

Are We Ready To Grow?

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The church of Christ, which was the fastest growing religious group in the United States between 1945 and 1965, has experienced declining growth rate in the last decade. We are no longer number one, we are number twelve on the growth rate list. Recently I took the figures on our declining growth rate and fed them into a computer. The question I asked was, "what would happen in the future if our growth rate were to continue the decline of the past decade?" The answer gives cause for serious concern. We would grow at a slower and slower rate until we would finally top out in the early or mid-1980's. After that we would start having fewer and fewer members each year. By the early 1990's, we would be back to the number of members we now have. And within the lifetime of many who are now living, the church of Christ would vanish from the earth. Personally, I do not believe that this is what will happen. But this is the direction we are now headed.

A few congregations have begun to reverse this trend. Several congregations baptized more than 200 people last year. The Garnett Road congregation in Tulsa, Okla., where my family and I worship (the congregation where Marvin Phillips preaches) baptized 310 people last year and thus far this year we are baptizing people at double last year's rate! Several other congregations are experiencing similar growth: Williamstown, W. Va.; Sunset in Lubbock, Texas; White's Perry Road in West Monroe, La.; and the Belt Line Road congregation in Irving, Texas, where I used to preach. Reports which we have received following the recent Soul-Winning Workshop in Tulsa, Okla., indicate that many congregations have experienced a great revival and are beginning to reverse the declining growth rate of the past decade.

Following the Soul-Winning Workshop in Tulsa, the elders of the Garnett Road congregation asked me to conduct a survey to measure the impact of that workshop in the brotherhood. I will be working on the analysis of the data from this survey for the next few weeks and by the end of the summer should have a report prepared. But we already know that several congregations have already proven that it is possible to reverse the declining growth rate of the past decade. Several of our congregations have already begun to grow at a rate which approximates the estimated growth rate of the first-century church. I believe that this is the wave

of the future.

What would things be like in the future if the entire brotherhood started to grow at the same rate as the congregations mentioned earlier? What would happen if we took the 2½ million members we now have in the United States and started growing at the same rate as the first-century church? I recently fed this problem into a computer and came up with an answer which is much more encouraging than the one discussed earlier. By the end of this century, instead of having 2½ million members in the United States and very few throughout the rest of the world, we would have a membership of over 2½ billion and those members would be scattered all over the face of the earth! At the growth rate which the first-century church experienced and which several modern congregations have proven is possible today, we can go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature before the end of this century. We have the manpower; we have the communication power; and what is most important we have the gospel power. All that we lack is the willpower.

It took all the time from Adam to Christ for the world's population to reach one-quarter of a billion. It took another 1600 years for the population to reach the one billion mark. But then it took less than three centuries to reach the two billion mark. In the 1930's we hit the three billion mark. And just this year the world's population reached four billion. By 1990, there will be six billion people living on this earth. Those who are high school age or younger should live to see the day when the Lord's church will be 2,000 years old. This will be just a little more than 50 years from now. And by that time, the world's total population is expected to number around twenty billion. Because of this tremendous population explosion that is going on right now, this generation of the church has an unparalleled opportunity. We can provide a large portion of heaven's population, or, if we fail, a large portion of the population of hell. I believe that we will meet this great challenge which the Lord has set before us. I believe that in the next few decades, we will grow more than the Lord's church has ever grown in the past.

But are we really prepared for such growth? Do we really want it? The more that I have studied patterns of congregational growth in recent years, the more I have become convinced that many of our congregations do not want to grow. Many elders, preachers, and members want to keep things the way they are: small. Rapid growth presents all sorts of problems. Many are not ready or willing to cope with these problems.

The growing church of the future will require a well-trained, well-qualified leadership with true spiritual vision. I am fully persuaded that the greatest problem we have today is in the eldership. Many of the men who are presently serving as elders will not be qualified to lead the growing church of the future. Some of these men will want to keep the church small so that they

can remain in control and thus satisfy their own personal ego-trips.

For some people, their congregation is the best and most exclusive social club they have ever joined. The growing church of the future will no longer be made up of congregations limited to white middle-class suburbanites. People of all races, all ethnic backgrounds, and all levels of socio-economic status will worship together in the same congregation. The Archie Bunkers in our brotherhood will resist growth because of this.

People who "grew up in the church" will be in the minority in the growing church of the future. The new majority will be concerned about restoring the essentials—the matters of faith in the New Testament pattern, but they will not be interested in preserving traditions, customs, and opinions. Those who are committed to custom rather than to Christ will resist growth because of this.

Rapid growth means bringing in so many converts who still need the milk of the word that it will be impossible to meet their spiritual needs and the needs of older Christians without greatly modifying our Bible class programs. Rapid growth means bringing in many children who are noisy and undisciplined. At first they will not know how to behave in worship services or in Bible classes. It is possible to cope with these problems within the framework of the New Testament pattern—but not without changing some customs and traditions. It will not be easy to cope with these problems and because of this, some will resist growth.

The growing church of the future will call for a greater commitment of our time, money, and effort than we have ever dreamed of before. Those who are "at ease in Zion" will resist growth because of this. New factions may arise with all sorts of doctrinal excuses—but with resistance to growth as their real motivation. But we can go on in spite of those who resist growth. We can preach the gospel of Christ to every person on the face of the earth before the end of this century. We can see our membership grow from 2.5 million to over 2.5 billion before the end of this century.

Will we continue the declining growth rate of the past decade and gradually sink into oblivion, or will we meet the great challenge which the Lord has set before us? It is for you to decide.