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Online Churches: An Intensive Analysis and Application

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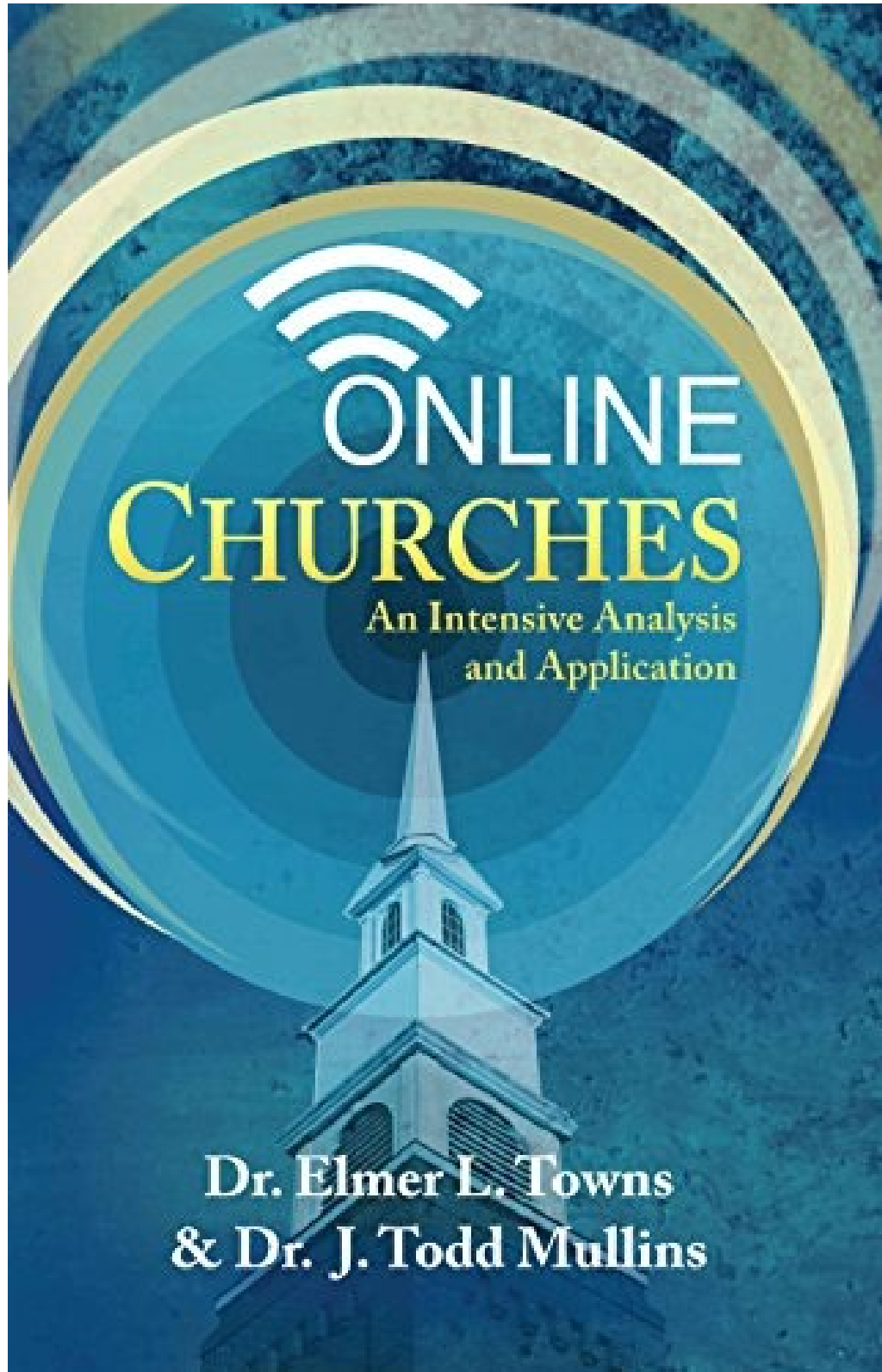
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Dr. Elmer L. Towns
& Dr. J. Todd Mullins

THE ONLINE CHURCH:
An Intensive Analysis and Application

By

Elmer Towns

and

Todd Mullins

INTRODUCTION

WHY NOT ONE MILLION PEOPLE . . . IN ONE CHURCH?

Someone asked, “Why one million people in one church?”

We simply answered, “Why not?”

After all, there will be more than a million people around the throne worshipping God.

That’s not about community . . . that’s not about helping one another . . . that’s not about whether they know one another . . . that’s more than one million focused on God. So why not do the same thing on earth? Why not have one million people in one church focusing on God?

Jesus said to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15), also He said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19). The first priority is not getting people in community, or bonding them to friends, or whether they help one another. The issue is their salvation; the marching order for the church is the Great Commission to get as many people saved as possible. Why not get one million saved through one church?

Didn’t Jesus promised, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all peoples* to Myself” (John 12:32)? So *all* includes what Paul identified, “Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11). So, why not one million people drawn from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds in one church?

The Bible teaches that all will praise Him in a multitude of languages, “After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands” (Rev. 7:9, *KJV*). So, why not one million people speaking to one another through an Internet translation program, all praising and worshipping God in their different language, but doing it together!

When Jesus was alive, the multitudes received Him gladly. He taught, cleansed the leper, gave sight to the blind, and raised the dead. Then Jesus said, “*Greater* works than these he will do, because I go to My Father” (John 14:12). The thing that is greater than Jesus’ physical “miracles” is the spiritual transformation that comes to those who are born again through our ministry. So, why not one million people being transformed spiritually through the ministry of one church? That sure sounds “greater” to me.

Our world has exploded, not just a population explosion of people of all kinds, but an explosion in technology, i.e., vehicles and roads of travel, city buildings, industrial empire buildings, manufacturing methods, food production, financing, educational systems (online classes), to name a few. Why not an explosion of a church to one million persons?

But perhaps the biggest explosion of all is in the realm of communication. Think wax discs, 78s, 45s, 8 tracks, cassettes, CDs, and now downloadable apps and music of any and every kind for your technological instrument. Think of i-pads, GPSs, Kindles, X-Box 360s, PlayStation 3 Slims. Think of party line telephones, car phones, cell phones, and smart phones. Think of crystal sets, tube radios, transistor radios, FM receivers, mp3 players, i-pods.

This book is written to stretch your thinking in several ways. First, we want you to see the problems facing the local church, all sizes. Then, we want you to see the role that “methods” have played in making a church strong. God has used different “anointed methods” over the centuries. So when you think about a one million-person church, you are attempting to use new methods and old ones, using as many methods as possible to reach as many people as possible, doing it 24/7.

Second, we want to resolve the bias some have toward the Online Church. A one million person church will use online communications, but it’ll also use many of the new social networking tools, plus many of the new innovations that express church community, such as

multi-site churches, video-venues, house churches, accountability cells, online prayer groups, city-reaching strategies, and multi-ethnic and multi-racial programs.

Third, this book will give you an overview of historical cycles of human relationships found in history, in Christian culture, and how today's social culture can provide for a million person church. Next you will see church relationships and how churches grow from small to large. The purpose is for you to see where church culture is today and how the ongoing evolution of social relationships will make possible a one million-person church.

You will be exposed to how electronic "marvels" can be used to reach one million people, studying both their advantages, and the unintended consequences of their use. Using social networking "tools" will never automatically build a great church, but in today's world; a church of one million people probably can't be built without them.

The authors believe a one million-person church can and will be built, but you will never build it simply because you know the sociological foundations that make it possible, or you are aware of the many "methods" used in the past to build churches. Every church is built on core values, and the church of one million persons must have biblical core values if it is to reach one million persons.

Then you must have great leadership skills as you master the technological "tools" that will enable you to relate to one million people. Chapter 8 will examine the personality of the charismatic leader and what you will have to learn to lead one million persons.

To reach one million persons, you must be a person of faith who knows "faith pleases God" (Heb. 11:6). Your faith must begin with a vision of a million-person church. As a matter of fact, it must be more than getting a vision of one million persons in one church; the vision must capture you, and possess you, and drive you until it's accomplished. You must become the vision of a one million-person church.

We pray this book will stretch your vision, then answer your questions, and finally give you some guidelines to begin an online church. But more than technology and tools, we want you to experience God as you read through these pages. May you touch God for a life-changing vision, as God touches you.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Elmer Towns

Written from my home,
On top of Liberty Mountain

Todd Mullins

Written from my home,
Palm Beach Gardens, Florida

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Rather than making a statement that a one million-person church can be an absolute fact, the possibility of a virtual church is raised in the reader's mind, then the rest of the book grapples to answer this question.

SECTION ONE

Thinking the Impossible

Chapter

1 Begin with the Exquisitely Small by Elmer Towns

A church is built on the seed truth of a relationship between a person and Christ, and then grows into a relationship of born again believers to one another. Unless you understand this life-generating power, then to you a one million-person church is just a crowd or an audience. There have been instances when one million gathered in the name of Christ, but they were not churches, i.e., Billy Graham preached to over one million in Seoul, Korea, in 1973, and Reinhard Bonnke preached to one and a quarter million people in Africa.

2 The Journey of Christ Fellowship to an Online Church by Todd Mullins

Christ Fellowship Church in South Florida never intended to become a mega church or to have an online church. Tom Mullins, the founding pastor and father of Todd Mullins, just wanted to reach as many people for Christ as possible. Then he wanted to disciple them so they would become dedicated disciples of Jesus Christ. Out of Tom and Todd Mullins' core values grew a mega church with video-venues, and satellite campuses. The next step was to begin an online church ministry that is now reaching thousands of people around the world every week.

3 A Name for an Online Church by Elmer Towns

Many question whether an isolated viewer of an online church can be a member of a church, or if the involvement of one person online is really church. Therefore, viewers are invited to a "connection" class where they learn the opportunities and obligations of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. We're not suggesting they technically join a "church," but we want them to "buy" into the core values of Jesus Christ, and live for Him. We want

them to be part of a family or fellowship. That's it! They are part of a "family" that's living a transformed life that glorifies God. When they "fellowship" with the online benefits, they are part of a new family. When they don't fellowship, they are no longer a part of the family. There is no voting "in," nor voting "out." They fellowship with part of a huge army that is following Jesus Christ. And like any soldier, they must be taught, assembled, and sent into service. That describes Christ Fellowship Church of Palm Beach Gardens, Florida.

SECTION TWO

The Foundations for A One Million-Person Church

4 What Core Values are Necessary to Build A One Million-Person Church?
by Elmer Towns

A one million-person church is not a huge Christian rock concert or any other type of church attraction. There must be "glue" to hold the people together; these are the core values for which people will learn, live, sacrifice, and die. The core values of a church are the internal magnetism that will pull people into a church this large and the glue that will keep them ministering for Christ.

5 You Must Have One Million-Person Faith to Build a Church that Large by
Elmer Towns

It will take a one million-person faith to build a one million-person church. Not just any pastor will build it, but any pastor, anywhere, can learn the lessons of mountain-moving faith and do it. The door of faith is open to all, but few will a million persons to follow Christ through one church.

6 The Sociological Past and Future of a One Million-Person Church by
Elmer Towns

In 1966 Harvey Cox wrote *The Secular City*¹ in which he observed that society followed a cycle going from (1) the tribe; to, (2) the town; to, (3) the metropolis. To this cycle we add, (4) the technopolis, the internal social structure that will allow a one million-person church. There is a similar growth cycle in Ernst Troeltsch's *Sociological Cycle of Church Growth and Death of Churches*. Also, this cycle is seen in the growth of church sizes from a single-cell church, to a multiple-cell church, to a multi-congregational church. The above three cycles are built on relationships in a church. Do the sociological implications of both the church and culture suggest a climate where the internet church could be effectively nurtured? Could the internet church become a "home" where a church of one million persons could provide the same positive advantages of a small

church? Is there a natural sociological growth of churches that ends with a technological basis that provides a base for a one million-person church?

7 What Methods are Needed to Build a One Million-Person Church? by Elmer Towns

The Church Growth movement discovered the difference between methods and principles, then communicated new methods to produce a 30-year surge in building mega churches and soul winning in all churches. But the Church Growth movement became bogged down in methods (a method is the application of an eternal principle to culture). However, the original principles of the movement should point us to the possibility of churches with a million members.

8 A Multi-Gifted Leader is Necessary to Build a One Million-Person Church by Elmer Towns

A man who expects to reach a million people has to have natural gifts and skills big enough to embrace a million people. This chapter examines the academic research of the charismatic (or entrepreneurial) personality of greatness that is found in world-changing leaders. The pastor who would lead a million people must have one of the strongest personalities that can influence hundreds of thousands of people to believe in Jesus Christ. The leader must pull people's loyalty to himself then point their loyalty to Jesus Christ, knowing that Christ is the One who builds the church.

9 Considering Arguments Against Church Online by Todd Mullins

There are those who claim an online church does not fit the description of a New Testament church. However, when viewed from a scriptural perspective, an online church can virtually do everything suggested in scripture, and can produce the same results in individuals that are described in scripture.

SECTION 3

Practical Principles for an On-Line Church

10 The Beginning of a Church Without Walls by Todd Mullins

We are living in a virtual world that relies on computer technology for all types of communication. Therefore, the future church must embrace the virtual church if it will carry out the Great Commission to all people, and to all parts of the world.

11 Programs for an Online Church by Todd Mullins

Just as a residence church necessitates organized programs that embrace all people with all types of ministry needs, this chapter outlines the way an online church can organize and prioritize its ministry programs. It includes ministry to children and youth, worship, discipleship, fellowship, and counseling ministry.

12 Administering the Ordinances Online by Todd Mullins

A description of the ordinances are given from scripture, then shown how they apply to the online church. It is suggested the ordinances can be biblically administered in the virtual church.

13 Measuring the Effectiveness of the Online Church by Todd Mullins

Anything that grows can be measured, both internally and externally. Internal measurement is difficult and sometimes subjective. But objective measurement involves repeatable, observable, measurable things. Therefore, the Online Church can measure attendance, income giving, worship experience, evangelism, discipleship, congregational care, service to others, and administration of the ordinances.

14 What Now? by Todd Mullins

The Online Church is here to stay. The question is no longer, “Is it valid?” The issue is its effectiveness. What local church will embrace it? How much of the tools and technology will it use? Will it be properly staffed? Will it be given the right support by the resident church? Will it have an effective prayer support?

NOTE

¹ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: McMillan Company, 1990).

Chapter 1

BEGINNING WITH THE EXQUISITELY SMALL

By
Elmer Towns

A church of a million is not really about a mega church or a large church, or a super-sized church. Every church is made up of many relationships between Jesus Christ and those called to serve Him. It's all about a connection to Him. When Jesus called Peter and Andrew to follow Him it was an invitation to participate in a life-transforming experience, "Come after me and I will make you fishers of men" (Mark 1:17).

Note the three-fold experience. First, they had to choose to come to Jesus, a momentary decision to accept Christ or believe in Him. Described as a conversion-transformation, this small solitary event is the embryonic seed of what happens to everyone in a church. And the pastor of a church must lead others into that relationship with Jesus. It's the same transforming conversion that he has experienced.

Second, the promise of Jesus, "I will make you," involves a growing maturity of a person to become like Jesus Christ. And that process is made up of an inestimable number of isolated–yet connected–events in life that produces growing knowledge and skills to serve Him.

Third, a challenge "to become fishers of men" relates to the growth of the church by bringing other people into the body of Christ. This is also seen in New Testament pictures of new fruit growing on vines, finding lost sheep, or adding to a building, etc. The seed truth of a New Testament church is connecting people to Jesus. And that's the purpose of a million-person church; it exists to get people saved. Those who have been connected to Jesus Christ, attempt to connect new people to Jesus.

A church of a million persons is made up of a million relationships. The strength of the total is seen in the vitality of each connection. Therefore an effective church of one million persons is measured by each relationship no matter how small the church.

Every pastor who begins a church—no matter how small—could build that initial relationship into a church of a million persons. But we know that the vast majority of churches never get very large. About 89% of American churches have 87 people in attendance for worship. That's large compared to the underground house churches of China. No one knows if they average 10 worshippers or 50 worshippers.

Unfortunately, most churches stop growing at a small number. Look at the answers of why churches stop growing to understand what it takes to build a church of one million persons. The opposite answer of why churches are small is the insightful clue of how a church keeps growing to become a million persons. Let's compare them.

Many churches remain small because that's the dream of the human founder. He wants to plant a small intimate fellowship, and there is nothing wrong with that; but to build a church of a million persons a pastor must be intentional about building a church that large. Therefore a church of a million persons begins with a dream of reaching a million.

Other churches remain small because of their focus on an individual (or a few individuals), so much so, that church leadership neglects the needs of the total church body or the needs of the masses. That majority could only be a few dozen or 100 people. When church leadership forgets or neglects corporate worship, corporate preaching, corporate evangelism, or even corporate standards of holiness, i.e., it neglects the core values of a church, it will never reach the potential God has for it.

The one million-member online church must begin by targeting the individual and his/her needs and problems. If it is going to be a successful church—no matter its size—it must lift the

individual to where God wants them to live. But an online church is more than just a mass of individuals tied together by an Internet connection. Yes! The Internet must tie them to a power and purpose that is greater than their individual existence. That power and purpose is found in its core values.

The individual must get faith from the pastor-leader in what is called faith-transfer. In that faith-transfer each member receives “spiritual strength” from the pastor, i.e., strength to trust God for things that are greater than life’s limitations. The potential member must get this identification by joining the crusade of the larger church. They must also become victorious over evil in their life by the lessons and fellowship with the larger church.

To be effective, the million-person church must be on a crusade that will influence both culture and the lives of its members. The individual must feel the crusade is absolutely necessary for culture and for them personally. Then the individual will sacrifice whatever is necessary, will learn whatever is necessary, and will involve himself/herself to do what is absolutely necessary. From that strength, the million-person church will thrive and grow.

Many churches remain small because the faith expectations of the pastor are small. He probably does not know how to move mountains, solve problems, raise money, recruit workers, or motivate people into action. In opposition, a church of a million persons is built by a pastor who knows how to pray to remove barriers that prohibit growth, and he can raise money or attract workers and then motivate them to action. A pastor must have a “million-member faith” to build a church that large.

Therefore to build a million-person church, there must be a pastor-leader who has a dream of a million-person church and has grown his faith through various strength levels as he develops a church through various levels or challenges of growth. In essence, a million-person church must be led by a person possessing a million-person faith.

Many churches remain small because the pastor's immaturity or lack of spiritual growth. The church is spiritually weak when the pastor doesn't know how to walk with God, how to get answers to prayers, how to successfully feed himself on scripture, or can't win souls to Christ.

That means a pastor must become a great man of God to build a great church. However, the size of one's church is not left to chance or to circumstance. A man must determine to walk with God as did Enoch (Genesis 5), and be a friend of God as was Abraham (James 2:23), and open heaven in answer to prayer as did Elijah (James 5:17-18), and teach the word as Ezra (Nehemiah 8:1-18) and evangelize as Peter (Acts 2:39), and plant churches as did Paul (Acts 15:36-41), and be as humble as John the Baptist (Luke 7:28). In essence a man must become an outstanding man of God to build an outstanding church of one million persons.

Many churches remain small because of the pastor's lack of skills in management or administration. This is not about his spirituality, for some have a deep walk with God but they don't have skills to manage money, possess the organizational ability to put to work hundreds or thousands, they can't or won't delegate pastoral duties, or they are overwhelmed with leading a large organization.

So obviously the pastor of a million-people church must have superior executive abilities. Many can lead a single fast food outlet (a small cell church), but very few can manage a business empire company (a super church) that has thousands of outlets, hundreds of thousands of workers and a billion dollar budget. A pastor of a million-person church must be able to attract and oversee hundreds of thousands of prayer leaders, soul winners, Bible teachers, counselors, plus a multitude of pastors and staff members.

Many churches remain small because of the pastor's limited ability to communicate his dream, or a program of ministry, or even preach/teach the Word of God. Remember

communication involves getting a message, mastering a message, and getting the message across so people understand it, make it a part of their life, and are motivated to do something with it. Sometimes I've been asked by a pastor, "What do I need to do to pastor a large church?"

I give several answers depending of what I think the pastor needs. Usually I say, "Be good up front!" By that I mean he must be an above average speaker and/or communicator. But the pastor of a million-person church must be an outstanding communicator in several areas. He must be skilled in face-to-face preaching of the Word. He must be able to communicate his vision to a million people using technological tools of communication, and be able to use many avenues of reaching both unsaved and the people of his community. To build a million-person church he must have the evangelistic power of Billy Graham, the expositional ability of Charles Spurgeon, the apologetic answers of Josh McDowell, the teaching focus of John MacArthur, the organizing skills of Bill Bright, and the persuasive ability of Ronald Reagan.

Some churches remain small because they don't have a goal to grow, nor do they have any plans or programs for expansion. Some of these churches want to produce "good" people; which is commendable, but goodness in church members does not produce church growth. A church must aim to produce good people and it must aim to grow. To produce one does not automatically mean the other will follow. These two goals require a two-fold commitment, a two-fold goal, a two-fold program, and a two-fold plan of action.

Some churches plan to produce good people with Bible teaching or with practical preaching that solve people's problems, or by worship, or by involving people in solving community problems. But remember, you will probably hit the target when you aim for its center, and you will come close to getting in your church what you go after. To get a church of a million persons, you must go after them. Then you must have a second goal, you must plan ministry to make persons good and then do it.

Some churches have little or no corporate purpose or vision. They just want to be the body of Christ on earth. While that is commendable, that isolated vision does not reflect the New Testament church.

A pastor-farmer does not inspect his fruit tree-church for beauty; he is looking for fruit. The pastor-shepherd does not simply feed or lead his sheep; he goes looking for the one lost sheep. The pastor-carpenter must build his church building. The bride and groom who becomes a couple will give birth (born-again) to children to become a family.

Everything that's alive will grow, and the local body of Christ must grow both internally and externally. Why not have a goal of growing a one million-person church by both internal spiritual growth and by external evangelistic growth?

Some churches are small because they are planted in the wrong location. If a church is planted in an isolated farming community of North Dakota, it can't grow beyond the population of the area. The same could be said if it's planted high in the mountains in a mining camp; it won't grow beyond the number of miners in the camp.

But a million-person church can be planted anywhere a pastor has access to the Internet to Twitter, or to Facebook, or to any of the new social communication connections. A nerd sitting in his basement dressed in a bathrobe can connect to a million people; why not a pastor sitting in his office of a small town church? There is a catch; the nerd must have something worthy to say, so must the pastor.

Location won't stop you from building a one million-person church. But you have got to be called of God to the ministry. You must have a fire in your belly to build it. You must be willing to sacrifice all your spare time, all your energy, and all your effort to do what God is leading you to do. You must be willing to fast if necessary to remove barriers. You must be completely yielded to God knowing God can do anything He promises, and you must have such

absolute faith in God that you release Him to do the impossible. And you must surrender all pride and self-ambition to become the greatest man of God born of woman (Luke 7:28). A million-person church is not built with half-hearted effort. No, you must reach deep within and put everything—spiritual and natural—on the line.

Some churches remain small because of inadequate facilities. Sometimes the building is too small to allow growth. Remember the old rule, “When a church auditorium is 80 percent full, it’s full.” Sometimes the facilities were adapted for a church but the renovated facilities prohibit ministry and stifle growth. Just as a storefront sometimes repels certain visitors, there are people who don’t like to attend church in a movie theatre, restaurant, or the chapel of a funeral home.

Like it or not, the issue is usually facilities that most outsiders define as the church. The outward building restricts the growth of local churches both by its image, and many times, by its size. People think of a church as the building on the corner, i.e., “that’s the Episcopal church.”

But an online church is not restricted by its physical facilities; it is seen by its ministry. People visit the online church because they know what they will get from it. Sometimes they have been invited by a friend, or they stumble onto it, or they research an issue in their life and a search engine directs them to an online church; and when there, God speaks to them. There is no building barrier to define the church as an “upper class community” or a Korean church, or a teen church, etc. A church must be defined by its core values if it’s to reach a million persons.

Some churches remain small because they are planted among uneducated people who may be anti-social, rebellious and perhaps dangerous. If you tried to plant a traditional church among this type of people, you probably would fail. And if you did get the church off the ground, it would probably remain small.

But look at the radical, reforming pattern of Christianity throughout history. General William Booth took his Salvation Army musical bands to the darkest slums of London and

through street preaching transformed the worst of drunks, prostitutes, and children who were professional thieves.

John Wesley built the largest denomination in the world, one decade after his death by ordaining preachers called “plough boy preachers.” Without a formal college education, Wesley ordained a person who “knew his letters (could read), numbers (could count) and possessed the Holy Spirit.” Wesley went to the poor, i.e., the lower classes, to build his churches. If Wesley could build a religious empire (the Methodist church was built on new methods), why can’t a pastor today build a church of one million persons on new methods?

Some churches never grow because of a language or cultural barrier. When a group of Anglos try to plant a church in a Hispanic neighborhood they are fighting an uphill battle, while a group of Hispanic church planters might have an easy time doing it. A church planter must be aware of any barriers (stained-glass, class, ethnic, language) he will face in the neighborhood where he is going.¹

But an Internet pastor of a million-person church will not only recognize barriers, he will use them as stepping stones to get the job done. First, he will need a large pastoral staff, and obviously, they will reach as many ethnic groups as there are ethnic pastors. That means the pastor will have a multi-ethnic staff. Next, the pastor will begin different multi-racial types of ministry. (Multi-ethnic means a mixture of people, from various ethnic groups. Multi-racial ministries mean “contextualization” of ministry to each race with the church.) Praise and worship music for an African American ministry will be different from Reggae praise and worship music for the people of the Caribbean Islands. Loud drums and a “singing guitar” sound like noise and static to older American adults who want traditional music as sung in American churches 50 years ago.²

The online church will cross these barriers and reach into various sections (not always geography) to bring various racial and ethnic groups together for various aspects of ministry.

The common elements of race or ethnicity will not hold any of these groups together, nor will they hold a church together. If ethnic glue is the clustering glue of an online church, it will never reach its goal of one million persons. The glue that holds an online church together are core values.

Then core values grow out of God's call to the pastor, and his allegiance to the essentials of the faith and his ability to "transfer his faith" to each person in the church so that their corporate allegiance will spill over into the personal allegiance of each member. And allegiance is a two-way street. What loyalty they give to the church, in turn the church must have a meaningful loyalty to each of its million members.

A million-person church is not a vast religious audience where people are receiving Bible messages or listening to Christian music. It's not one person text messaging to a million people. It's not like a game of telephone where one person passes on to one other or two others what he or she gets from the leaders.

A one million-person church is a vast expression of core values that is received from the church's ministry, received by each person through the various methods of ministry to meet the various needs of its members.

A one million-person church can express itself through cell groups (online or face-to-face), or house churches, through Bible-content classes, and through personal skill-learning classes, through classes training for ministry or classes training for discipleship, through mentoring groups or prayer groups, through video-streaming the Sunday sermon, through Skype, or through text messaging. It can reach people through video venues or multi-site locations, or

satellite locations of ministry. A million-person church does everything a traditional residence church does, but also includes everything that's also possible today.

NOTES

¹ Elmer L. Towns, *A Practical Encyclopedia of Evangelism and Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995), 206. See E-0, E-1, E-2, E-3 Evangelism.

² Elmer Towns, Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2007), 185-196.

Chapter 2

THE JOURNEY OF CHRIST FELLOWSHIP TO AN ONLINE CHURCH

By
Todd Mullins

As you read this chapter, I hope you will identify with Christ Fellowship and think of the steps needed to add an online ministry to your present church – Todd Mullins

My dad, Tom, was a very successful football coach in south Florida when he felt a tug from God to start a church. Soon after, Christ Fellowship began in the living room of our home in 1984 with just 15 people. From our own “exquisitely small” beginnings, our church family had an “all hands on deck” mentality. It took all of us, faithfully functioning in a variety of roles, to get our ministry up and running in those early days.

Our mission was, and still is today, to simply love God and love people. As we rallied together to fulfill our mission, God faithfully added to our number. We rapidly outgrew our home and moved to a nearby schoolhouse where we continued to grow and test the limits of how many people we could fit at a peanut butter stained cafeteria table until we were bursting at the seams needing a larger facility.

I had driven by an old horse stable on some property for sale on Northlake Blvd in Palm Beach Gardens and just knew it would be a great place to expand and grow our church family. We fasted and prayed before purchasing the land and building our first facility, affectionately named our “Gardens South Campus” today. Once we had this new facility, our growth exploded. People were turning in off the road wanting to see what would cause such a traffic backup and ending up staying for a service and joining our family! We had to hold five services a weekend to keep up with the crowds that just kept growing.

Eventually we realized we would not be able to keep up with God’s expanding work unless we moved to an even larger facility to make room for all those God was bringing to us. This spurred us to fast and pray again – this time about purchasing 40 acres directly across the street. God opened doors so we could purchase the land that now holds our “Gardens North Campus” facilities.

When we moved in 2000, the space was sufficient for about a year, but we were trending about 1,000 new people each year, forcing us to again add services to accommodate the crowds of people flooding through the door each week. There was no available land nearby to grow our Gardens Campus, so we began praying about what to do.

We had a number of people driving upwards of 40 minutes each way from western communities to attend our services each weekend. Knowing that we had outgrown our current location coupled with a desire to take church closer to those members who lived a distance away, we began researching and praying about expanding and extending ourselves to other areas of our region. We studied and visited a number of churches with video venues or campuses and assimilated much of their models for our own growth plan.

Our first satellite campus opened in Royal Palm Beach, followed by campuses in downtown West Palm Beach and Stuart. We also started a Latin American campus in our Gardens and Royal Palm facilities to accommodate that growing ministry demographic. Each campus has a campus pastor along with staff for worship, children’s, student, and adult ministries. The sermons are viewed on screens at each campus through a live video feed.

We host an average of 12,000 people on our campuses each weekend and currently have plans for three more physical campuses in the next five years.

THE ONLINE CHALLENGE

It is very rare to meet someone today who is not dependent upon, or at least being impacted by, technology. Between online social networks, blogs, books, newspapers, magazines, and educational institutions, the Internet has changed the way our society gathers and assimilates information. A virtual world of connectivity, community, and enlightenment is at our fingertips. Accordingly and undeniably, these advances in technology provide the church with unique opportunities to minister outside both the physical and methodological walls of the church.

It is within the backdrop of this growing reality that Christ Fellowship began to question how to best leverage technology for the kingdom of God. If people are constantly turning to and depending upon technology for information consumption, how can the church use this medium to connect them to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to His body?

At first, we began by simply streaming our church services for those within our church family that would be traveling. This allowed them to stay connected with the messages and vision of the church while out of town. We didn't give it much attention or resources as it was only reaching a small group of people.

Soon we began to hear of people who were watching online from our city and all around the world. Local people said they had been watching our services online before ever coming to the church. It was their way of "checking us out" before walking through the front doors. Others visited the church from out of town and returned home to join us online every weekend. Soon we found people from all over the world that were calling their online experience "church." As we began to further explore their situation, many were in towns where there was no evangelical church. Others lived in remote areas of the country far from any town, while others felt called and connected to the Christ Fellowship vision and mission.

We began to feel a spiritual responsibility to these people beyond the streaming of a weekend service. We had heard of other churches that had “online campuses” or “church online.” We began calling and meeting with those churches to learn what defines an online church. Life Church in Edmond, Oklahoma, was extremely helpful to our understanding of what an online worship experience could be like. Life Church has dedicated multiple staff members to the area of technological innovation for the Kingdom of God. We found no other church in America that seemed as dedicated to leveraging technology to communicate the Gospel. Since they had been operating an online church experience for a year longer than we had, they had discovered many of the opportunities and pitfalls associated with online church.

Life Church began holding church services online in April 2006. Using chat rooms for prayer and counseling while streaming the worship service, people from all around the world were able to connect with this church in the middle of Oklahoma.¹ Seacoast Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and Flamingo Road Church in Cooper City, Florida, were some of the earliest adopters to this new form of church, all of them paving the way to what is currently happening with the Church Online.²

Today hundreds of thousands gather from around the world to experience various expressions of church online. In its most basic form, church online is a virtual experience of a physical worship service; what is taking place in a physical location is also being experienced in a virtual location, all around the world, instantaneously.³

Through technology Internet pastors and volunteers are welcoming people into the virtual service through chat “rooms.” They pray with each other in virtual prayer rooms and share the concerns of their everyday lives.

Additionally, we talked with families who were watching our online services to see how we could better connect with them and help them grow in their walk with Christ. We discussed

discipleship methods and options, connection avenues, as well as practical ways their church could serve them. After much prayer and seeking out a potential online pastor, we launched our online campus in January of 2008.

Through the use of online chat rooms, our Online Campus Pastor, David Helbig,⁴ meets with those attending this virtual campus both before and after the services. The chat rooms also provide opportunity for those attending to connect with each other for encouragement and prayer. Prayer, connection, and even counseling are taking place before and after each weekend service in these chat rooms. Additionally, Pastor David is available through the week for further connection and prayer through e-mail and phone. Our Online Campus also provides discipleship classes to help people grow in their relationship with Christ and Christ Fellowship. Although this is an area that needs further development and attention, the basic steps are in place to allow spiritual growth to take place online.

Our Online Campus, which is now reaching thousands of people from all over the world, is constantly producing evidence of the cultural, sociological, and evangelical impact technology is having on the way we can and should be doing ministry. It allows us to literally reach around the world with the love and message of Jesus Christ unlike any other initiative in which we have participated in the past. The church simply cannot afford to be on the backside of a rapidly advancing technology movement. We have to learn how to best leverage technology for the advancement of the Kingdom.

CAN COMMUNITY HAPPEN IN AN ONLINE CHURCH?

The question the church at large is grappling with in regard to online ministry is: “Can true worship, fellowship, discipleship, service, and evangelism—all core philosophies and directives of the church—actually take place in an online environment without sacrificing the biblical definition and model of *koinonia /ecclesia*?” In other words, can “real” church take place

on the Internet? Can people genuinely connect, fellowship, and grow with one another in healthy community in an online environment?

As a multi-site church⁵ that is already using streaming technology for dispersing the sermons to our campuses, it was an easy step to leverage that technology to establish an online campus. Yet we knew to have an online campus required more than a Web address and sermon video. “Church” by definition is so much more than simply a sermon or recorded services.

We selected Pastor David for this online community because we knew he was gifted in crafting personal connections with those joining together online. He is available before, after, and during the services for prayer and counseling, to connect with newcomers, and answer basic questions. One of his main goals is to create a sense of “community” or “*koinonia*” among those gathering online, to recreate the same sense of family and belonging people experience when they are in one of our physical locations.

Through the use of monitored chat/prayer rooms, the congregation can share prayer requests and needs with the online campus pastor as well as others in this virtual room. Pastor David has reported that it is common for those in these chat rooms to begin praying for one another’s needs before he has the chance to respond. These chat rooms have become their “altar experience” where they come for prayer and are prayed for by the body of Christ. Pastor David reports that many of those gathering return week after week for connection, prayer, and encouragement.

For many who question the validity of “online church,” their number one argument is that true fellowship cannot occur without being face to face. The early church met together daily, ate together, and prayed together. It was in this context that the church as we know it began. How can something so personal morph into a virtual experience where perhaps no other human touch occurs? Can cyberspace be an environment for community and care? For example, Mark

Driscoll of Mars Hill Church believes “technology is in no way a substitute for life-on-life, face-to-face, actual Christian community where the eight characteristics of the church are present.”⁶

What about the writer of Hebrews’ admonition not to “give up meeting with one another” (Hebrews 10:25)? Is it possible for this worship “meeting” to take place in various forms on multiple plains? These are legitimate questions and concerns that must be addressed before the validity of the online church can be defended. Communities such as Facebook, My Space, and Twitter are virtual gathering places where friendships and relationships are fostered. Less than a decade ago, these virtual connections were not available. Now they are among one of the most common points of connection within millions of people’s everyday life. With the enhancement of mobile technology, access to maintaining these points of communication has exponentially increased. People are more connected with more people than ever before.⁷

Yet many argue this connection is superficial. How truly connected can you be to more than 400 friends? While the question is rhetorical, it does pose a compelling argument regarding the validity and profundity of online community. How this matter intersects with the online church should be considered.

Furthermore, Jesus’ mandate to make disciples and baptize one another (Matthew 28:19-20) must be considered. If the Online Church is legitimately a church, how does it baptize? Some online churches are encouraging their attendees to find a local church to be physically baptized in water. Other online churches have performed baptism via video with a pastor in one state and the person being baptized in their bathtub at home by a friend. Still other churches are grappling with the question, “If the purpose of baptism is to be an outward testimony of an inward work, does water have to even be involved?” Their argument is contextually driven. If in the first century church, water baptism was an outward expression or testimony to the community, is there a better way to share that testimony? Since many baptisms take place within

the four walls of a church to be witnessed by fellow believers, could a more effective witness be a video testimony of lives change and dependence upon Christ as Lord and Savior? Again, these pose valid questions for the increasing numbers of online church communities.

The argument that seems the easiest to answer is: “Is it possible for the church to properly and efficiently disciple people on the Internet?” With the more common practice and effectiveness of online schooling, both for secondary, undergraduate, and graduate programs, this question seems benign. People all over the world are growing and learning from the Internet. Classes and teaching will continue to become even more effective allowing better teacher/pupil interaction for greater learning.

But what about Paul’s admonition to “equip God’s people for acts of service” (Ephesians 4:12)? Is it possible for the church to help people online to identify their God-given gifts and then provide them with outlets to use their gifts to build up the Kingdom of God? For any online church to truly be the church these purposes and demonstrations must occur in the lives of the believers. Otherwise the online experience is nothing more than watching a church service on the television or computer. There is no personal connection, no opportunity for care, and no opportunity for spiritual development and service.

THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE ONLINE CHURCH

Community by definition is “a group of people sharing common characteristics or interests.”⁸ Although the term has historically been associated with a group of individuals living in a common location, the introduction of the Internet has broken that barrier. Community no longer has geographical limitations associated with it. Author Stephen Spyker validates that community takes place online. “Increasingly the Web is not seen just as a way for the individual to access vast quantities of data, as in the lone religious seeker looking for truth out there somewhere, but also as a way for people to come together, to *be* together, in cyberspace.”⁹

The introduction of online communities such as My Space, Facebook and Twitter (to name a few) has proven that community and connection can take place online.¹⁰

As a part of my research, I joined several online communities and participated in the relationship-building taking place within them. I found the connections to be both authentic and unfulfilling at the same time. Some of the connections are meaningful and have an impact on my thoughts and everyday life, while others are simply surface relationships. The same is true with relationships I have had with those physically connected in my daily life. Some are meaningful and change the way I think and live while others are mere acquaintances.

However, community within the Christian context implies more than just knowing someone's favorite color or genre of music. Christian community implies a sense of belonging and caring. The word *koinonia* more clearly defines the close-knit community of the first century church. Conceptually, it includes a sense of fellowship, association, community, communion, and joint participation. It is this type of community that most churches strive to create.¹¹ The questions remain, "Can true *koinonia* take place online? Can the church live out its expression of love and caring for each other in a virtual reality?"

The expression of "community" has changed over the centuries. Even within the last 100 years the definition has changed. Back in the early 20th century, community was noted by the relationships within a small town and village. Neighbors knew each other and spent time talking with each other. As time progressed and culture changed, the automatic garage doors became the moats to castles. People became more reclusive and less connected with their neighbors. Larger cities drew people out of smaller communities. There is much to be gleaned from examining the sociological evolution of community in relation to the manner in which authentic community is built by the church.¹²

Still, we must look to the Bible to see how true community is expressed. From the very beginning, God refers to His children as a community. In the Book of Genesis, God speaks a blessing over Jacob and says, “I am God Almighty. Be fertile, and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from you” (Gen. 35:11, *GWT*). Throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, the Israelites are commonly referred to as a “community.”

The Book of Acts offers us the clearest expression of true care and community within the church. Within the opening chapters of the book, *koinonia* and care are expressed as we see the people of the early church devoting themselves to one another and sharing with whoever had need (Acts 2). Believers ate meals together daily in each other’s homes. They sold their possessions and gave to those in need, and the Bible says that everyone’s needs were met. What a powerful picture of love and care.

Before we can ask if this type of care can take place in an online community, we have to ask if it is actually happening today in churches across America. Again, as culture has changed so have our definitions of what acceptable “community” looks like. Within our church, I have witnessed and been a part of care and love as expressed in the Book of Acts. I have been on the receiving and giving end of such love. But in a church our size with more than 20,000 in attendance each weekend, that type of *koinonia* can only take place in a small group. So the logical question, then, is can small group care take place online?

At Christ Fellowship we have proven that small groups can occur online. However, the question we must grapple with is can deep care and *koinonia* occur within groups that never meet face to face?

IS THIS TOPIC HOT?

Many churches are recognizing the ease with which they can use a website to keep their congregations up to speed on events and to invite newcomers in the area to join their family. And some of those churches are branching out to explore how the Internet might be used to implement new and enhance existing ministry programs. Because of this growing trend, some books are popping up in Christian circles to address the need for churches to tap into the power of such broad, mass communication.

Wired for Ministry, by John P. Jewell; *Web-Empower Your Church*, by Mark M. Stephenson; *eMinistry*, by Andrew Careaga; and *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, by Shane Hipps all address the very issue of using the capabilities of the Internet to maximize and expand the church's ministry beyond its four walls. Further, these books shed light on the opportunities afforded the church to reach out in unprecedented new ways because of the worldwide Web. Each author here makes the case for the need for the church to be "visible" online in order to have impact on today's society. They also enter the discussion of the church's privilege and responsibility to carefully and strategically integrate technology and ministry while avoiding pitfalls. However, none of these books seem to address the real theological issues at stake of whether real *koinonia* can be fostered in online church. Rather, the emphases seem to be on the "how-to's" of online ministry.

Church Next, by Aubrey and Michael Malphurs, and *Grown Up Digital*, by Don Tapscott, discuss the importance of understanding and reaching the "Net generation." This demographic is between the ages of 11 and 30, and they are growing up digital with brand new ways of thinking, interacting, working, socializing, and even worshiping. The church must listen to the arguments these authors make about relating to future generations online. However, neither of these authors hit on the question the writer is wrestling with in this project: Can the mere comfort and

availability of worshiping online truly foster the same kind of authentic Christian community found in a brick and mortar church where face-to-face contact is rightly made?

Exploring Religious Community Online, by Heidi Campbell; *The Internet Church*, by Walter P. Wilson; *Give Me That Online Religion*, by Brenda A. Brasher; and *Religion Online*, edited by Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan get closer to the topic of this project, but none comes to any definitive position. In fact, *Religion Online* seems to hit many issues relative to this project including considering the possibility of “sacred space” in cyberspace and “religion and the quest for virtual community,” but none of the articles therein address whether the biblical definition of *koinonia* is sincerely honored in an online church environment. In fact, later articles concern themselves with the spread of Buddhism and cults online, completely abandoning the relative nature of the Christian church, making the book only partly adequate to this discussion.

Exploring Religion Community Online is probably the most helpful in developing a comprehensive sociological perspective of biblical community and addressing some of the challenges of online religious community. However, Campbell does not question the theological issues churches must grapple with in order to truly be the church.

In his book, *SimChurch*, Douglas Estes does an effective job of addressing the current online world and how it intersects with spirituality, specifically the church. Estes challenges the church to not ignore the virtual world but to engage it to reach people for Christ. He addresses Internet churches and the differing arguments surrounding their effectiveness. However, he does so from a practical perspective rather than a theological one, spending more time arguing that churches must engage in the virtual world than clearly addressing if true biblical community can be experienced online. Still, Estes does a solid job of addressing many of the issues surrounding how the church must engage in the online world to be effective in the coming days.¹³

In his book, *Technology & Spirituality*, Stephen Spyker addresses how technology is affecting our relationship with God. The author deals with both the benefits and the negative consequences of our technologically-driven culture. Spyker's own spiritual journey mixed with his love for technology makes his approach to this issue authentic and engaging. He dedicates an entire chapter to how spiritual community online can be formed and maintained. Spyker argues that community is not regulated to geographical boundaries. He encourages the reader to broaden their perspective of what community in the future will look like in light of technology. His book is brilliant in addressing how technology affects our walk with God; however, the author does not specifically confront the question whether the church can biblically exist in an online environment.¹⁴

Steve Hewitt's book, *Windows PCs in the Ministry*, is a more recent publication addressing how technology can be used to enhance the ministry of the church. His book is a shotgun approach briefly addressing many areas including selecting worship presentation software, blogging, and how to build a good website. Hewitt's book serves as a basic introduction of current technologies for churches but he offers little knowledge of existing opportunities and endeavors. The author does offer basic applications such as ChurchonVideo.com and StreamingChurch.tv for those churches interested in streaming their services or wanting to start an online church. Hewitt does not begin to address the various arguments surrounding Church Online nor the theological question of whether Church Online can truly be a biblical representation of Christian community.¹⁵

NOTES

¹ Geoff Surratt, Greg Lion and Warren Bird, *A Multi-Site Church Road Map* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 88.

² Ibid., 88-89.

- ³ Chad Hall, "Church . . . Virtually," (January 4, 2010), available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2009/fall/churchvirtually.html> (accessed March 13, 2011).
- ⁴ Pastor David Helbig, Church Online Pastor. David joined the Christ Fellowship pastoral team in 2004. David has more than 15 years of pastoral experience in Canada, the United States, Europe and Southeast Asia. His experience ranges from church planting to family and children's ministries. David is a graduate of Vanguard College in Edmonton, Canada, where he studied theology. David and his wife, Manuela, have been married since 1992 and have three children.
- ⁵ A multi-site church is one church meeting in multiple locations. (See Elmer Towns, Ed Stetzer, and Warren Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books), 65-94. The author's church, Christ Fellowship, has a multi-site model with four physical campuses and one virtual campus.
- ⁶ Surratt, Lion, and Bird, 96.
- ⁷ Hilary Stout, "Antisocial Networking," *New York Times* (May 2, 2010), available from <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9401E3D8103DF931A35756C0A9669D8B63&scp=12&sq=more+cell+phones&st=nyt> (accessed March 11, 2011).
- ⁸ *Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, available from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community>, s.v. "community," (accessed March 3, 2011).
- ⁹ Stephen Spyker, *Technology & Spirituality, How the Information Revolution Affects Our Spiritual Lives* (Woodstock: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2007), Kindle download e-book (accessed December 28, 2010).
- ¹⁰ Michael S. Rosenwald, "Can Facebook Help Overcome Shyness?" *Washington Post* (February 12, 2011), available from http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/can-facebook-help-overcomeshyness/2011/02/12/ABxotpQ_story.html (accessed March 11, 2011).
- ¹¹ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 352.
- ¹² Danielle Burrows, "Next Door Strangers," (February, 2011); available from <http://www.southjersey.com/articles/?articleid=23708> (accessed March 13, 2011).
- ¹³ Douglas Estes, *SimChurch* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), Kindle download e-book.
- ¹⁴ Spyker.
- ¹⁵ Steve Hewitt, *Windows PCs in the Ministry* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2010), Kindle download, e-book.

Chapter 3

THE JOURNEY OF ELMER TOWNS TO A ONE MILLION-PERSON CHURCH

By
Elmer Towns

As you read this chapter, I want your expectation to be stretched to expect the impossible. Once I had doubts there would ever be a church of 10,000 in attendance. Today, I know there will be one church of one million people. Will you believe with me? – Elmer Towns

I began preaching on a weekly basis at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Savannah, Georgia, 1952-53. I was 19 years old and in my second year at Columbia Bible College, 150 miles away. I pastored the church on the weekends, catching an early Saturday morning Greyhound bus to Savannah. I had a goal of knocking on 20 doors Saturday afternoon and evening. Then I preached Sunday morning and Sunday night. I had a second goal of knocking on 20 doors every Sunday afternoon, inviting people to church. I caught an 8:00 p.m. Seaboard Railway train to Columbia arriving around 10:30 Sunday night.

I don't remember setting attendance goals, nor did I motivate the church to break goals. The church building was an old colonial structure with four columns holding up the porch, and a steeple and bell towering two stories in the air. There were five stained-glass windows on either side of the church.

The church had originally had an upper middle class congregation who lived in large two-story Victorian homes, a short buggy ride to downtown Savannah. But when I got there a city diesel bus rambled down Augusta Avenue shuttling the poor from the neighborhood who had divided the large old homes into apartments.

Somewhere in the past, someone had divided the large old three-hundred seat auditorium into a smaller auditorium to seat 125, the rest of the building was cut up into Sunday school

rooms and restrooms. When it would rain I could not visit the homes. Often I looked out the back clear-glass window onto four city lots immediate to the rear of the church. I prayed earnestly that God would give the church those lots. I had a dream of building an L-shape Sunday school building on those lots. Then, I could remove all of the petitions in the main auditorium and preach to 300.¹ Maybe I did have a goal of reaching 300 people for Christ, but it was not motivated by numbers; I wanted people to get saved, so I preached evangelistic messages.

My first Sunday at the church, I visited the Miller family that was kitty-corner across the intersection from the church. It was a dirty smelly house, and Mr. Miller was drunk sleeping off a hangover on the living room couch, wearing only overalls and an undershirt.

I sat at a table nearby explaining the plan of salvation to Mrs. Miller and their daughter Edith, but Edith did not receive Christ as Savior. Because I heard Mr. Miller snoring, I did not think he was listening to what I said; but he was.

Immediately after I left the house, he took a shower and slipped in the back door of the church sitting on the back pew.

I preached an evangelistic sermon on John 3, challenging the people “you must be born again.” When I came to the invitation I pointed dramatically to the church altar and shouted, “Kneel!” I had heard that command used effectively in a street meeting, so I thought it would work for me.

It worked! Miller almost ran to the altar, dropped to his knees weeping uncontrollably. I fell to my knees and lead him to Jesus Christ.

Miller was transformed, and went with me throughout the neighborhood knocking on doors telling people how Jesus had saved him. His testimony energized the neighborhood and the

church. He was just not just a drunk;¹⁷ I am talking about a fall down in the street drunk. He was a new man, and I witnessed the power of being used by God for the first time.

THE VISION GROWS TO 4000

In 1954 I enrolled in Dallas Theological Seminary, still licensed for the ministry by the Southern Presbyterian Church. On our first Sunday in the city, Ruth and I visited an Independent Presbyterian church, but it was dull and dead. That afternoon I read the Sunday newspaper to find out that the Dallas Symphony Orchestra was playing that evening at the First Baptist Church. I said to Ruth,

“I hear that church has a seven-story parking garage and a gym on the eighth floor.

Something that big and expensive—especially built by a church—was unbelievable. I said,

“We’ve got to see that.” An added attraction was to hear the music of the Dallas Symphony. When I got to the church I drove the circular ramps up seven stories and parked on the very top parking spot. Then we went in to look at the gym, and rode the elevator down to street level.

“WOW! Can you image that?” I told Ruth, “I never thought I would see an elevator in a church.” God was stretching my expectation and faith.

Later that night Ruth had severe pains in her abdomen. I rushed her to the Baptist hospital which was only three blocks from our duplex. After examining her, the doctors took her into an emergency room to remove a cyst growing on her ovary.

I was standing in the hall, “lost” not know what to do, but was praying. A nurse beckoned me to fill out admission papers. When she asked for my church membership I told her I didn’t have one; it was my first weekend in Dallas.

“Where did you attend yesterday?”

“I attended the Independent Presbyterian Church and First Baptist Church.” Since it was a Baptist hospital she wrote down First Baptist Church.

“How are you going to pay for this?” she asked.

“The Lord will provide . . .”

After the operation was over, I walked into the post-op room where Dr. Schaffer, a grey-headed elderly visitation pastor from the First Baptist Church was standing next to Ruth.

He wanted to relieve me of any fears so he announced,

“I know that you kids do not have any money, so First Baptist Church is going to pay for this hospital bill.”

“What?” I could not believe what I was hearing. I was a Presbyterian, and the Baptists were offering to pay for my hospital bill. I had never heard of anything like that happening between denominations.

The nurse had told Dr. Schaffer what I said, so that is why he was offering to help God out. Schaffer went on to tell me,

“When you get home tonight, there will be a couple waiting at the curb of your duplex, they will be your Sunday school teachers next Sunday.”

Schaffer went on to tell me that they would bring dinner, clean the house, and every night that week another couple would come from the Sunday school class to bring dinner. First Baptist Church was running about 4,000 in Sunday school at that time, and I thought it was the biggest church in the United States, to me the biggest in the world. Wasn't Dallas in Texas, and isn't everything bigger in Texas? Yet in spite of its enormous attendance, it had compassion for a young couple alone in a large new strange city. I told Ruth,

“Let's go to First Baptist Church, let's learn how to build a big church, but let's don't become Baptists.”

Dr. Criswell was in the middle of preaching a thirteen year series of sermons from Genesis to Revelation. We attended the church from Romans to Corinthians. When he came to preach from Romans 6, he announced that evening he would be preaching on baptism,

“There is no water baptism in Romans 6.”

He promised not to preach on water baptism, but Spirit baptism, i.e., “Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). I believed then and still do that baptism in that chapter is spiritual baptism. I believed when Christ died, I was placed in Him by the Holy Spirit so that He died vicariously for my sins. I thought I knew it was not water, and here one of the biggest Baptist preachers in America agreed with me.

That Sunday night I came to church with my Greek-New Testament, and sat around six pews back straight in front of the pulpit. I wanted to look Dr. Criswell in the eye and check out his exegesis. Coming to the end of the sermon, Criswell dramatically lifted his voice,

“If . . . when Jesus died you die.”

“If . . . when Jesus was buried you were buried with Him.”

“If . . . when Jesus was raised you were raised with Him.”

Then Criswell dramatically repeated that series of statements three or four times raising in crescendo with power until he announced,

“If baptism is a picture of our identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection . . . why not tell the world in water?”

“YES . . .” I said and slammed my Greek-New Testament closed. From that moment on I was a Baptist in my head, although it took three or four months before I was actually baptized by immersion.²

THE VISION GROWS TO 6000

Jump ahead in the story 22 years to the fall of 1966 in the Greater Chicago area where I was teaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. I had 60 students in a class on “Methods of Teaching.” Somehow we got off the subject and were discussing the largest church in the world. Ron Rynd one of my analytical students said,

“Jack Hyles, First Baptist Church in Hammond, Indiana, has the largest church in the world.”

“How many does he have?” I cautiously asked.

“He has 2600 in his Sunday school.” Ron answered my question.

“But I told you earlier in the class that I attended First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, that had over 4000 people in attendance.”

But Ron was persistent claiming, “But Jack Hyles says he has the largest church in America.”

“You can’t believe everything preachers say,” I joked, and the class laughed with me. But a young man in the back of the room put up his hand to claim,

“I think both of you are wrong.” He went on to explain that there is a hillbilly church in Akron, Ohio, that had about 6,000 in attendance. He went on to explain that he was taken by a Sunday school bus to that church when he was young, and that he accepted Jesus as his Savior as a boy in that church. The student went on to describe the pastor, but couldn’t call him by name.

“The church has a hillbilly preacher from Paducah, Kentucky, and it is filled with Southerners who work in a rubber factory.”³

A SEARCH FOR THE LARGEST

I forgot the conversation until the following Sunday afternoon when I was reading *The Chicago Tribune*’s list of the ten bestselling books in the area. Then the thought hit me,

“What would be the ten largest churches in America?”

I determined to find those churches because I thought enough other people would be as interested as was I. In my original research I found that American churches did not keep worship attendance on Sunday morning, but they were very careful to keep Sunday school attendance. So I determined that when I found the ten largest Sunday schools, I would find the ten largest churches.

During the next six months I contacted every denomination asking for a list of their largest attended Sunday schools. Then I found a mailing list of Sunday school conventions, and I wrote to the Sunday school convention presidents asking for a list of the largest Sunday schools in their area. At the time I was the Sunday school editor for *Christian Life* magazine, the largest evangelical magazine, so I posted ads asking my readers to help me search for the largest Sunday school in America.

In 1967 I printed the first list of the largest Sunday schools in America, and according to Robert Walker, then the editor of *Christian Life* magazine, “The news of the ten largest Sunday schools hit America like a thunderclap.”⁴

Out of that research came the book, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow*.⁵ I determined to travel to the ten largest churches and determine the reason why they were so large.

That book was listed among the bestsellers and stayed there for a couple of years. The idea of big growing churches seemed to captivate the thinking of many church leaders because many had given up on exciting soul winning churches (however I realized even from the beginning that many were turned off by the idea of bigness, numbers, and soul winning). After the first article appeared in the magazine, I began traveling among the largest churches in America to speak in their Sunday school meetings, banquets and/or Sunday services. Within a

two year period I preached at 84 of the 100 largest churches. During the next few years Akron Baptist Temple grew from 5,762 to approximately 6,5000.

One thing I realized, it took big buildings to build a big Sunday school. In those days there was no thought of staggered Sunday school times, nor multi-site locations, or video venue churches.

In the early 70s I announced in several ministerial meetings and wrote several articles claiming eventually that some church might have 10,000 in Sunday school. It was a dream that I had, but in my heart I was not sure that anyone would reach it.

A GOAL OF 10,187 IN SUNDAY SCHOOL

Let's jump ahead to the fall of 1971. I had left Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and moved to Lynchburg, Virginia, to help co found Liberty University with Pastor Jerry Falwell.

Of the ten largest Sunday schools, Jerry Falwell was the only one to have planted his church and caused it to grow to become one of the ten largest in America. He was the most innovative, practicing daily over a national radio network, televising his morning services over 200 stations, and he was the first to put all his church records on an IBM computer system. He was building his view of "Saturation Evangelism, i.e., "using every available method, to reach every available person, at every available time."⁶

When the *10 Largest Sunday Schools* was published, Jerry Falwell's church was averaging 2640 but during the fall of 1971, his Sunday school was averaging over 6000 in attendance. There were 154 new students at the new college and every one of them joined Thomas Road Baptist Church, and all of them became involved in the work of the ministry; many of them working in the Sunday school, either teaching new classes, or filling Sunday school buses with children.

By this time Jerry Falwell had purchased about 100 old school buses that he sent out on Sunday morning to pick up children to attend Sunday school. There was an average of 27 riders per bus, so when the church reached 100 buses, they brought in 2700 children. “We are going to be the first church to have 10,000 in Sunday school,” Jerry Falwell announced the beginning of November 1971. That news electrified the student body and congregation.

The announcement began in prayer meeting where Jerry Falwell stood before the congregation and symbolically tore the pages out of the Lynchburg telephone book. There were over 100 and then he began laying them on the Communion Table, announcing, “I want over a hundred people to come forward and take a page of the phone book and phone everyone on both sides of your page, inviting them to Sunday school.” People rushed forward; there were not enough pages to go around.

Then Falwell pointed to a stack of 5000 posters. Then he announced, “I want high schoolers to post these announcements on every light pole and telephone pole in the city. The posters invited people to Sunday school. Next, Falwell pointed to a stack of 10,000 flyers. He announced his strategy for them, “On Thursday, I want one flyer placed under every windshield wiper of every car in the city of Lynchburg, no matter where it is located.” He went on to announce that he would need college students, youth workers and adults to get the job done, but especially junior high workers. They enthusiastically responded.

The church purchased 50 one-minute radio spots to sound on all of the 14 radio stations in Lynchburg, each announcement inviting people to Sunday school. Then, 50 one-minute announcements were made on the ABC television outlet in Lynchburg (it was the only television station in the city).

An advertisement covering the entire page in the newspaper appeared on Thursday, Friday and Saturday leading up to the biggest day.

On Saturday morning over 200 people showed up at the church, their aim was to knock on every door in the city of Lynchburg to invite people to the largest Sunday school in history in their small town of Lynchburg. The city was beginning to catch the spirit of something supernatural happening in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Every Sunday school class had some type of attendance contest, and offered an award to those who brought a friend to Sunday school.

One piece of fried chicken from Colonel Sanders was given to every bus rider that morning just to motivate the children to attend Sunday school.

Finally on top of everything else, a *Friend Day* contest was held throughout the entire church. Jerry Falwell promised a new *Scotfield Bible* (\$16.00) to the person who brought the most friends to Sunday school on that day. These had to be first time visitors, and they had to fill out a card indicating that they were visitors. The cards were dropped in a large barrel at the front door of the church. Steve Wingfield, first year student at the college, brought 53 friends and family members, an unheard number for one worker. Steve Wingfield went on to become a city-wide evangelist in the Northern Midwest with a 5,000-seat tent, and a large office in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Knowing that the church only had 4,000 seats, the E. C. Glass high school auditorium was rented (2,000 seats) for a giant Sunday school rally for junior and senior high students.

Some people were leery about what would happen if the goal was missed. Others wondered if some enthusiastic church workers would stretch the numbers to reach the 10,000 mark. Sam Pate, chairman of the deacons at Thomas Road Baptist Church, got the city fire marshal to make the count and he announced in the morning service that there were 10,187 in attendance that day making it the largest Sunday school in history.

That day laid the foundation in my thinking to build a one million-person church. No one method will do it; it will take a multitude of methods, involving a multitude of people to build a one million-person church.

NOT THE LARGEST

After the big day of over 10,000 in Sunday school I began to do research and found that the Christian Church, Long Beach, California, had over 25,000 men (only a few women) in Sunday school on Armistice Day weekend in 1925, and again in 1927. There was a layman who ran the Sunday school who was also a veteran of World War I. So he challenged the natural grouping of military units to which men from San Diego to Los Angeles had served.

Back in the 1920s, there was the Red Line street car that ran from San Diego to Los Angeles, and covered both of those cities. The Red Line ran a full contingency of street cars on Armistice Day weekend. He got the support of the newspapers to challenge all veterans to wear their uniforms, and travel to Long Beach, California, to be a part of a Sunday school of 25,000.

The downtown area of Long Beach was mapped out, each unit was assigned to various streets and blocks. At a given time they all marched to the baseball stadium where the layman taught the Word of God. After the Sunday school a gigantic picnic was held.

72,000 IN SUNDAY SCHOOL

In 1978 I traveled to Seoul, Korea, not to preach or teach; but just to celebrate my 25th wedding anniversary with Ruth. When we registered at the Presidential Hotel, a group of Christians saw me and a day later I was invited to meet Pastor Yonggi Cho, pastor of the world's largest church. He had built an auditorium to seat 8,000 people and was rumored to be averaging over 72,000 a week in attendance. Obviously I was anxious to meet him. My appointment was for 5:00 p.m. on a Wednesday night. Cho met me at his office door and announced,

“Dr. Towns, I am not going to give you this interview unless you write in your story that I have built the largest church in the world because of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by speaking in tongues.”

I was dumbfounded, I did not know what to say. Before I could answer anything, Cho interpreted saying,

“I believe you are an honest man, and I have read everything you have written on growing churches.” I found myself saying that no one has ever read everything I have written. He continued,

“Your stories make Pentecostal churches sound like Baptist churches”

I wondered if he was accusing me of lying or compromising on doctrine, or what”

“Dr. Towns, you are an honest man, but many Pentecostal preachers want to be big Joe, to be number one, so they know that you are a Baptist. They only tell you how they do Baptist things to get you to write about them.” Then Cho repeated his challenge,

“I will not give you a story, unless you write that I am the largest church in the world because of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by speaking in tongues.”

I carefully phrased my answer to him. Knowing that I had written many term papers in college and seminary, and had quoted my sources accurately to get a good grade. So I said to him,

“I will tell everyone, ‘Pastor Cho says he is the largest church in the world because of the baptism of the Holy Spirit speaking in tongues.’” I was careful to attribute that statement to him, and not my editorial opinion.

We sat down to talk about building the largest Sunday school in the world. It was then Cho said he could not build a Sunday school the way Americans build Sunday schools. Then he asked me a question,

“Have you ever been to UCLA campus in Los Angeles?”

“Yes.”

“How big is that campus?”

“Around 15 blocks by 15 blocks,” I said to him repeating the fact that some buildings were 12 stories tall, some 3 stories tall, but it was a vast campus.

Cho explained that UCLA had about 100,000 students, and it took a vast number of blocks in a town just to house that many students. He went on to say that he would have to build a campus 15 blocks by 15 blocks to put 100,000 students in a Korean Sunday school. He shook his head negatively,

“The city authorities would never let me construct that many buildings and I don’t have the money to put up that many buildings. But we will have 100,000 people by using living rooms, laundry rooms in apartment buildings, recreational rooms in apartment buildings, and restaurants.”

Cho announced that he would not call these Sunday school classes, but rather cells. Then he asked another question,

“What is the best figure in the Bible to describe the New Testament church?”

I was a little embarrassed thinking I didn’t want to give the wrong answer. I gulped and said,

“The body is the best illustration for the church in scripture.” Then I repeated with confidence, “The human body is the best analogy to describe the church.”

“Yes,” Cho answered, then explained,

“The body grows by the division of cells.” He planned to have 100,000 people in his church by the division of small cells in homes throughout the city.

Cho explained to me that a cell in the human body was created when the male sperm came in contact with the female egg, “All the life of the man, and all the life of the woman, are joined

together to make an individual cell. And that cell is so small that you cannot see it with the naked eye.”

At the time we did not understand DNA, but Cho explained the function of DNA saying, “All of a man and all of a woman is found in that first cell.”

Then Cho began to play a game with me. He said, “When you were only a cell, if we could have had a microscope to analyze you, we would have seen a pale white-skinned, bald-headed man.”

Any time someone calls you bald headed to your face, you know they like you. Since then Cho and I have become good friends. (It’s when they call you baldy behind your back that they don’t like you.)

Then Cho laughed and said when he was just a cell, if we could have taken a microscope you would have seen a healthy brown-skinned, black-headed, Korean baby boy.

We laughed together. From that conversation I have learned, “The body grows by the division of cells.” Cho explained to me that one cell is divided into two, but after they are divided you cannot tell which was the original cell because each are identical.

And then the two cells become four, and four cells become eight, and eight cells become sixteen . . . thirty-two . . . sixty-four . . . one twenty-eight . . . *ad infinitum*.

Cho explained that he would add home cells all over the city of Seoul, Korea, for growth. Cho set a first goal of 100,000 in attendance, and I felt he could do it. Then he set a goal of 250,000 and he reached that goal. Next it was a goal of 500,000 and finally a goal of 750,000.

Then Cho retired in 2008. Since then many of the satellite churches that are counted in that number have been cut loose, and are now self-supporting indigenous churches. Cho came close to building one church of a million people, but retirement cut that dream short. Now, I believe someone can build a church of a million through an Internet church with the support of a

multitude of methods, and means of evangelism. If one man can build a church of 750,000 people, why cannot another man build a church of one million?

THE FIRST TIME TO PREACH TO 8000 PEOPLE

My appointment with Cho was to last from 5:00–6:00 p.m. and then I would attend his prayer meeting. But at 5:55 p.m. he said,

“We will go out that door, it leads to the auditorium,” he pointed to a smaller door on the other side of the room, then explained,

“We’ll kneel down when we first get into the auditorium, and ask God what you should preach on tonight.” That was my first clue that I was going to preach that evening. He added, “God will tell me what you should preach on; it will be a message from God.” I felt the presence of God as I entered the auditorium to over 8,000 people, jammed packed into the sanctuary. Excitement rolled as they sang cheerfully from their hearts, I could feel sincerity from their faces.

When Cho prayed publicly, that was the first time I experienced a *concert of prayer*, I jokingly said to myself, “*This sounds like praying in tongues*,” but it wasn’t. They were all praying in Korean. Like an ocean wave reaching higher and higher, they worshiped the Lord louder and louder (*a concert of prayer* is where everyone offers to God worship and prayer out loud so that God is the audience Who enjoys our worship, while our mouth is the instrument of praise music being directed to Him.)

Cho hit a small bell, the kind school teachers use to call attention for a rowdy class . . . ding . . . ding . . . ding . . . ding . . . ding.

The sound penetrated through the loud praises, then 8,000 people stood meditating silently in triumphant silence, a contrast to the loud peal of worship I heard a few seconds before.

When Cho prayed for God to give me a message, John 3:17 came to his mind, “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

I did not have a message on the condemnation of God. But God answered my prayer for a message, just as much as God had given Cho the topic. As I stood to preach, I announced, “We cannot understand the condemnation of God until we understand the love of God . . .” Then I preached a sermon on John 3:16 that I had used many times before, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son . . .” (John 3:16).

From that conversation with Cho, I realized the secret of a 100,000 people church was not buildings and auditoriums, but people. A leader has to put 10,000 group leaders to work to get 100,000 people in a church. What does that say about a million-people church? A leader must put 100,000 people to work to effectively reach a million-people church. PREACHING TO 19,000

Five years later I planned a trip around the world to interview pastors and investigate churches to find the ten largest churches in the world. I was confident that churches outside the United States grew because of a different dynamic than those within our nation.

Most of the world’s largest churches were Pentecostal, and their dynamic pulpit ministry, including their manifestation of spiritual gifts, was the source for their growth.

I attended prayer meeting in the Jotabeche Church in Santiago, Chile. The auditorium could seat 19,000 people, and was packed for prayer meeting. I took three pastors with me, including world-renowned leadership author and speaker, John C. Maxwell, then pastor of Skyline Wesleyan Church, San Diego, California.

We had previously visited the church called Brazil for Christ in Sao Paulo, Brazil. *Christianity Today* magazine had just announced it was the largest church in the world, and in an article describing its dedication service claimed it averaged 25,000 people a week in attendance.

When I looked over the crowd, I knew it was an exaggeration. John Maxwell paced the auditorium both ways. It measured approximately 200 feet by 200 feet and he quickly figured that if 25,000 people attended, each worshipper would stand in a small space 11 inches by 11 inches. We all concluded that 4,000-5,000 people was a tremendous church, but 25,000 was an exaggeration. So when we got to the Jotabeche Church in Chile, Maxwell paced off the auditorium and concluded it could hold 19,000 attendees.

Pastor Vasquez the third pastor of the Jotabeche Church met us in his office at approximately 4:00 p.m. on a Wednesday afternoon. The short happy pastor announced, "Let's go see how we get 19,000 people in prayer meeting!"

Vasquez put us into his large Cadillac and announced, "There are only two Cadillacs in all of Chile, I have one and the president of Chile has the other." He explained that the government had a restriction on large expensive American-made cars such as Cadillacs, but the legislature voted to allow only two in the country.

We drove through the poor sections of Santiago, viewing the shanties seemingly built on top of one another, stretching for miles. I was not shocked how poor the people were in Santiago, for I had pastored a church in the same type of neighborhood in Dallas, Texas, while a student at Dallas Theological Seminary from 1956-58.

Then we saw our first parade, it was a long snake-like line of approximately 150 worshippers marching to church. Three men at the front of the parade were blowing trumpets, about 4 or 5 men played guitars, and the people loudly sang Christian songs. The leader was announcing the gospel over a small portable amplification system, inviting people to join them in church that evening.

About a mile away we saw a second parade, this one was smaller, i.e., about 50 people with only one trumpet player. As we continued searching the neighborhood, we must have found

4 or 5 different parades, all converging on the Jotabeche Cathedral which was located on the main thoroughfare that stretched across the valley from mountain to mountain, 14 lanes across. As each parade reached the highway, police were ready to stop traffic, so believers could parade into the house of God. As they entered the Cathedral, their singing became triumphantly louder. When they finally entered the Cathedral, everyone stopped to join in one worship hymn of praise to God.

This second largest church in the world was large because their music was indigenous to the Hispanic culture. The following night I spoke at a Baptist Church on the same thoroughfare on the other side of the city, approximately 12 miles away. The Baptist church met in a neat little yellow brick building, with a paved parking lot, paved sidewalks and light oak pews resembling thousands of churches I had seen in the United States. That evening around 60 people sang European music, played on a piano and organ. They conducted a typical American worship service, but it was dead. The missionary leaders didn't understand contextualization, that a church in Chile should express the unchangeable content of the gospel in Hispanic culture.

But the Jotabeche Church was alive with music. The balcony sat about 2,500 people and the first row was filled with 50 men in white shirts, dark ties, each one with a trumpet in hand. It was the largest mariachi band that I had ever seen or heard. Behind that row of white shirts sat almost 2,000 guitar players, half of them were fathers with their sons sitting next to them, mimicking the play of their fathers. Can you image 2,000 guitar pickers beating out the hymns, not American music, but with Hispanic rhythm?

The lead trumpet player on the front row left raised his trumpet, every eye in the auditorium on him. When he dropped the trumpet like a symphony conductor dropping a baton, all of the other trumpet players, guitar players, and 19,000 people "let it fly." Noisy . . . cheerful . . . singing.

I did not know the songs, but I felt their enthusiasm; but even more than that, I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit ministering to people—Hispanic people—in their own language. I thought, *“It can’t get any better than this,”* but I was wrong.

Pastor Vasquez, smiling, rushed to the platform, threw both hands in the air reaching for the ceiling, and shouted at the top of his voice,

“GLORY TO GOD . . .”

At that signal, all 19,000 people sprang to their feet, threw their arms into the air shouting, ***“GLORY TO THE FATHER . . . GLORY TO THE SON . . . GLORY TO THE HOLY GHOST . . .”***

At that shout, the hair on the back of my head stood up, my eyes immediately watered with tears of appreciation, and I hid my face in my hands for shame that I had never had such an enthusiastic expression to God. I whispered to myself, *“I will never hear this again in my life.”*

Again I was wrong. The Holy Spirit said to me, “Yes, you will hear this when you stand before the throne in Heaven where there will be millions upon millions of people who will shout just as enthusiastically,

“Worthy is the Lamb . . .”

I was able to preach that evening to 19,000 people. I don’t remember what I preached on, and I don’t remember if I did a good job. But I felt connected to the people as I quoted scripture after scripture, and told story after story. The people sat packed in their small little wooden pews, listening intently to a message from an American, a man that they did not know and never heard of before.

The church announced 92,000 members for that year, however the congregation attended several locations. The large mother church was called the Cathedral, and had 12 satellite congregations called Temples, averaging about 1,200 in attendance, and under them were

another 100 churches, with an attendance of 400 each, and under them were mission Sunday schools.

Once a year every member was required to come to the Cathedral to take Communion on Good Friday, (they only served communion once a year). Their membership count was taken from those who were served Communion.

I remember thinking this is a small denomination, not a single church. However, as I viewed other large churches in South America, many followed the same organizational patterns, i.e., they were small denominations with a mother church, satellite churches and mission churches.

Forty years earlier (in 1980) evangelical church membership throughout South America represented about one percent of Chili's population, which included all evangelical groups, including Pentecostals. Today evangelicals average approximately 20 percent of the South American nations, and most of those people belong to Pentecostal churches.

I was convinced then that large churches can be effective, and multitudes can be reached simultaneously for the glory of God. Today, I am convinced a large one million-people church can be built across ethnic lines, and can include people from every ethnic group.

CORE VALUES ARE THE GLUE THAT CAN HOLD ONE MILLION TOGETHER

The core values that hold the Jotabeche Church together, even those temples and churches stretched over many miles, and multiple sites, and multiple sizes, are an illustration of what it will take to build a potential one million-person church.

Obviously, ministry of the pastor holds the Jotabeche empire together. His powerful preaching, his powerful worship, and his wise administrative direction keeps the church focused in one direction (Vasquez has one part-time secretary and no other paid employees throughout the 92,000 member church, not even janitors.)

Their second core value is a joint commitment to their church. The people know that they are not a Roman Catholic church, they know that salvation is in Jesus Christ, and Him alone. They deeply believe their church is the correct one because of doctrine, but even in a greater sense; they know their church is correct because of the atmospheric presence of the Holy Spirit they feel when they enter its doors.

Their loyalty to the church is seen in their commitment to the Lord's Table, probably a carryover from their Roman Catholic allegiance to the absolute demands of the mass. They recognize the Communion on Good Friday is as absolutely imperative for continued fellowship with God and the church. People are taken from the hospital to celebrate Communion, and business men postpone any business trips during Good Friday. Because everyone cannot enter the church at one time, there are multiple services to offer Communion throughout the day. People line up and wait sometimes two and three services to get in. Another core value is the church's commitment to evangelism. The church is known throughout the area for its street preaching. When I was in the city I saw a man preaching in a large common area in a shopping center or preaching on street corners. The most unusual sight was seeing a lone figure standing on an empty street corner preaching the gospel. It was in a future subdivision with no trees anywhere, but telephone poles and paved streets with no houses for several blocks. Apparently the church is committed to street preaching, whether anyone is present, whether anyone hears, whether anyone responds; the member's core value is just to preach in obedience to Jesus Christ.

The church has a strong commitment to Bible teaching of children through Sunday school. While their preaching services are held Sunday afternoon (allowing those who work six days a week to sleep in on Sunday morning) they teach children on Sunday morning.

I had my hair cut by a lady working in a garage who was one of their leading Sunday school workers. Speaking through an interpreter she told me she began a Sunday school right there in the garage. When I asked her where the Sunday school is now, she said, “It’s out the back door.”

I then opened the door to a 400-seat sanctuary in her backyard behind her garage. Her mission Sunday school had grown into a church. Then she explained that she now walked five miles every Sunday morning, beginning another mission Sunday school. Her prayer was that the mission Sunday school would grow into a church just like the one in her backyard.

Another core value is *authentic* worship. Inside the walls of their church building they throw their arms in praise to God, they raise their voices in shouts of hallelujah, the crowning core value of all that they experience in the presence of God in their corporate worship. As one believer said,

“If I did not worship God with all my heart, God would not be pleased, and I could not live for Him next week.”

That obligation to worship God corporately makes the Jotabeche Church absolutely necessary to its 92,000 members. And that type of obligation must be built in a one million-member church. Members must attach themselves to church by whatever electronic means possible, and receive something so life sustaining that they feel that they cannot make it through the next week without their connection to the church.

Their commitment to core values is the glue that holds the Jotabeche empire together. It is not an empire of buildings or structures; if anything, it’s a very loose confederation almost like a loose confederation of a one million-people church.

NOTES

¹ The story of my preaching at Westminster Presbyterian Church is told in the book, *Stories About My First Church*, Regal Books, Ventura, CA (out of print); available from

http://elmertowns.com/books/online/my_1st_ch/Stories_About_My_First_Church%5BETowns%5D.PDF (accessed July 26, 2011).

² The story of my transition from a Presbyterian church to a Baptist church is found in *Stories About My First Church*, Chapter 19, available from http://elmertowns.com/books/online/my_1st_ch/Stories_About_My_First_Church%5BETowns%5D.PDF (accessed July 26, 2011).

³ This story is told in Elmer Towns, *the Ten largest Sunday Schools* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1969), 15-24.

⁴ Elmer Towns, *Sunday Schools That Dared to Change* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993), 22.

⁵ _____, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1969).

⁶ Jerry Falwell and Elmer Towns, *Church Aflame* (Nashville, TN: Impact Books, 1971), 70.

SECTION TWO

The Foundations for a One Million-Person Church

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Chapter 4

WHAT CORE VALUES ARE NECESSARY TO BUILD A ONE MILLION-PERSON CHURCH?

By Elmer Towns

You will survey the necessary core values to build any growing New Testament church. While there are many churches that are not growing that have similar core values, the values emphasized in this chapter will focus first on outreach and evangelism and second, discipleship and bonding which are foundational to growth.

The core values that will be necessary to build a super church of one million persons are the same values that have built churches throughout the centuries. Just because a one million person church is connected by technology over vast geographical distances does not change its inherent glue.

The marvels of electronic technology will not draw people together, neither will instant connection of tweets, Facebook or the next invention that will make relationships quicker . . . clearer . . . easier . . . or more addictive. Yes, the latest and newest i-pad may capture the fantasy of a million people today, but modern people have short attention spans. What's in today may be out next week. It will take something more than the latest "buzz" to keep people coming back week after week. But a living church is an ongoing connection.

The million-person church will have to answer the deepest questions of the human soul and give each person a reason to live, a reason to come back week after week and ultimately a compelling explanation for their death and life after death.

Put it simply, the member of a church with one million others must find the most compelling answers to his problem, the best reason to exist in a world that gives little meaningful reasons to live, and help to touch God on a regular basis and have God touch him. And God's touch must be so meaningful that it becomes the most important thing in his life.

Let's not project values on to a million-person church that hasn't been experienced by millions previous to this church.

A couple of years ago I visited the Coliseum in Rome, Italy, walking all the way around the upper deck of its vast 80,000 seats. Half way around I stopped to gaze at the Coliseum floor, and wondered how much martyrs' blood was mingled in its dirt?

How could a young man face a hungry roaring lion and feel its teeth biting into his flesh, and not deny Christ? He valued his relationship to Christ more than anything else on earth. He died for his faith.

How could a young mother experience her children jerked from her arms by vicious starving wolves, then see her children eaten alive and not deny her Christian faith that thrust her into that arena? Her faith was real.

Old men were nailed to a cross, just as their Lord, then they were doused with oil to be burned alive. Even as they smelled their flesh burning, they didn't deny their Lord who was crucified for them. All of these martyrs—plus thousands more—valued their faith in Christ more than their physical life.

It may not require you to endure the same physical torment and death as martyrs of old, but it will take that degree of commitment by members of a million-person church to produce a super church that's described in this book. The members must value their faith in Christ to the same degree as past martyrs. They must value faith to the core of their being; they must have core-value faith.

They must value their sacrifice to make such a church possible, knowing it's what God wants them to do, and it's how they can best serve God. Because they are attached to others—a million others—they must know their influence will make a difference.

Two Protestant church men were burned at the stake at Oxford, England, in 1555 because they opposed “Bloody Queen Mary” who attempted to bring England under the servitude of the Roman Catholic Church. Bishop Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were marched by armed guards to a tall pile of lumber and straw, then tied to a stalk and were asked to recant their faith in Christ. They refused. When the smoke dimmed their eyes, and the flames began to scorch their flesh, Latimer said,

“Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light a candle, by God’s grace in England, as I trust shall in ever be put out.”¹

What makes a strong young college male surrender his life for the mission field, then follow up with training and preparation? What makes him spend his life in the jungle evangelizing a heathen tribe, learning to speak their language, then molding it into readable script, then translating the Bible into the language of the people so they can read God’s Word for themselves? What drives him to invest his life in a heathen culture to build a church for the glory of God? It’s the same core values that will drive a modern-day young person to learn God’s Word, then learn the technological language and tools to reach a million persons in an Online Church.

THE “JESUS” CORE VALUE

The one who will build a million-person church must know more than the historical Jesus that’s seen in the pages of the New Testament. Yes, he must know that the Son of God is eternal, and was the Creator of the earth and universe, with God the Father, and God the Holy Ghost. He must know more than the fact that Jesus was the only begotten Son of the Father, and that He was conceived of the Virgin Mary and born in Bethlehem, and that Jesus was born without a sinful nature, and that He lived without committing sin. He must know that Jesus was tried by Pilate and found innocent yet was crucified by Roman soldiers on a hill outside

Jerusalem. He must know that the sin of mankind was upon Jesus, and that He died for sin, and was buried in a borrowed grave. He must know that Jesus died for his sin; the death penalty for his sin was forgiven by Jesus' death.

But knowing all about the death of Jesus is not enough. You must show sorrow by repenting of your sins and asking for the cleansing of sins that comes through the blood of Christ. This involves a personal encounter with the Son of God so that Jesus Christ comes into your life to give you salvation.

Also, you must know that after three days in the grave, Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of God the Father. The new resurrection life of Jesus is available to those who invite Him into their life. This new life has the power to help you gain victory over sin and live a life pleasing to God.

This relationship is more than joining a church, and it is more than being baptized, and it is more than establishing a relationship with an Online Church by technological connection. Every one of the million persons should know Christ personally and experience a born-again relationship with Jesus Christ. This is the beginning core value that becomes the glue that builds a million-person church.

One of the first mandates of the new believer is to tell others of their new faith in Jesus Christ. They will confess this before the church; probably posting their testimony online so all one million members can read and know about their salvation experience. Then the new believer will want to be baptized in water, telling the world when Jesus died, their sin died for they were in Christ in His crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. When they come out of the water they are testifying that they have new life in Christ. When a video of their baptism is posted, all in the church can relate with them and rejoice with them for they have had the same experience.

The new believer will want to fulfill the commands of Jesus in the Great Commission to “make disciples of all nations (ethnic groups)” (Matt. 28:19). He can go to all ethnic groups through the technological advances of language translation available in modern online communication.

To build a supernatural church of unlimited reach, the believer must have radical faith that only the gospel, and the gospel alone, can save an individual; is the basis for transforming the culture where he ministers and is the only means of salvation for everyone in the world.

The pastor must preach “thus saith the Lord,” in a world of uncertainty and confusion. The pastor’s sermon must be bold as thunder, just as surely as its roll follows a deadly strike of lightning.

The pastor must preach an exclusive way to heaven, that Jesus saves and all who believe in Him will be saved, and those who have not taken Jesus as their personal Savior will be lost in hell forever. He’s not sharing theological ideas, nor is he just teaching how to solve life’s problems. He’s not just offering excellent Christian music in a contemporary beat, nor is he providing better worship than other churches. Listeners must know a church of a million persons is in the salvation business.

The pastor must be an ardent, enthusiastic, unabashed Biblicist who believes the message of the Bible comes from God to man and he’s just one who speaks for God. He must give all effort to communicate the Bible to as many people as possible in their heart-language as they understand its meaning and the consequences of rejecting its truths.

Within this limited time, space, and circumstances, he must take every opportunity and give every effort to communicate the message of Jesus to as many as he possibly can. He is a desperate preacher on a desperate mission where life and death are human consequences; where heaven and hell are the only choices.

Because the message of the Bible is imperative, the preacher must study the scriptures diligently, craft his sermon pointedly, illustrate it practically, present it passionately; but most of all he must go into God's presence by prayer, asking for His anointing on him personally, and for His conviction to grip his listeners because of their sin, and he must pray for His power to transform lives.

THE OBEDIENCE CORE VALUE

To build a super church, members must be committed to biblical obedience, and separate themselves from every known sin. They must not just give lip service to holiness and godliness, no; the pastor must urge every member to live a life of obedience that will please God. Each must be so committed to a life of separation from sin that the pastor will hold all church members, workers, and church officers to the standard.

Legalism alone is never the answer. The pastor and his members must passionately seek the presence of God with the same energy that sin is avoided and temptation is shunned. Too many modern church members have a low view of sin and a familiar acquaintance with it, as though evil is a snake without venom or it cannot strike death.

There is godly power in holiness when a believer leaves sin's grip and cleaves to God. There is no spiritual power in legalism. Who cares if someone doesn't get drunk, or doesn't curse, or doesn't rob or commit adultery? A lot of people live by the standard of "touch not, taste not, handle not." The issue is Jesus Christ. Everyone must know Him, must allow His presence to be felt in their life; and allow His power to flow through them to change lives.

THE CHURCH CORE VALUE

There are so many ideas of what make up a church, or a local church; that it's easy to be confused on the subject. Let's look at the root meaning of church from the Greek language. It

comes from *ecclesia* which is taken from two words, *ek (out) and kaleo (to call)*. It originally meant those “called out,” or those “called together.”

Doesn't that begin to make sense, a church is a group of people “called out from sin” or “called out from doing their thing?” Think of Jesus walking along the shore of Lake Galilee; seeing fishermen He said,

“Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people” (Mark 1:17, *NLT*). They were asked to leave their fishing nets and follow Jesus. Therefore, a church is made up of people who are asked to leave their normal life to follow Jesus and serve Him. That relationship is the power that can build a million-person church.

But the invitation by Jesus is also a call to gather together. Notice, “Jesus went up into a mountain and called those who wanted to be with him, and they came to Him” (Mark 3:13, *ELT*). The call involved being with Jesus. That's a call to learn from Him, to become like Him, and to fellowship with Him. Therefore, a church of one million persons is a gathering of Christ followers to learn to be like Jesus, and to learn how to follow Him, and to have fellowship (by prayer and meditation) with Him.

What a privilege to meet Jesus Christ in the church, whether online or in residency—this is the positive attraction to any church. But there's also a negative obligation. Since Christ has called us to Himself, we have an obligation to gather in His presence.

The church has two meanings in scripture. First, it's a local gathering of people. When the church first gathered on the day of Pentecost, “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day with about three thousand souls were added *to them*” (Acts 2:41).

This was the outward church that “continued steadfastly in the apostle' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking bread” (Acts 2:42). Added to these activities were “continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house . . . praising God and

having favor with all the people” (Acts 2:46-47). Did you notice they went from house to house, which meant they couldn’t all get together, just as a church of one million persons can’t all get together? Yet, in spite of their geographical diversity, “The Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 12:47).

There’s another indication the early church was geographically diverse. The church is described as plural, many multitudes, “Believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” (Acts 5:14). These appear to be believers from various sections of Jerusalem or “house churches,” which come to faith in Christ. At the same time, all believers in Jesus were described as a single group. “The multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32). Doesn’t that suggest a church can be made up of many groups of people, from many sections of a city, yet God’s Word recognizes them as a singular church? So why not a church of one million persons, made up of many groups of people in many different geographical locations?

But not everyone who joins a local church is a believer. Paul warns the church at Corinth, “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves” (2 Cor. 13:5).

That brings us to a second understanding of the church. It is a spiritual gathering made up of all believers who have been placed into Christ by spiritual baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). Paul says, “The church, which is His body” (Eph. 1:22, 23). So when we see the Word *church* in scripture, we have to interpret the context to determine if the author is describing a local church of believers on this earth or others in the spiritual body of Jesus Christ.

Whatever our conclusion, we must realize the church is important to God, because “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her” (Eph. 5:25). Since Jesus gave His life for the church, then each member must make the church important to him. Each member must attach himself to it in love, loyalty and service.

The Bible tells of no unbaptized believer—except the thief on the cross—and he probably would have been baptized if given the opportunity.

The Bible tells of no believer who was not attached to a local church. There were no “Lone Ranger Christians” in scripture. If anything, it shows each believer was connected to a church. Then it exhorts each believer to live in harmony with other believers; love them, serve them, and serve Christ with them.

WRAP-UP

The core values of the Online Church are the same for the resident church. They are the values that guide our thoughts, attitudes and actions. They reveal our self-importance, our estimate of others, and then tell us how valuable is our faith.

Our core values tell us who we are and they determine the priority for the things we do, or don't do. If we see ourselves as born-again believers who received strength from our Online Church, then we will give time, energy and money to keep vital our relationship with people in the Online Church.

Our core values give meaning to our personal relationships, both those we meet in daily activities, and those we connect with online. When we value those online, we will pray for them, work with them, and when necessary, we will serve them.

Our core values guide our decision-making power, determining what we choose to do and not do. Our core values will determine how we spend our time, energy, and what we do to serve God.

When our core values are biblical, we will realize the importance of our church to our spiritual development. We will nourish that relationship and prize it among our other connections in life.

NOTES

¹ William Francis Collier, *History of the British Empire* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1876), 174.

Chapter 5

YOU MUST HAVE ONE MILLION-PERSON FAITH TO BUILD A CHURCH THAT LARGE

By
Elmer Towns

The term *faith* is used in several ways in scripture. In this chapter the readers will examine the principles of “mountain-moving” faith to see the ingredients of active faith that expect the impossible and attempt unattainable feats for the glory of God. It will take one million-person faith to build a church that large.

Any pastor can build a one million-person church because God’s power is available to all His servants. But probably not one in a 1,000 pastors will do it because it takes a million-person faith to build a church that big.

When I was doing research for the book *The Ten Largest Sunday School and What Makes Them Grow*, I spent a morning with Pastor G. B. Vick of Temple Baptist Church, Detroit, Michigan, the 3rd largest church in America at the time with over 5,000 in attendance. Then I later spent an afternoon with him at Baptist Bible College, Springfield, Missouri, where he was president. The college had produced 23 of the 100 largest churches in America. I felt he understood how greatness in ministry was produced, so I asked,

“What does it take to produce a great pastor who will build a great church?”

Vick didn’t give specifics, but he seemed to ramble on about faithfulness in little jobs done for God, and faithfulness in prayer, soul winning, and a hunger to know God. Then he made one statement that’s stuck with me over the years,

“Great men build great churches, average men build average churches, and small men never do much to help the work of God, they just hang on . . .”¹

So to apply Vick's formula to our present task, it's not skill with technology that will build a one million-person church, nor is it skill with evangelistic methods, or Bible knowledge. To build a supersized church, a man needs supersized faith. He must know God, plus know all the other technical and spiritual ingredients it takes to pastor a church.

The staff of G. B. Vick told me when he was relaxing and talking about the students, he would put numbers on the forehead of future preachers by predicting how large a church a student might build. He'd say,

"That guy is a 100 guy," predicting he would pastor an average church of 100 people.

Vick at times would surprise the staff with his prediction of certain "personality" leaders with loads of charm and great grades, but Vick predicted,

"He'll not make it in ministry," suggesting the young man would give up too easily, or the young man would give into a temptation that would destroy his ministry.

Vick only had three numbers he put on student's foreheads, i.e., 100, 500, and 1,000. Perhaps his thinking was limited by the limitations of outreach methods of his day, or perhaps by the cultural conditions of the 1960s. When someone asked Vick what Jerry Falwell would build, Vick said,

"He'll build a church bigger than anything we've ever seen or he'll end up in prison."

I was intrigued by Vick's assessment of greatness so I went to interview Jerry before we started Liberty University together. I asked,

"Where did you get your great faith?"

Falwell answered with a dead-pan expression,

"I don't have great faith, I have a great God."

"O phooey!" I thought, and put my pen in my pocket thinking there was no story here.

Then Falwell added,

“Let me tell you how I learn the greatness of God.”

Pulling out my pen I wrote furiously as he told a simple story of putting God on the spot while he was a freshman at Bible Baptist College.

1st INGREDIENT: FAITH RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Jerry Falwell was sent to ask Max Hawkins, superintendent of the junior department at High Street Baptist Church for a Sunday school class. Hawkins raised a suspicious eyebrow. He didn't like what he saw in the young freshman, but he gave Falwell a class anyway. Max didn't want to give him a good classroom so he drew some divider curtains together in the corner of the larger junior assembly hall and handed Falwell a roll book with one name. Daryl was the only 4th grade boy in the class.

Falwell taught the class, and at the end of the third week he caught Hawkins in the hallway to announce,

“Here's the roll book, I don't think I'm cut out for this class; things are not going so well.” Falwell held the roll book out to Hawkins.

“Yep . . .” Max put his hands behind his back, rejecting the offer of the roll book. “This is what I expected. You're just a puffy cheeked rich kid with your own car and you think the world owes ya a living!”

Max continued telling the young freshman he didn't want to give Falwell a regular classroom, that's why he strung up two curtains off in a corner. Then Max reached for the roll book.

Falwell jerked it back in defiance, saying,

“I'll keep the class, and I'll make it successful.”

Max could only shrug his shoulders and walk away.

Stinging with defeat, Falwell went back to his dormitory determined to do something big for God with that Sunday school class. He got a key to an empty room in his dorm and every day after lunch he went there to meet God from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Falwell told me in that room he learned how big God really was. After 20 minutes of prayer, the young freshman ran out of things to pray about. So visiting the college library, he checked out and began reading the great Christian classics from warriors of the faith like George Müller who prayed for God to supply all the needs of 2,000 children in his orphanage in Bristol, England.

Then Falwell read *Absolute Surrender* by Andrew Murray to learn the power of complete yieldedness to God. Then he read *Power Through Prayer* by E. M. Bounds to realize spiritual results in ministry came as a result of prayer—much prayer. Falwell learned intimacy with God when he read *The Normal Christian Life* by Watchman Nee, and *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* by Hannah Whitall Smith. He read those deeper life books and dozens more.

Falwell tells of stretching himself out on the springs of an old army cot to beg God for His power and blessing. “There was a holy glow in that room. I eagerly went to that room every day because I knew God was waiting for me. I gave up sports in the afternoon and hanging out in the coffee shop to spend time with God.”

Jerry picked up Daryl on Saturday with the expectation,

“Let’s go find every 4th grade boy in Springfield, Missouri.” They knocked on doors, visited playgrounds and searched empty fields where boys hung out looking for prospects.

The class grew each week. There were three cars among Jerry’s roommates, so they made a caravan and wound their way through Sunday morning streets to transport 4th grade boys to Sunday school. They’d pack one car and send it to the church while they continued to fill the next one.

By the end of the year, attendance averaged 57 boys with over 100 on special days. Jerry said his success was because,

“In that tiny dormitory room I met God face-to-face and heart-to-heart; it was there I learned what a great God I have, and it was there I developed my faith and learned that in a relationship with God, a person can get things from him.”

Toward the end of his ministry, Falwell realized it was faith that built the great Liberty University, so he often quoted,

“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). If Falwell were still alive, he would agree with me that faith is the starting point to pleasing God and the foundation for building a one million-person church.

2nd INGREDIENT: FAITH VISION

Faith is the incendiary ability to see what God can do—because leaders see first, see most, and see further into the future. As a matter of fact, faith and vision are twins. To give birth to one is to give birth to both. You can’t have extraordinary faith without a God-given vision.

Bill Monroe was the pianist for a church in Indianapolis, Indiana, in the late 1960s when God called him to become a fulltime pastor during a Sunday morning church service. He left the piano bench to go to the altar to surrender for the ministry.

Bill quit his job and moved to South Carolina to begin a church. He stopped at a rest stop on Interstate 77 on his way to South Carolina where his wife asked again if he was sure they should move to South Carolina. Monroe described for his wife,

“I see a yellow brick church, surrounded by Southern pines and azaleas. I see a 1,000-seat auditorium filled with people listening to me preach the Word of God. I see a large choir and above them a baptistery where new converts are being baptized.”

That vision motivated Bill Monroe to begin a church in an abandoned building that had been used by the Florence (sic) Little Theater. It was a decaying framed structure with red asbestos brick siding peeling off the walls. The interior had been painted completely black so no light would reflect. The roof leaked, and a couple of times a church service was cancelled because of a rainstorm.

The first church service featured the first sermon Monroe ever preached. He sold products door-to-door to earn a salary and averaged only 23 people during the first few months. Yet, Bill Monroe was gripped by a vision of building the largest Sunday school in South Carolina right in his church.

Monroe was a business major from the University of South Carolina and used his business background to sell bonds to purchase land on Highway 301 and construct the first building of 15,000 square feet in 1972.

In 1978 I spoke at the dedication of the second auditorium. It was a perfect picture of the vision that motivated Monroe to begin the church. The yellow brick building was surrounded with Southern pines and azaleas. The 1,000-seat auditorium was filled with guests, plus those overflowing into the wide hallways and foyer. The choir reached around the pulpit and the baptistery was above it just as Monroe had seen it in his vision.

Today, the church averages almost 2,000 in a town with a population of 132,800, a far cry from a million-person church. But the power of vision that motivated its planting and growth is the force needed to build a one million-person church.

Yet, a God-given vision is not something you dream up and plan to do. No! A vision doesn't come from the pastor; vision comes from God. A pastor must get a vision of a one million-person church from God as he fulfills the first ingredient, i.e., he spends time in relationship with God.

3rd INGREDIENT: A FAITH LEAP INTO THE UNKNOWN

No one has yet built a one million-person church, so the pastor who has a vision to begin this church is attempting to do something that has never been done. What he attempts is no different than what some did in scripture.

“. . . Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen” (Heb. 11:7). He built an ark (boat) when no one had seen rain. Then he took a second leap of faith. He entered the boat to wait for it to rain.

“By faith . . . Abraham went out not knowing where he was going” (Heb. 11:8). His leap of faith motivated him to live in tents in the Promised Land; he left the civilization of Ur of the Chaldees to obey God.

“By faith Moses . . . refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God” (Heb. 11:24, 25). His leap into the unknown was to give up a life of wealth and choose to suffer with God’s people.

“These all died in faith, not having received the promise, but having seen them afar off” (Heb. 11:13). The godly men of faith all took a leap of faith into the unknown, long before they received any tangible reinforcements.

A leap of faith is intentional and planned. A pastor must plan to build a church of one million persons, and take intentional steps to do it. He must risk his reputation, sacrifice other plans, and even jeopardize his standing in the ecclesiastical community.

If a man says he’s going to start a church, then waits to see if it reaches a million-person church, is that really a leap of faith? If God drags him kicking into a large church, is that faith? Or if a person refuses a big vision, but God pushes him into action, is that a leap of faith? Your faith pleases God when you intentionally choose to trust God to accomplish the impossible.

4th INGREDIENT: BRINKMANSHIP FAITH

Sometimes God's servant faces an obstacle greater than he's ever found before. There will always be obstacles and problems facing the growth of a church. There are money problems, legal issues, personality conflicts, persecutions, or an innumerable number of other barriers that will hold back the work of God. Sometimes it's an attack by evil forces to wipe out the church and its influence.

The one who would build a million-people church must be prepared to face opposition at each growth stage of the church. There will be problems with each new ministry he introduces. People in leadership will fall into sin and disappoint Him. A pastor is disillusioned if he dreams of building a church without facing problems. How he faces and overcomes problems will determine his success. Those who can't handle problems, can't build a church of any size for God.

The word *brinkmanship* was coined during the cold war between Russia and the United States from 1945 to 1989. Both nations were threatened by the other. Both nations had the atomic bomb and both nations could almost destroy the civilization of the other. Both nations went to the *brink* of war, but held back by MAD, "Mutual Assured Destruction." The one who would build a super church—a one million-person church—must realize the many threats against his church. He must realize any one threat could wipe out the church he has planted.

But Jesus promised He would build His church, "I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18) and the scriptures promise, "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Therefore, work with a triumphant attitude.

Brinkmanship faith involves going to an extreme limit to counteract an extreme threat to the church. When evil pushes, brinkmanship faith pushes back. This is more than denouncing sin or holding a candle in the darkness. Brinkmanship faith counterpunches with the strength of a

heavy weight because everything is at stake . . . the work of God . . . its people . . . the pastor's home . . . everything.

Brinkmanship faith is Esther who risked her crown as queen of Persia; she even risked her life when she said,

“If I perish, I perish” (Est. 4:16).

Brinkmanship faith is following God even when circumstances go against you. It's trying even though it seems you fail. Sometimes in God's perspective you win when you lose.

The Bible is filled with stories of those who experience, “stopped the mouth of lions, quenched the violence of fire, faced the edge of the sword . . . were tortured . . . trials of mocking and scourging; yes, even chains and imprisonment” (Heb. 11:33 ff, *ELT*).

5th INGREDIENT—FAITH CONVERGENCE

A person is most effective in ministry when there is a convergence of his faith with his spiritual gifts, his calling by God, and the leadership of God in his life. Just as a multitude of vehicles from different directions converge into an expressway interchange to be effectively exited to the direction they seek to go—all at the same time—is an illustration of how a person's faith will be most effective when exercised with his dominant spiritual gifts.

J. Robert Clinton, professor of leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, has agreed, “In convergence, God moves a leader into a role that matches his or her gift-mix and experience so that ministry is maximized.”²

Tim LaHaye pastored Scott Memorial Baptist Church in greater San Diego, California, and built it to a mega church of over a thousand in attendance. During the 70s and 80s this was a colossal achievement; [REDACTED]

But LaHaye set out to do something new—something that had never been done. He, along with Jerry Jenkins, wrote a popular fiction story of events about the rapture in *The Left Behind*³ series. The

convergence of LaHaye's faith with his spiritual gift as exercised in Christian fiction journalism produced the bestselling series of over 100 million copies sold.

LaHaye's spiritual gift of pastoring a church led to a church of a thousand, but when LaHaye applied faith to his journalistic talent, God blessed him abundantly; above all he could ask or think (Eph. 3:20).

I have discovered that those with the most effective faith express it in convergence with their calling from God and their spiritual gifts. Their faith grows in keeping with the leading of God in their lives.

DIFFERENT EXPRESSIONS OF FAITH

Jerry Falwell, the builder:	constructed 113 buildings for the world's largest evangelical college.
Bill Bright, the businessman:	organized Campus Crusade for Christ into over 578,000 volunteers and full-time workers in the world's largest Christian organization.
Billy Graham, the evangelist:	preached the gospel to more people and probably won more people to Christ than any other evangelist in history.
Yonggi Cho, the church planter:	began the Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, the world's largest church.

Therefore, think of all the various projects that people have built by expressing their faith through their strengths. You will find some have faith that will absolutely blow you away because you don't have faith to do the things they do. However, you may find several areas where you are comfortable expressing faith. These may not be considered great areas by others, but these may be where you live and serve God. So look for that one category where your faith is strongest and follow that lead.

What's the secret of growing your faith? Start in your strongest area of giftedness and branch out from there. Don't try to develop faith where you are weakest; rather, start with your strongest gift. Make it even richer and more effective for God. Then you'll find that you will begin to be effective in other areas of ministry. Like waves rippling out from a rock thrown in a pond, you can develop faith in other areas where you've never dreamed.

Faith for money—the results: resources for God's work. Faith for money is a wonderful thing to have, and the work of God needs those who can pray for large amounts of money and get it. Think of Hudson Taylor raising thousands of dollars by prayer to send hundreds of missionaries to inland China.

Many think about the inspiring stories of George Müller trusting God for thousands of dollars to house, feed and clothe over 2,000 orphans in Bristol, England, maybe someday you can do the things Müller did. But many are overwhelmed by these stories, because they know they can't do that.

Faith for tangible things like property or buildings—the result: growth of God's kingdom. So, let's ask the question why can some pray successfully for buildings or money than others? Perhaps they need a building that's absolutely necessary for survival. Perhaps they need a place to shelter their ministry from the storms of life. Maybe they can't do God's work without an automobile. When these people take a leap of faith toward four wheels, God is more likely to answer because they have more urgency in their prayer. Their faith is motivated by what they don't have.

There are some who just don't have faith to pray for a new Christian education wing at their church, nor can they pray aggressively for other tangible things for ministry. Why? Maybe they just don't have a great burden to pray for buildings, or automobiles, or things.

This person may be so spiritually minded that they only see the kingdom of God going forth in the hearts of individuals. This person might be extremely effective in praying for spiritual victory, or spiritual growth, or for Christians to overcome their doubts, but they are not effective in praying for tangible things. Perhaps these people emphasize the kingdom of God growing within. It's not that they're against praying for buildings or things; it's just not their priority.

Faith to present the gospel to lost people and motivate them to believe in Christ—the result: souls are won to Christ. One of the first students at Liberty University was Steve Wingfield,⁴ a very energetic young believer from greater Lynchburg, Virginia. During the first year of the college, Thomas Road Baptist Church had "Friend Day" where Jerry Falwell motivated everyone—college students and church members—to bring their unchurched friends to church on "Friend Day." A brand new *Scofield Bible* was offered to the one bringing the most visitors. Many Christians were reluctant to invite just one to church, but Steve brought 51 visitors.

I saw more than a young student winning a Bible; I saw Steve's passion for souls. Later God expanded his evangelistic crusade so that today his evangelistic organization ministry owns an office building in Harrisonburg, Virginia, with a staff of over 10 full-time workers, a gospel tent that will seat over 5,000 people.⁵ |

When Eastern Europe first opened up to the gospel after the Berlin Wall collapsed, Steve just happened to be in Romania where tens of thousands ran to a large soccer stadium to celebrate their new political freedom. Steve seized the opportunity to preach the gospel and thousands received Jesus Christ. Steve Wingfield has faith for souls, while others have faith to teach young students in a seminary or in a home Bible class.

Faith to learn what is thought unlearnable—the result: personal intellectual growth. Some feel they can't learn, and they feel extremely inadequate in a teaching-learning situation. Perhaps they got poor marks in school, or they didn't like school, or they have always had difficulty with memory, or understanding. They probably block out any attempt to learn new or different things. This person may be above average in intelligence and could learn; but they have convinced themselves that they can't.

On the other hand, there are believers who love the word of God and search it daily. They're not just academically curious; they search the scriptures because they love the author of the scripture, i.e., the Lord Himself.

I spoke to the Southern Baptist Pastors Retreat at Hume Lake, California, in April 2008. I was asked to bring a series of messages on faith that I had given the previous summer at Glorieta, a Southern Baptist camp ground in New Mexico. Even as I was in the pulpit speaking about faith, God gave me new insights about faith. Even as I was explaining verses on faith, at that moment I realized I was learning new truths. When I came to the phrase, "From faith to faith" (Rom. 1:17), ideas jumped off the page of scripture. I saw several different applications about different kinds of faith.

I had announced to the audience that, "I don't have the faith of Jerry Falwell; I can't trust God for money, property or buildings." Then it dawned on me as I stood before those pastors, "Yes, I do have faith; but for different purposes." I have deep faith in God, and yes I believe God answered my prayer, but the function of my faith was different from Jerry Falwell. He could trust God for money, I could trust God for ideas. So I began to list all the different purposes for which people express their faith. This chapter came out of that experience and the various purposes for which people express faith.

Notice the play on words, "I have faith to believe I can learn more about faith, and the more I learned about faith, the deeper my faith became."

There are certain believers—usually with the spiritual gift of teaching—who are called to a life of study and sharing the Word of God. They are not called to build college buildings (as college administrators), nor are they called to a life of evangelism, nor are they called to innovative types of ministry (rescue missions, age graded ministry, counseling addicts, etc.). Some are called to teach the scripture, so they exercise faith every time they dig into the Word of God for new insight (not new to God, but new to them). They must rely on their faith in God as they apply scripture to the many and varying needs of their listeners.

At the same time, there will be someone called of God to build an Online Church. That person will have “church-planting faith,” but they will also be at home with all the various technology used in communicating online. Perhaps reading this book will motivate them to set a goal of a one million person church.

Faith to trust God through pain and sickness that He will glorify Himself through physical problems—the result: believers glorify God through pain. God allows some believers to suffer more in sickness than others. Of course there are many natural reasons, some are sick more than others; some are exposed to more bacteria, some inherited illness from one of their parents, and some because of wrong eating habits, lack of exercise, work demands, or many other environmental difficulties. Yes, we get sick for many different reasons, but doesn't God know about that? Doesn't scripture say, “All things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28)? The answer to both is yes.

To some God gives the “gift” of suffering to keep that person close to Him. A shepherd had a lamb that was always running from the flock. Like some believers, the little lamb had a rebellious streak. So the shepherd broke one of its legs and kept the lamb close to his side. The shepherd gathered the best of grass for the lamb and he drank from the shepherd's cup. After it could walk, the healed lamb stayed closer to the shepherd, closer than any other sheep in the flock. God allows us trouble so we will see his tender care and sovereign plan for our life. We became more intimate with the Lord. And what happens, our faith grows.

Look at Job. His financial and physical problems were not chosen by God, rather they were devious plots by Satan to destroy Job and embarrass God. But even when God allowed Satan to punish Job, Satan could only go so far, for God told him,

“You cannot touch his life.”

The boils on Job’s flesh were so painful that scratching with broken pottery shards didn’t bring relief. Yet in the midst of all of this pain Job could witness in faith, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19:25-26).

Remember Paul prayed three times for God to take away pain in his life, i.e., to remove his “thorn in the flesh.” We don’t quite know what that thorn was, whether it was migraine headaches, painful arthritis, or malaria. Whatever the problem, Paul said, “I asked the Lord three times” but he didn’t get relief. What did God tell him? “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). So sometimes, the person in pain has faith to claim God’s grace to go through his sufferings.

Faith to endure trials and persecutions for the glory of God—the result: the believer warrants patience. James writes to suffering Christians, “My brethren, rejoice when you fall into various testings” (James 1:2, *Amplified*). They were suffering for Jesus’ sake, so he exhorts them, “when you are tried, you shall receive the crown of life” (James 1:12, *Amplified*).

Jesus taught us, “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11-12). Since faith is believing the words of Christ; when a martyr accepts persecution for Christ’s sake, he is responding in faith.

We in America have only soft persecution for our faith. People may make fun of us, or there may be some slight zoning restriction, or we might not even be able to witness or pass out tracts in some areas. But we are not beaten, tortured, or thrown in jail. But think of the underground church in China or in some Islamic nations, where the believer suffers persecution for the name of Christ, or they would be martyred if they took Christian baptism.

“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you” (1 Peter 4:12). Isn’t Peter telling us here to expect trials and temptations because we belong to Jesus Christ? On the night before Jesus died, He warned the disciples that, “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). So how does our faith respond to persecution? Notice what Peter said, “But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings” (1 Peter 4:13).

Faith to solve an unsolvable problem—the result: you grow as a believer and/or the work of Christ goes forward. Sometimes a believer has faith to claim God’s help to do something that no one else can do. That happened in the 1980s in Washington, DC/Northern Virginia area. Several churches were trying to get zoning variances and/or zoning approval to build new churches. The Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and Board of Zoning Appeals were resisting almost any church expansion in the area. The rapidly growing area was being politicized, and since church property was non-taxable, they didn’t want to give permission to any churches to be built.

Mark Grooms,⁶ a graduate of Liberty University, was pastoring Fellowship Baptist Church in Lorton, Virginia, that had purchased 5.35 acres of property. The other pastors and a Board of Zoning Appeals clerk told Mark, “You can’t get that zoned, and they won’t give you a building permit because it is in Fairfax County;” then perhaps the most difficult place in America to get a building permit because it was influenced by Washington, D.C. But Mark felt that God wanted him to build so the church could go forward. We’re not describing a super church; it was a church less than 200 people.

Mark has a very winsome way with people, and he went back down to the BZA office to make another application and this time the BZA administrator waited on him, and he asked him, “Will you help me fill out this application?” He obliged and they went through the entire application together. The clerk knew the intricacies of the government; he told him how to fill out all of the questions—and Mark did. Whereas large, powerful churches couldn’t get their program approved, Fellowship Baptist Church, one of the poorest churches in the area with no political pull, got approval. Mark simply said, “I believed God wanted us to have a church, and I believed that God would help me through the red tape.” Whereas some people have faith for biblical insight, and other people have faith for money, Mark Grooms had faith to solve an unsolvable problem.

Faith for an intimate relationship with God—the result: you become spiritual and God is worshipped. You would think that all believers exercise faith to know God intimately, but they don't. Some are effective praying for things, for their projects, and for their ministry; but they don't pray for more intimate fellowship with God. Paul did, for his prayer was, "That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection . . ." (Phil. 3:10). God invites us to know Him, "When thou saidst, 'Seek ye my face'; my heart said unto thee, 'Thy face, LORD, will I seek'" (Ps. 27:8).

There was a saint who washed dishes in a medieval monastery. He was not known for his great faith to pray for money or improvement of work conditions. He wasn't known for his great faith to learn the mysteries of God or to become knowledgeable so he could be promoted to monk or priest, i.e., or to be transferred out of the dish pit. No, none of that. Brother Lawrence had faith to meet with God over dirty dish water. The title of his book is a reflection of the faith he expressed, *The Practice of the Presence of God*.⁷

There are saints like Brother Lawrence who realize they can know God and they have perfected a skill of communion with God that many other believers never obtain. What does that mean? They have faith to know God intimately; they have faith that others know nothing about.

Faith to develop a new method of ministry and implement it into action—the result: more effective ministry. David Yonggi Cho, the pastor of The Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, whom I mentioned earlier, built his church with hard work, long hours, and stressful ministry. When Yonggi Cho had a heart attack one Sunday during the church service, the elders gathered around to pray for his healing. Yonggi Cho said on tape, "I wanted to demonstrate faith so I got up and walked home, even though I was hurting terribly."

He wanted to act in faith, so he came back next Sunday to conduct the church services. While baptizing people at the end of the service, he had a second heart attack. This young pastor felt he had "lost face" before his people because he was sick. He wondered why God was allowing him to suffer.

As Cho was recuperating from his heart attack, he spent time talking to God about pastoring the church. God gave him a *faith-vision* of pastoring the church through small groups—cells—throughout the city. When he was able, he gathered his board of elders to share his new insight with them. He planned to

divide the city up into divisions, giving each elder one section for pastoral care over the members in that section of the city. Each elder was asked to divide his section into home cell groups.

“No, Pastor,” the board members told him, “we’re not called to do that, that’s your ministry.” They not only didn’t want to do it, several suggested if he were physically not able to pastor the church, he should resign. The world has been blessed because Cho didn’t listen to them. Cho went back into the presence of God to pray for his new vision of cells.

Since the board members wouldn’t help him, Cho asked some of the ladies to help lead cell groups. At the beginning they thought he was just asking the ladies to gather together small groups of ladies to minister to them. But to everyone’s surprise, men started coming to the meetings where ladies were in leadership. Why? Because they received spiritual ministry.

With this new innovation in ministry, Cho began organizing small cell groups to meet in living rooms, apartment recreational rooms and laundry rooms, any place where people could meet together for ministry. Very early in the development of the cells, over seventy-five percent of them were led by women. But as the men of the church began to see what God was doing, many men came forward to lead cell groups for the church.

So where does faith come in? Yonggi Cho had a great passion to build a church for the glory of God, and was using all of his strength to do it. When he could not physically do it any longer, he needed help from God. As he prayed, God gave him an idea of a new method that could extend his ministry. By faith he implemented his new method.

During that first meeting with Pastor Cho in 1978 he said to me, “Most American churches grow by building new Sunday school classes for expansion, but constructing facilities limit their growth. A church can only build so many classrooms, and a city will only allow a certain size church building.” Cho was explaining to me why many American churches were limited.

Then Cho began to talk about, “By using living rooms of the homes of Christians, the space is unlimited, because as more people become Christians, more living rooms are available for cell groups.”

At the time of his first heart attack the church had 2,500 people, today the Full Gospel Church averages 75,000 cell group meetings, with approximately 750,000 members.

The first time I preached on *convergence-faith*, I got an email a day later from a lady telling me that my message had changed her life. “I will always be different,” she wrote. She was a Christian counselor with an MA degree who had been unsuccessful in praying for money, facilities and things. Her lack of faith to receive tangible things kept her discouraged in ministry. Then my sermon gave her great insight. She realized she had faith to help people through problems and she knew God had used her to transform lives. God had used her to put marriages back together and help people find freedom from addictions. She wrote,

“You’ve forced me from the slavery of my ill-conceived expectations.”

The bottom line is that you should find your calling and spiritual gifts and exercise your faith in keeping with God’s leading in your life.

6th INGREDIENT—FAITH-TRANSFER

How does a leader transfer his faith to followers so they believe with him for a great answer to prayer. Is it a knowledge-transfer so that followers know the same content as their leader? No! It’s more than that. Probably some knowledge transfer is involved, but *faith-transfer* is probably much more than fact-transfer. Does the leader teach the followers certain ways of ministry so that followers can do what the leader does? No, it’s not that, but it may include training.

Faith-transfer is more than a deep feeling about something, or deep emotions for a project. It’s more than a leader stirring the passion of a crowd so they feel the same about a project as he. Probably some emotions are involved, but *faith-transfer* is but much more than emotion-transfer.

Does the leader call for a decision from his followers so they act in a situation the way he wants them to act? Yes, the will is involved, but *faith-transfer* is much more than followers deciding to do what their leader asks.

Faith-transfer contains all of the above but also includes spiritual factors, so that the followers believe God for the same miracle that the leader believes will happen. They join their faith with the leader to move mountains. The Holy Spirit makes the *faith-transfer* happen because He indwells the leader and also indwells the followers. The Holy Spirit is the agent who originally stirs faith in the leader, then He becomes the agent who stirs faith in the follower. And how does this happen? The Holy Spirit actually

transfers faith from a leader to a follower. He uses the Word of God to build faith in followers, just as He uses Scripture to build the faith in any child of God.

I walked into the small back room where the Vice Presidents gather for chapel at Liberty University on April 24, 1985, only to be greeted with the bad news, “Vernon Brewer has stomach cancer and only has six months to live.”

That was a shock! Vernon was the Vice President in charge of student relations; that meant he enforced the rules for Liberty. But rather than being hated by the students; they loved him because he loved them. I too loved Vernon, and it never entered my mind God could heal someone that close to death.

When Jerry Falwell heard the news he told us, “Vernon’s too important to lose, we’ve got to fast and pray to change God’s mind.”

Jerry went straight to the chapel pulpit to tell a shocked student body the news, and then he cancelled the sermon for chapel. “Today we will have a prayer meeting instead.”

But before we prayed Jerry began making plans on the spot for a twenty-four hour fast. “We need someone to make a sign of a huge clock and hang it on that wall” and he pointed to an empty wall where every student could sign up. “The sign has to show all 24 hours of a day and have space where every student can sign up.”

“Everyone should pray for Vernon for one specific hour.” Falwell explained we should not count prayers at the beginning of class, or when exercising. “I want you to go to the prayer chapel to pray for one hour, didn’t Jesus tell us, ‘Could you not watch with me one hour?’” Falwell suggested we start a few minutes early and continue a few minutes longer, to make sure we prayed at least one hour. Our obedience would be the basis for God hearing and answering. “We’ll close the University’s food service,” Falwell explained, “we’ll follow a *Yom Kippur* fast,

beginning with this evening's meal, then continue fasting the following day for breakfast and lunch. Spend your mealtime in prayer."

Someone—I don't remember who—whispered in Falwell's ear. Then Falwell changed the announcement, "Some are diabetic, or have other physical problems that must eat. We'll leave one serving line open in the cafeteria." Then Falwell added, "It's not right to force prayer on students who don't believe in fasting, God wouldn't honor the fast of unbelief."

Falwell urged unity in our fast, quoting Jesus, "If two of you agree concerning anything that you shall ask, it shall be done" (Matt. 18:19). Then Falwell repeated his oft repeated statement, "There's value in the volume of prayer." Falwell was *transferring* his faith to us. His confidence that God would answer prayer was becoming our confidence.

When Falwell called on someone to lead the 5,000 students in prayer, I was standing next to Vernon. God urged me immediately, "Lay your hands on Vernon's head to pray." But I didn't respond in faith; but rather made an excuse to God, but it was really unbelief. I told God, "The students will think I'm Pentecostal." I had so many Pentecostal friends that some already thought that.

God immediately convicted me of my unbelief. I had been more concerned with what people thought of me than I was in praying for Vernon.

Instantly I prayed, "Lord, forgive my unbelief." Then I placed my hands on Vernon to identify with him in prayer.

As I prayed, I got an overwhelming confidence that God was going to heal him. I experienced what the Bible calls, "the prayer of faith shall save the sick." I have never taken credit for Vernon's healing. It wasn't me; Vernon's healing came from the corporate faith of 5,000 students, staff and faculty. Jerry's faith had transferred to them.

Vernon was healed. God used chemotherapy, radiation and an operation to remove a five pound cancerous mass from his stomach. But beyond medicine and surgery, it was God's supernatural work. Every April 25th I phone Vernon to remind him, "Ain't God good?" It's not proper English but it's great theology. Then Vernon and I rejoice in God's healing power.

As I write this book, last April 25th I left a phone message because Vernon was out of the country traveling for World Help.⁸ If God had not healed Vernon, he couldn't have built a large Christian humanitarian organization with over \$365 million in humanitarian aid being distributed to meet physical needs around the world with over 100 Liberty students employed full-time.

Hope and vision are two powerful tools in *faith-transfer*. When leaders come up with a believable plan to accomplish what both they and the followers want, it involves *faith-transfer*.

And doesn't *faith-transfer* happen when the leader does something to identify with his followers, i.e., Jerry fasting and getting 5,000 people to fast with him? He did what every leader could do, and eventually did, producing *faith-transfer*.

But *faith-transfer* is far more than the leader becoming an example. Jerry Falwell successfully got his followers to believe in the projects for which he believed. When he called on his followers to fast for a million dollars, or to pray for \$5 million to finish dormitories, or fast for someone to be healed; God honored both Falwell and the people's faith and gave them what they requested. Falwell's past accomplishments in raising money or praying for the sick, inspired people to again believe that God would do it again. Then faith transferred and God gave them the thing for which they prayed.

WRAP-UP

God's methods to overcoming obstacles in ministry are a spirit-filled person who will boldly confront evil—always has been, always will be. God is looking for a unique leader who is fearlessly driven to get done the work of God. He believes God has called him, so he will do

whatever it takes to get the job done. His faith does not rest in technology, methods, tools of ministry, or facilities. His faith doesn't rest in his courage or his vision; his faith is in God Himself.

When the night is blackest, and the way is fraught with problems, and the enemy seems to have the upper hand; the man or woman of God will trust in God and God alone. He will step out into the unknown, not knowing where he is going, or how he will solve the dilemma he is in. He will continue charging up the hill of resistance. He will strike with his last ounce of courage.

Then in one magnificent leap of faith into the darkness, he will confidently step out into the unknown. He will not fear, but with confidence and courage know he is doing exactly what God wants him to do. He knows it's the right time, the right situation and the right place. So he puts God and His reputation on the spot. He calls for all the world to see what God can do. He practices *brinkmanship*, pushing a dangerous situation to the limit. Why? Because he believes God has led him to do it. He has no other choice.

After he has done all he can do, the man of God waits for the inevitable to unfold. He knows God will roll back the black clouds and God will push back the enemy and God will give him the victory.

The command the man of God has heard in the dark of night, whispered to him by God, is that command for which he risks his life and ministry. He knows what he has to do because he has heard God speak to his soul. He cannot go back, he cannot quit, and he cannot fail; because in the dark he recognized the voice of God talking to him. Now he must take the leap of faith that will define his life and define his ministry.

NOTES

- 1 Conversation with G. B. Vick ??
- 2 J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1988), 46.
- 3 Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *The Left Behind Series* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House).
- 4 See <http://www.stevewingfield.org/>.
- 5 See <http://www.stevewingfield.org>.
- 6 See <http://www.ttbc.info/>.
- 7 Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1982).
- 8 See <http://www.worldhelp.net/>, (accessed August 5, 2009).

Chapter 6

THE SOCIOLOGICAL PAST AND FUTURE OF A MILLION-PERSON CHURCH

By
Elmer Towns

What methods are needed to build a one million-person church? You will read a recent history of the development of church methods and how God used them in His work. This chapter will bring you to the conclusion that we now live in an era where a one million-person church can exist.

Joe Rodriguez, unemployed, spent his days gambling on cards, getting soused with beer, and hitting on the women in the borough.¹ Then one day he met Jesus Christ in such an extraordinary way that he repented of every sin he could think of. He began spending all his time telling people they must be “born again.”

His converts couldn't find a church that preached like Joe, so someone said, “Joe, you start a church and I'll be there.” He rented a 2-bedroom house and filled it within two weeks. Next, the little church took over a bankrupt drug store, and filled it within months. Excitement riveted every service; people were repenting, getting saved and they also shared the gospel with friends.

Next, the congregation took over a large, closed discount “box” store. Joe committed himself to making 100 house calls every day to win people to Christ. There were thousands of low-income homes ruled by poverty, boredom, and despair. The congregation grew to 2,000; lives were being transformed. Door-to-door evangelism worked, and the church added a second worship service; 4,000 attended. The church was filled with former gamblers, and alcoholics, all repenting of sexual promiscuity and drugs. It seemed the future was unlimited, then Joe died.

A cousin, Frank Rodriguez, had been converted in the church then went to Bible college and seminary. Frank was a powerful Bible teacher; God spoke to the hearts of all through his exposition of scriptures. He was called a pastor-teacher, and immediately added a Christian education committee to upgrade Bible teaching in every area of the church. Then he added an evangelism committee to oversee door-to-door soul winning that had previously been done by his uncle Joe.

Frank taught the Bible on a daily radio outreach that brought many visitors into the church. The church continued to attract people to Bible teaching; they came from emotionally frenzied churches or those with no Bible teaching at all.

Frank's reputation as a Bible teacher continued to grow. He started satellite churches in other abandoned discount "box" stores, and was able to televise his sermons to each location. Before long, there were 10 video venues, and each satellite added multi-services. Frank was able to teach the scriptures to over 40,000 people each week.

Because of his popularity and influence, Frank was attracted to a position on the faculty at a large theological seminary. A lesser known brother of Frank's took over the church, but he didn't have the charismatic personality of Joe or Frank, nor did he have a communication skill-set to add to the church's growth. As a matter of fact, attendance began to decline. First, second services at satellite venues were dropped, then some actual satellite locations were dropped.

The church's bureaucracy had gotten fat. When money became scarce, the financial committee asked the pastor to resign. Two more pastors quickly came and left; the church tried to give the new pastor the authority of Joe and Frank, but it didn't click.

Anthony Rodriguez, the oldest son of Joe, always identified with the Hispanics in the borough, and still had many friends among the poor because he grew up with them as his father built a mega church.

But Anthony grew up playing games on his father's computer and by the time he was three was text messaging. He was up-to-date on the latest down-loadable apps. Unknown to anyone at the church, Anthony had built a friends' list of the children that his father Joe had won to Christ.

Not because of professional pastoral care, but driven by boyhood connections, he built a huge network on Twitter, then they followed him to Facebook. He heard their problems, and counseled them by Twitter. When God spoke to Anthony, he posted it on Facebook, and thousands poked in.

The elders at the church asked Anthony to fill in and preach on a Sunday night when they couldn't get anyone else. Anthony text messaged his techie buddies and posted a glimpse of his sermon on Facebook. Being intimidated by the pulpit, Anthony called a number to pray with him in a chat room.

Attendance was larger than the morning service. Anthony attracted an even larger crowd through Internet connection when the elders asked him to preach on a Sunday morning.

The "Holy Spirit is back," an elder said when the board called Anthony as senior pastor. The original core values returned, and enthusiasm among the young grew. People were drawn back because Anthony touched their hearts. But everything was not always rosy; some elders wanted Anthony to do what his father did, i.e., make 100 soul-winning house-to-house visits every day. Anthony answered the board, "We can't use yesterday's methods to each modern youth."

Video streaming added over 10,000 viewers each week. Anthony challenged each to join the church, get baptized online, register their attendance each week, and begin tithing by credit card contributions. But more importantly, he encouraged them to get involved in prayer ministries online, and to volunteer for service projects.

Then Skype² added another 5,000 viewers each week, and they downloaded his fill-in-the-blank lesson sheets at home. Anthony Skyped his “soul winners” with a weekly discipleship class, and they emailed their outreach reports back to him through accountability questionnaires.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Joe Rodriguez, founder of the church, had a fantastic ministry, and used the “methods” available to him. Effective as were Joe’s methods, were they limited to certain types of neighborhoods and a certain age? Could the dynamic of Joe build a million-person church if he used different methods than those he used? But the question is, did Joe live in the right age to do it?

Frank Rodriguez also had a fantastic ministry and his spiritual gift of teaching built a mega church, but his tools and methods might not work in other churches that have a different expression of worship. Frank’s teaching *might* have built a million-member church, but would he have had to learn other tools to make it happen?

Does Anthony have the type of church that can reach one million people? Are these some of the new tools that can network many people into personal discipleship and spiritual growth? What’s it going to take for Anthony Rodriguez to pastor one million people in one church?

UNDERSTANDING CHURCH TYPES

It’s difficult knowing what will happen in the church in the future without understanding the forces of the past that have brought the church to where it is.

Because the community of Christian faith—known as the church—is a social grouping, we must understand how the social relationships have evolved that make people group together. When we see the pressures that force people to organize themselves, then we understand their past and future.

The rest of this chapter looks at three types of cycles that help explain what happened to the church planted by Joe Rodriguez. The first is the Geometric Cycle of relationships that explains how sociology or culture developed. The second is the Sociological Cycle of Church Growth and Decline that has both a cultural and theological explanation for how churches develop. The third is the Cell Growth of the church that explains how churches develop because of the relationship of believers within a church as the individual church grows in size.

GEOMETRIC CYCLE OF RELATIONSHIPS

The first section in this book looks at *natural social growth* as people grow from (1) basic human relationships, to (2) tribe relationships, to (3) town relationships, to (4) metropolitan relationships, ending in (5) technopolis relationships. The thesis of this book is that the one million-person church probably could not have happened in previous *social growth* stages, but it can emerge in *technopolis*.

1. Basic Human Relationships. Because man is a social animal, he joins a woman in marriage, and they produce children. This first social grouping is a family, and God originally designed the family because He put within man a physical sexual drive that is satisfied in a relationship with the woman, and within the woman he placed the desire for fulfillment with a man.

2. The Tribe. The second geometric stage of growth is the tribe. When many families join together, they become a tribe. Some tribes located at a single spot because food, water and/or protection were nearby. Other tribes traveled from one location to another seeking the basic necessities of life. The tribe was held together by protection and provision, i.e., protection from weather, predators, or other hostile tribes and by provision of food, water, or the other basic necessities of life.

In his controversial book, *The Secular City*,³ Harvey Cox examines the development of people into a tribe. The tribe is held together by basic human instincts of relationship and survival. But over a period of time, people learn language and begin communicating more rationally and clearly. When children are born, they learn language and communication, so the tribe adds education to the “glue” that holds it together.

When people start gathering together, there are many terms to describe that relationship. Cox defines it, “By tribal society we have in mind a stage in human social development which has been described variously as totemic, preliterate, primitive, and even savage or prelogical.”⁴ Cox describes the glue that holds together the basic tribal society, “Tribal life grows out of kinship ties.”⁵ The family to which people belong are one by blood relationships. Because they belong to each other, they protect each other, provide for one another, and support one another.

The tribe is a tightly-knit group. They usually do not allow other people to join, as Cox notes, “Tribal societies are compact, and enclosed.”⁶ The tribe does not reach out to other tribes, rather they usually fight one another or avoid one another. The tribe does not try to learn from one another, rather it attempts to eradicate or eliminate other tribes, or have complete dominance over them.

As civilization spreads because of secularization and urbanization, it became difficult for tribes to continue their existence. Civilization is basically recognizing one another, accepting one another, and learning to live with one another. When one tribe is civilized to the extent that it recognizes and accepts another tribe, their world becomes smaller and usually the tribe has difficulty fighting other tribes. Tribal life is disrupted.

Note what American society has done to the native Indian tribes that live within its borders. Native Indian tribes are usually not able to continue existing as they had in the past, because the fathers and mothers who tried to continue their Indian traditions had difficulty when

their children began learning the “white man’s”⁷ ways, and they begin living among the “white man.” As their children were educated to read and write on the reservation school, their children moved farther away from the traditions that held the tribe together. Then, their children began trading for goods within the “white man’s” culture, so they took on habits and practices of the “white man.” The tribe loses control of its children, then loses its influence, and in the final stage; loses them all together.

The tribe is an extended family; its roots reach back to each family to a common past. When the members of a tribe are locked together in common consanguinity, there is no question about the tribes’ identity, nor who should be within the tribe, and who is not a member. Every relationship in the tribe is controlled by the tribe, i.e., marriage, occupation, the purpose of life, everything. Cox explains, “Tradition, whether a dance, chanted, or carved into masks or figurines, provided a rich complex, and utterly complete catalogue of images, identities, and values.”⁸ The man who lives in the tribe, becomes the tribe, and his personal identity is wrapped up in the tribe. Cox notes, “He does not so much live in the tribe; the tribe lives in him.”⁹

Everything about the tribe is incorporated into individuals within the tribe. Their homes, animals, food, everything is part of one continuous life.

Cox describes the process of change from individual relationships to tribal relationships and from evolving into a town relationship as *secularization*. “The world has become his city and his city has reached out to include the world. The name for the process by which this has come about is secularization.”¹⁰

The characterizations of the tribe, and certain types of churches are similar. The fundamentalist or withdrawing, or sectarian church is usually held together by the same type of social forces that hold the tribe together.

Cox makes an interesting observation that secularization has worked in every society of every tribe and town; he also notes that secularization has changed the church, weakened the church and destroyed the church. He notes, “Secularization has accomplished what fire and chain could not. It has convinced the believer that he could be wrong, and persuaded the devotee that there are more important things than dying for the faith.”¹¹

Cox also describes *secularization as urbanization*. “If secularization designates the content of man’s coming of age, urbanization describes the context in which it is occurring.”¹² Cox goes on to note, “Urbanization means a structure of common life in which diversity and the disintegrating of tradition is paramount. It means a type of impersonality in which functional relationships multiply.”¹³

3. The Town. The third geometric cycle is the town. First, town people decided on a location that met their basic necessities, i.e., water, food, and/or points of satisfaction, beauty and/or tradition. Two basic ingredients “glued” the people together. The first was *transportation* which provided trails or streets so people could move about their daily activities within the town. The second was *communication* which established words symbols, written and verbal interaction, community signs and documents of agreement.

As noted before, secularization is the force that changes the tribe into a town. Two forces bring about this change, i.e., “The appearance of currency and the development of the alphabet supply two essential ingredients in the shattering step from tribe to town.”¹⁴

Rather than fighting another tribe to acquire their wealth, i.e., animals, tents, clothing and even slaves; one tribe member tends to start bartering with a member of another tribe. They might barter a milk cow or one animal for another. They may barter food for food, or clothes for clothes. In essence they traded food, clothing, housing, or anything they possessed. But economic contracts changed all that. When man placed great value on money, that money

became a tool of bartering. Money may have been gold, silver, or any other form of currency. Cox again notes, “The man who can sell a sheep and buy bread with the money is at once more mobile and a more independent operator.”¹⁵ Money makes tribal members act more logically in the way they live, and the way they plan life. Money gives them a purpose to live, and to acquire more money is to acquire a bigger broader and wider life. Just as intolerance for others in a tribe or sectarian church separated them from others, then tolerance brought together a town or institutional church.

Also, writing changes the tribe into a town. When man acquired the ability to read, and to understand what he read, he no longer is dependent upon other members of his tribe for instructions how to live, how to think, and what to think. Now he can learn apart from another tribe member and he usually learned to think, act, and respond differently from the tribe; especially if what he is reading was written by someone from another tribe, and they have described “tribal life” that is different. Man reads directions for life from documents, letter scrolls, or anything upon which writing is produced. People no longer depend upon the personal relationships of the tribe to improve or direct his life. Now man can be influenced by someone outside the tribe. Therefore the very nature of reading breaks up tribal relationships, because it breaks up tribal dependency.

Cox notes the economic impact of writing, “Once again the economic framework is critical in the appearance of writing. Writing began as a tool of commerce, but critically became a way to acquire knowledge and therefore power. Thus writing had political and religious consequences. Contact with the ‘outside,’ with ideas and possibilities not accessible within the tribe, provided one key to the development of the town culture.”¹⁶

Notice how one became a member of the tribe, or one became a member of the town. Originally, a man had to be born into the tribe, and he related to the tribe by blood. Over time,

extended families became larger tribes. But one could become a member of a town differently; one could read, and learn how to live in the town. That meant eventually strangers could become part of the town. Cox notes, “A town provided a place where strangers could become fellow citizens.”¹⁷ To Cox, the town did not have permanence. He felt, “What we have called the “town” will eventually be recognized as itself merely a transitional stage between the tribe and technopolis.”¹⁸

With the development of towns came many other forces that continued to move it towards technopolis. Cox said, “The age of towns gave us printing and books . . . the scientific revolutions, investment capitalism, and bureaucracy.”¹⁹

4. Metropolis. The fourth stage on the cycle is *metropolis*. Metropolis stands for more than an over grown town. A metropolis is more than an urban size, it means a corporate structure of everyday life, where people hold in common symbols of transportation and communication, but at the same time their culture becomes diverse and the symbols of tradition disintegrate. In metropolis there is a much greater sense of tolerance of those who are different in ethnic background, language and religion, but at the same time everyone is committed to the “laws” that hold together for protection, food, water, and other basic necessities. Metropolis represents a fusion of all types of political compromises, culture compromises, religious compromises, and ethnic compromises.

As the town moves into a metropolis, there are many forces that create the change. Cox draws a parallel between the growth of society in the Bible and the natural growth within culture where there is no Christianity. He notes, “Thus, the disenchantment of nature begins with the creation, the desacralization of politics with the exodus, and the deconcentration of values with the Sinai Covenant, especially with its prohibition of idols.”²⁰

Metropolis is more than a larger city with more people. Metropolis is a quality of life. It is how we live life in relationship to our self, in relationship to others, and in relationship to our God. When the town becomes a large metropolis, human relationships weaken. People only relate to those they need, i.e., those who benefit them daily. Thus in metropolis people live among a vast number of people they do not know, nor need. Thus they try less and less to form a human relationship with others. They exist in their world, and let others exist. They live and let live. Thus a spirit of animosity spreads throughout metropolis.

When you see a metropolis, you basically look at all types of buildings, old and new; glass and brick, tall and short, ugly and artistic. You are looking at buildings that represent places of power such as the police department, fire department, courthouse buildings, or you are looking at offices that hire and fire, or you are looking at places where people work to receive money. You also see schools and universities where tradition and culture are passed on to children, or they learn about other cultures.

Metropolis is a place of transition, where people either board a bus, train or plane to travel from one place to another. It's not a place of relationships.

Metropolis is a place where people jostle each other for the space that they need to live out their life.

But it's not a place where they know each other.

The two major forces that make a metropolis successful are the technological growth of communication, the *Internet*, and transportation, the *interstate*. These two forces became sophisticated in reaching and influencing everyone living in a large metropolitan area.

Notice the growth of the mega church—both in the U. S. and around the world—is tied to these two forces. People *know* (communication) about a desirable church, then they *go* (travel) to

the church that fulfills their desires. Without a massive knowledge of mega churches, and the ability to attend the worship of mega churches, there would be no super churches.

5. Technopolis. The term technopolis represents the ultimate geometric growth cycle. What happens when metropolis becomes too big, at least too big in the mind of its inhabitants? It takes technological advances to keep society tied together. Technological advances in transportation provide buses, elevated trains, subways, expressways, double-tiered expressways; all to travel to work, play, education or fulfill other basic necessities. The bigger the invention, it seems humans have fewer intimate relationships with others. Then comes the technological explosion in communication. One accountant with a computer does the work of dozens of bookkeepers with adding machines. One administrative assistant with access to the Internet does the work of a whole floor of typists, whether you count a dozen typists, or a dozen dozen typists.

But people are still social “animals”; they still have a need for others, to know others, to learn from others, to love others, and to relate to others. In technopolis, they gather again in small groups. Not tribal groups of blood relationships, but affinity groups, but not necessarily geographical affinity. The power of the grouping also might not relate to age, gender, occupation, or ethnic heritage. The “affinity” power happens to be the thing that grips or motivates them at the moment.

I remember an early story of the attractational power of the Internet. Several people in a large California city began communicating with one another about a certain breed of dog that each owned. They communicated with each other about the care of their dog, the grooming of their dog, teaching tricks, and other incidentals about their particular breed. What the circle of people didn't know was that each had another circle of friends to whom they were passing on the “tips” and information. While each person thought they were talking through the Internet to a

small group of people, they actually were talking to hundreds of people. The Internet pages about their unique breed of dog kept expanding into more circles of information.

Two or three persons decided to meet one another face-to-face at a specific restaurant at a specific time. They wanted to show off their grooming of their dog. Again, unknown to others, many decided to bring along his or her friend(s). Each expected a few to attend, but over 175 showed up, overwhelming the restaurant.

That illustration describes several factors that help us understand technopolis. First, people feel disconnected even though they brush arms with “others” every day. They may recognize faces, or titles (boss’s secretary), or even know names, but they don’t really know others. When given an opportunity to get acquainted with someone with whom they share an affinity, a relationship happens.

Second, there is power in social networking especially if there is a purpose or an event to bring people together. Again, two forces collide, i.e., people of affinity and an affinitive event.

Third, people exist in their own private world, and many around them don’t know what is important to them, or what controls their world. Social networking penetrates their isolation and brings people together.

Fourth, a person’s alienation or isolation can be penetrated by an intentional contact. Someone from outside their world can penetrate their world by appealing to their needs or expressed desires. But there has to be a point of contact, i.e., a technological tool that gets to them. Also, the intentional people must have an affinity with the person.

Fifth, technopolis creates a powerful individuality of personhood. The person is bequeathed power to do almost anything by instruments or gadgets. He can talk to anyone, anywhere, at any time. In one sense he controls his world; even though in reality, through the power of culture and instrumentality, the world controls him.

Whatever the yearning of the individual, he can find someone who agrees with him, who will communicate with him, and who might need him as much as he needs them.

Sixth, isolation is both good and bad; desirable and deplorable. The person can talk to us many times with his cell phone or that person can communicate with us via computer. Yet, at the same time he needs a face-to-face relationship that is never satisfied with an instrumental relationship.

If ever there was a cultural milieu where the one million-person could flourish, it's in technopolis. With 100,000 people reaching out to another person, this could create a church of unheard influence. But as always, the secret of a one million-person church is in the power of its message (core values) and potential relationships that it offers. But there must also be a powerful leader who brings the focus of the gospel into all relationships.

SECTION TWO THE SOCIOLOGICAL CYCLE OF CHURCH GROWTH AND DECLINE

The second section of this book is the *Church Growth Relationship*, called the Sociological Cycle of Church Growth and decline.²¹ This growth begins as (1) *a dyad*: a person who is related to God, then begins a relationship with other believers; (2) *the sect*: an intimate, inclusive grouping of like-minded believers who bond together to fulfill their core values; (3) *an institution*: the group is organized to accommodate the lifestyle of these immature believers won to Christ, as well as children born into the Christian institution; (4) *a denominating church*: the name of a larger group of believers who continue to adjust the requirements of their beliefs with the demands of living outside the church in a secular world; (5) *individualized Christianity*: because the denominating church can't properly help the religious needs of its members, they abandon the organized church. It is at this stage the one million-person church can connect these people in a faith relationship where an actual physical church relationship is not possible nor necessary.

Ernst Troeltsch made some amazing insights into the differences between the social fabric of churches in Northern Europe in the mid-1800s that have become a standard for many for interpreting Church Growth and decline.²² This section will examine Troeltsch's insights to understand the original cycle of developing church. To Troeltsch's cycle, I will add the impact of technological advances that make possible a huge Internet church.

1. The Individual Believer. Troeltsch observed the believer in the most primitive social church groups that had deep conviction, i.e., a belief system that had all the energy and dedication of early New Testament believers. These believers worked harder than Christians in long-standing denominational churches. They grew more, sacrificed more, and got more out of their worship and fellowship than believers in historic churches.

It's not clear whether the believers got their energy from the church as the source of their faith, or their conversion gave energy to their faith community. Whatever the origin, these churches were dynamic in ministry, and elicited a deep level of loyalty from their adherents.

2. The Sect. The most primitive social grouping of Christians into a church was described as a "sect" church. Troeltsch's use of the term "sect" was not ill-employed, because the early church was identified as a sect in the book of Acts (24:5, 26:5, 28:22). A sect is identified in the dictionary as (a) an organized ecclesiastical body, (b) a way of life, (c) a dissenting religious body from normal culture, (d) regarded as extreme, (e) withdrawn from other religious groups, and (f) limited by agreement of narrow doctrine and/or lifestyle.²³

The sectarian believer tends to avoid state and societal influences. The true Christian sectarian church is an aggressive band of born-again Christians who have mutually agreed that the world is going to hell and the drift of this life is governed by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Therefore, strict standards of personal purity are prized. Every man who has not experienced the new birth is lost and going to hell, so the aggressive sectarian

believers attempt to win him to Christ, caring nothing what the world thinks of him. The believer is committed to pure doctrine, giving diligent attention to teaching children and new members the essentials of the Scriptures. Doctrinal deviates are ostracized from fellowship in a sect.²⁴

The sect believer is judged by his zeal in personal holiness and attendance of meetings. He walks in a day-by-day communion with his Lord whom he loves, and counts his church life the center of his existence. He feels his Christianity at a “gut” level and is sure of the correct stance of his position.²⁵

Because culture in general and political leaders are controlled by evil purposes, the sectarian church and its member separate their lives from anything sinful, i.e., government, politics, entertainment, leisure, etc. Their only focus is doing God’s will, as found in scriptures; they do not pursue the pleasures and values of the world.

Elizabeth Nottingham indicates there are several types of sects.²⁶ Some are withdrawing sects who take on the characteristics of the medieval monastic orders. These might be Plymouth Brethren or Old Amish Mennonites. Others are militant sects who are aggressive in their outreach who might attack the things in politics that are perceived as anti-Christian, i.e., Moral Majority.²⁷ Nottingham indicates that many of the present denominations at one time were sects, such as the Methodists and Southern Baptists, but have made their peace with the world. These groups no longer practice personal separation based on biblical commands.

Sectarian churches place a heavy emphasis on the Second Coming of Christ in their preaching and teaching. Since the present culture will be eventually destroyed, they place little stock in its present enjoyment and existence. The members would spend so much extra time working at the church that they take little time to enjoy the things of culture and little time for unsaved friends.

The sectarian church usually is found among lower socio-economic people. But that might be justified in scripture; the common people heard Jesus gladly. Jesus said the rich man would have difficulty entering heaven as a camel passing through a needle's eye (Mark 10:25). The rich are criticized in scripture (Matt. 13:22; James 5:1-4) and the poor are commended (James 2:1-4). Perhaps the poor are more aware of the harshness of life and turn to God for help. At the same time, the upper class "rich" may trust their wealth, or spend their time pursuing money.

Sectarian churches tend to put more emphasis on enthusiasm as a sincere expression of their dedication. Preaching at their churches is sometimes interrupted with shouts of "Amen!" Zeal is a criterion for spiritual service. Pastors spend time making announcements to motivate Christians to soul winning and Christian service. Outward enthusiasm is an obvious characteristic of sectarian churches. New members are judged by this zeal and emotional vitality.

The critics of sectarian churches accuse them of being emotional, hence shallow. The morning service is not characterized with liturgy, ritualism expressed in printed programs, robed choirs, anthems and threefold amens.

Sectarian churches emphasize a mystical religious relationship to God. Troeltsch said a mystical relationship to God is characterized as communicating with God apart from the five senses: i.e., sight, taste, hearing, smell, and touch. They believe they have a relationship with God through a sixth sense, "the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:16). Ask one who arises from his knees if he talked to God. His reply, "God spoke to me—I know it in my heart."

There is nothing wrong with mysticism; all true Christians have Jesus Christ in their hearts, which results in a mystical relationship to God. "Mystical" does not mean unreal, but refers to an unseen relationship with Christ. The basis for a mystical relationship is in the

objective revelation—the Word of God. A mystical relationship with Christ cannot prove one’s Christianity, but only reflects one’s walk with God.

Many church sociologists see the social characteristics of sectarian churches in fundamentalist church. Technically, a fundamentalist church has sectarian “social glue,” but not all sectarian churches are fundamentalistic in doctrine and/or lifestyle.

David Moberg, the church sociologist from Marquette University, has designed the cycle as “a process by which cults originate, develop into sects, and then change into denominations, perhaps finally to emerge from the process as churches.”²⁸ Harvey Cox in his controversial book, *The Secular City*, explains the development of churches in relationship to the socio-economic factors of society. He sees the cycle as: (1) the tribe, (2) the town, (3) metropolis, and (4) technopolis.²⁹ His cycle has many parallel factors to Moberg’s and Troeltsch’s cycles.

3. An Institutional Church. A sect church begins to change when children are born into its church family. Whereas it previously was an evangelistic church to win converts, or a reforming sect to change the world, or its primary energy was spent on withdrawing from the evil world; now the sectarian church must become a “teaching institution” to communicate its core values of life and beliefs to its children; or in some cases to instruct its converts about how they can conform to the church’s way of life. But even the children of the staunchest sect members are born with a sinful nature, and they may find pleasure in life outside the church, a lifestyle that is counter to the expectations and values of the sect.

Therefore, the sect church may operate on enthusiasm as it allows its leader to direct the church by their accumulated authority, that the church becomes institutionalized when procedures must be codified and/or written out to explain evangelism and the way educational ministry is done.

The “glue” of an institutional church is more organization and administrative than the previous “glue” of sectarian churches, i.e., vision, excitement, and sacrificial dedication.

The sect/fundamentalist is characterized by a compelling concern to reach people for Christ by any and every means. Ministers give attention to the function of Christianity rather than to its form.

When those in an institutional church see a growing number of ministries in their churches, they usually organize a Board of Christian Education as a coordination of energy rather than allow for omission or over-emphasis to continue in their ministry. Therefore, responsibility is turned over to committees so that the work of God may prosper, rather than the previous “man-centered ministry” in sectarian churches.

Many in the institutional church feel sectarian believers are motivated by guilt feelings in their separation from worldly amusements and sin. The institutional Christian points to the positive aspects of the scriptures whereas the sectarian emphasizes the opposite. Institutional believers tend to emphasize turning to God, or the positive, whereas the sectarian emphasizes repentance or turning from sin.

A teen-ager arrives home from high school, and argues, “But, Mother, the daughter of the minister of First Church is going to the prom. Why can’t I go?” As a result, the parents are caught in tension; either they give in to their convictions or give in to their children. Neither is satisfactory. When their children take leadership in the church, it changes.

4. A Denominated Church. Troeltsch originally used the word “denomination” to describe this stage on the cycle. But it confused contemporary readers because the word denominational is an American religious network of churches. Troeltsch probably used this term in its original meaning. The word denominated means, “to give a name to or designate,”³⁰ as in “to number or put things together”³¹ Troeltsch described state churches as a group and gave them

the name denomination.³² When many churches join together to do ministry together what they can't accomplish separately, they are called a religious denomination.

A denomination is a group of churches with similar doctrinal beliefs, who have similar traditions and backgrounds, who share the same goals in ministry, who desire fellowship to encourage one another, and have organically bound themselves together to establish corporately what they feel cannot be wrought separately.³³

But in this chapter we shall use the term according to its original meaning, i.e., *denominated*. The very nature of a denominated church is *compromise*; individual churches have to surrender some of their financial and property authority to “join” a larger group of churches, i.e., to become part of a denomination. They also have to surrender some of their minor interpretations of scripture and doctrine. Perhaps they have to “live with” other churches that do evangelism differently, i.e., use different methods of outreach or worship. In a denomination, one church doesn't have to agree with other churches doing ministry differently, but they have to tolerate them. Isn't that the first step of compromise?

When one view of doctrine or one unique way of ministry becomes dominant in the denomination, those churches which interpret scripture differently must sublimate their interpretation of scripture to stay in the denomination. They retain their views, but permit others (tolerate) to hold different views.

Next comes the “first step of compromise.” The denomination votes or endorses a view contrary to what a local church believes. To remain in the denomination, a particular local church usually holds to its original belief and core values, but has to “suffer” when identified with a doctrine it doesn't believe or teach.

The “final step of compromise” happens when the children of church leaders vote into their church the “liberal” view held by the denomination. Or new converts or transfer members with views different than church leaders finally vote in the denomination's agenda. For the sake

of tolerance, the original convictions—formed in the white heat of religious battles—are changed.

However, a denominated church can be an independent body, yet has drifted around the cycle. Or a denominated church can be the “liberal” body in a group of “fundamental” churches.

The denominated church member usually has lost his/her commitment to the doctrinal fundamentals of the faith and/or separation from an evil world. To find a reason for existence, the church turns to a relevant ministry of meeting needs of individuals, i.e., social work and/or social gospel. Usually this is a slow erosion. At first help is given as a way to win souls, and also is justified as carrying out the mandate given by Jesus of giving humanitarian mercy, i.e., the Good Samaritan. But over a period of time, giving help becomes more prevailing than soul winning. Lip service is given to evangelism but the predominance of effort and money go to humanitarian relief.

Another characteristic of denominated churches is perpetuity. Rather than aggressive evangelistic outreach, programs and money are spent to keep committees going and to “fill slots” in leadership positions.

Committees and offices that were constituted to perform a job, often enjoy status simply because they got the job done. With the passing of time, people take a job because they want the status, yet are hardly capable of functioning on the committee. Hence a Sunday school superintendent may be appointed because “nobody else wanted the job.” Or a committee continues to exist without a function; “We always have VBS; if it is dropped this summer our children might go to the “Other” church.

5. Individualized Christianity. The original evolution toward centralization of church authority usually causes a church to operate more efficiently, resulting in a stronger denomination. The sect and institutional church become stronger through organized outreach.

When churches shift to a centralized authority, they reach more people. But usually in the process, the members become less responsible for church direction, hence over a period of time, loyalty to the church becomes weaker.

The problem is time. With the passing of time both the membership and leadership change, then the next generation of leaders alter the direction of the church, and the membership is either powerless to stop them or does not care. Schaller predicts, "It now appears that the future is almost certain to witness a further deterioration of congregational autonomy."³⁴

Kinchela, in his article, "The Behavioral Sequence of a Dying Church," notes that a congregation finally dies in one of three ways: (1) vacated by the pastor, (2) securing a part-time pastor, and (3) complete abandonment or by merging with another group.³⁵ Schaller gives an analytical and practical discussion of a dying church in the deterioration cycle. They can (1) merge, (2) relocate, or (3) remain and struggle with death.³⁶

Many believe the present-day trends of merging denominations are simply a move by dying organizations to save the deteriorating superstructure from oblivion. Leaders feel that the consolidation of headquarters and reduction of overhead cost can eventually save the denomination. However, by alienating members at the local church level, the ecumenical movement cannot fulfill its promise.

What happens to members when their church moves around the cycle? Many believers become alienated from their "church home." They feel no loyalty to their previous denomination and/or their local church. They may give up on their core values that originally attracted them to a "sect" church that was going to change the world as they wanted the world changed. Perhaps there is no church in their immediate neighborhood that expresses their core values, so there's no possibility of swapping churches. Is this person a candidate for an Internet church? Yes! Could this person be challenged to once again "take up his cross and follow Jesus"? Probably!

Would this person care if there are 100 others in his or her new church affiliation, or one million? However, one million other “crusaders” like him who hold his same core values might be a bigger challenge than a smaller church. As a matter of fact, this “candidate” might better respond if he doesn’t “see the lifestyle or level of commitment of others in his movement.

SECTION THREE

CELL GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

The third section of this chapter analyzes the *Cell Growth of the Church*. Again, as in other growth cycles, this section begins: (1) the *individual believer* who is related to God; then (2) *the cell church*: is made up of a homogeneous unit of individual believers who know and are known by one another, who have relationship to one another of varying strengths; (3) *the multiple-cell church or congregational church*: a larger group of believers who all have—more or less—the same Christian goals, but relate for identification to a primary group within one of the cells of the larger church; (4) *the multi-congregation church*: a mega church grouping of many “congregations” united by a common Christian purpose and core values and held together by organization or infrastructure, led by a single pastor (pastoral team); (5) *disjointed believers*: the organization becomes so large it can’t meet the spiritual needs of its members; therefore, each seek some outside support for Christian fellowship, nurture, service and worship. It is at this stage of cell church growth that the one million member church finds its place of ministry.

The secret to building a one million-person local church is not technology, nor the “compulsion” of people in Technopolis to use social communication devices. The secret is not the quality of a streaming (or Skype) musical program, powerful preaching, or any other technological “miracle.” The secret is to bond all people to one another around a common purpose (dream) or core values. Each believer must belong to intimate others in their primary group, whether that group is a prayer group, Bible study group, service team, ministry team, or

any one of the multitude of intimate gatherings that make up the whole. The following is the description of the various stages of the *cell growth of churches*.³⁷

1. The Individual Believer. Christianity starts with the one who accepts Jesus Christ as personal Savior. That believer's relationship becomes so strong that embryonically all the core values of Christianity are planted in his heart. The more the believer reads the Word of God and prays, the stronger that relationship to Christ becomes. The believer realizes he/she is a member of a family, they are brother and sister to other believers. The believer wants to be baptized, so they identify with a church family. The believer wants to celebrate the Lord's Table; it's then they realize it's a "communion" both with Christ and other believers.

2. The Single-Cell Church. So the new believer begins living within a new group called the church, each one probably knows all the others or at least knows about all the others. The new believer becomes aware of Jesus' new commandment, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart . . ." and the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-39). So they bond with other believers in the new group in a loving-serving relationship.

To understand the nature of any church, one must understand the relationship between believers, especially one that exists in the single-cell church. (See Sect characteristics to understand the sociological limits of the single-cell church.)

A small single cell church probably has an average attendance of 87 worshippers (87 is theological convictions, worship styles and regional areas of the United States). The single-cell church resembles a large, overgrown family. As a matter of fact they are many times called the family church or the typical American church.

The single-cell church has the characteristics of the tribe of the *geometric cycle of relationships*. Just as a primitive tribe is made up of blood relationships and those who marry

into the tribe, just so the single-cell church usually has five blood families or marital family groups, these family groups are the dominant influences of the single cell church. The single cell church is described as, “A single-cell church everyone knows everyone, everyone relates to everyone, and everyone waits on everyone; before anyone will do anything.”³⁸ The above definition of a single cell church in actuality is a definition of the homogeneous unit.³⁹ There is saneness, relatedness and dependency present in the homogeneous unit, are also descriptive characteristics of the single cell.

As previously mentioned, the primary influence and/or control in the single cell church is with the five families, and they usually are the board members or they influence the board.

The pastor of a single-cell church is employed to minister to the congregation, but is usually not the leader of the church. He is employed to preach, marry, baptize, visit the sick and newborn, and bury the dead.

Just as the human body grows by the division of cells (and remains healthy by the addition of cells), in the same way the local church body will grow by adding cells. Don't think of adding people to a church of 100—think of adding new ministries, new classes, and new programs of outreach. These additions are new cells. Because “the body grows by the division of cells,” new human relationship cells must be added for the single-cell church to grow. Usually these few cells do not come from within, but must come from the pastor and/or by the initiative of some outside force. Then the single-cell church grows past 100, so that it becomes a middle-sized church. When these things happen, the single-cell church begins growing toward 200 worshippers or even 300 worshippers. Just as fruit on trees and bushes grows on new sprouts, so growth in an existing church comes through new units, not through old units, existing classes or groups already in existence.

3. The Multi-Cell Church. This church is not always described by numbers, but rather by its constitution and/or the way it is organized. When a church has several cells, it becomes a multi-cell church in its composition. This church might have several elective Sunday school classes. When more are added, it causes growth. At the same time, some classes will not grow.

As the single-cell church begins to grow, traditional members are heard to complain, “I don’t know everyone in the church,” and “We are becoming two churches.” These two criticisms are actually a sign of health; they indicate that the church is growing toward becoming a multi-cell church.

The primary role of the pastor in the multi-cell church is to be *managing leader*, that is, the pastor oversees several leaders of groups of people who do ministry in the church. As an illustration, the pastor should be shepherd to all the people, but when a youth pastor is hired, the pastor delegates his ministry to the youth pastor, and extends his pastoral ministry to the young people through the youth pastor. The same process is repeated with a children’s pastor, a singles’ pastor, and perhaps a music minister, and maybe later, a minister of recreation. When all of these additional pastors/ministers are added to the church staff, one of the major tasks of the senior pastor is to manage and/or oversee his pastoral team for more efficient ministry throughout the whole church. Very quickly, management becomes a key force in the multi-cell church so the pastor must quickly develop skill-sets as a managing leader.

Some pastors who preach well in single-cell churches, are called to pastor multi-cell churches. Sometimes they fail, however, because they cannot manage well or their organizational skills are counterproductive. These pastors fail in multi-cell churches not because of their pulpit ability, but due to their lack of leadership ability.

Someone has said that, in the small church, the pastor is the ball carrier on the football team. In the multi-cell church, the pastor is the quarterback who hands the ball off to a ball carrier. The pastor doesn't do all the ministry; he delegates it to staff members who in turn do ministry. In the next steps—the multi-congregational church—the pastor is the coach on the sidelines calling the plays.

Different Names of the Multi-Cell Church

1. The middle-sized church
2. The multi-celled church
3. The departmentally graded Sunday school church
4. A heterogeneous body with homogeneous cells

4. Multi-Congregational Church. The most dominant force that produces growth in large churches is the pastoral leader. Technically, this is called the *executive leader*. In earlier writings, I said that the pastors of megachurches were the length and shadow of the church. By this I meant, because they were men of great ability and great character, they produced a great church.

A large church is actually a congregation of congregations, and within most congregations are cells. One third of the traditional cells are probably related by blood or marriage.

Some cohesiveness among the congregations and/or cells is usually present. Sometimes the cohesiveness or glue is nationality, neighborhood background, similar needs, similar desires, work relationships, family relationships, or some other designated glue that holds the group together.

The one over-riding cohesive glue is the core values that hold the cell together. To continue growth, these core values must be transferred to each new member, and each new generation, and internalized by the new additions.

People who don't understand the large church think it is a small church with a lot of people. That's not true. Decision making in the small church is usually made in a business meeting by individuals who make up the majority. As the church becomes multi-celled, more and more decision-making moves to the pastoral staff and/or church leaders. When the church arrives at the megachurch status, decision-making passes from individuals into the congregation to small groups within the church. These small groups can include the pastoral staff, the finance committee, mission committee, advertising committee, or any committee that manages a budget within a large church. The individuals of the larger congregation do not make decisions, the supervisory group and/or board does.

It has been said in the large church, "decisions are not made, they happen." This means decisions will grow out of core values or the guiding principles of the congregation. That's good when it happens. However, decision making is more complex because many people are involved in the process of arriving at every decision.

In the multi-congregational church, most of the leadership decisions are determined by the leadership, however much of the ministry is done by the laity. That fits into the Online Church because the pastoral leadership must set up and direct the strategy and tools to operate an Online Church, then the people must relate to one another and to the church through technology. Lead by a pastor, the people are both the focus of ministry and the dispenser of ministry, i.e., every member a minister.

WRAP-UP

The three cycles seem to overlap each other. While not a perfect fit, nor are they a *cause-effect* relationship, there seems to be a correlation. From these comparisons, we can see where “growth” or “development” is headed. Since they all end up at the same place, we see how the one million-person church is possible because the Online Church can prosper at the end of each cycle.

The first stages of the cycle are the tribe, the sect, and the single-cell church. All three appear to have the same appearance and seem to be held together by the same social “stickiness.” All appear to be ingrown and tend to separate from other groups.

The second stage of the cycle is the town, the church as an institution and the multi-cell church. Each of the three depend upon a sophisticated degree of organization and administration. Each requires a functioning leader and the glue is communication and transportation.

The third stage is metropolis, denominational churches and the multi-congregational church (a mega church). The people of all three relate to others in their small primary group that is part of a much larger congregation. These may also be called affinity groups. This allows for multi-race, multi-class, and multi-linguistic groups, all united around a common core of values.

The final stage is technopolis, deterioration, and a return to individualism. As communication and transportation are advanced by technology, people find themselves alienated from more and more people and groups of people. As people search for meaning and purpose in their life, they find it on the Internet. The computer gives them power, they can control their destiny, and/or they can find answers to their questions, help for their problems, and a purpose in life. They can find Christ through an Online Church, and then they can be trained by the computer to minister to others through the computer.

This last stage makes possible a one million-person church because “isolated” individuals can find hope and help online, then become a part of a great outreach to help others.

NOTES

¹ Spanish “coined” term to describe an Hispanic neighborhood.

² Google definition of Skype: is a software application that allows users to make voice calls over the Internet. Calls to other users within the Skype service are free, while calls to both traditional landline telephones and mobile phones can be made for a fee using a debit-based user account system; available from http://www.google.com/#hl=en&xhr=t&q=skype+definition&cp=9&pf=p&scient=psy&biw=787&bih=420&source=hp&aq=0&aqi=g5&aql=&oq=skype+def&pbx=1&bav=on.2,or.r_gc.r_pw.&fp=fa26eb184f58bc00 (accessed July 15, 2011).

³ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1965).

⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The term “white man” is not used in a pejorative way, nor is it used to suggest it was a better or superior way. The term is used here, as was commonly used by American Indians, in a historical setting.

⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1.

¹¹ Ibid., 2.

¹² Ibid., 4.

¹³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴ Ibid., 10.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., 12.
- 19 Ibid., 13.
- 20 Ibid., 17.
- 21 Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. By Olive Wyan (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931), 2 vols. *An outstanding analysis of the factors that cause deterioration in churches.*
- 22 _____, This discussion is based on a summary of Vol. I, pp. 331-81, Vol. II, pp. 993-1013.
- 23 Definition drawn by Dr. Elmer Towns from *Webster* and *Oxford* dictionaries, s.v. sect.
- 24 Elmer L. Towns, *America's Fastest Growing Churches* (Nashville, TN: Impact Books, 1972), 168.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid., 161.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 David O. Moberg, *The Church or a Social Institution* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), 100.
- 29 Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, 1-13. When Cox sees the bankruptcy of American denominations, he suggests we advance to a religionless society where God is dead, as an answer. When I see the same bankruptcy, I maintain we must return to the origination, the sect/fundamentalist church.
- 30 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. denominate; available from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/denominate> (accessed July 20, 2011).
- 31 *The Free Dictionary by Farlex*, s.v. dominates; available from <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/denominates> (accessed July 20, 2011).
- 32 Troeltsch.
- 33 Elmer L. Towns, *Is the Day of the Denomination Dead?* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1973), 49.
- 34 Lyle Schaller, *Planning for Protestantism in Urban America* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), 211. Schaller gives an excellent summary to causes of church and denominational deterioration, especially analyzing the bankruptcy of many inner city churches.
- 35 Kinchela, "Behavioral Sequence of a Dying Church," *Religious Education*, Vol. 24, pp. 329-45.

³⁶ Schaller, pp. 15-46.

³⁷ Adapted from Elmer Towns, C. Peter Wagner and Thom. S. Rainer, *The Everychurch Guide to Growth* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 151-160.

³⁸ Elmer Towns, *Everychurch Guide to Growth*, 152.

³⁹ _____, *A Practical Encyclopedia of Evangelism and Church Growth* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1996). See articles on “Homogeneous Unit” and “People Movement.”

Chapter 7

WHAT METHODS ARE NEEDED TO BUILD A ONE MILLION-PERSON CHURCH?

By
Elmer Towns

The readers will see the differences between methods and principles, then understand that church methods have changed over the ages, but principles never change. They will learn that some previous evangelistic methods will not be effective with the future virtual generation, but that new methods and tools can be used of God to reach a new generation and build a one million person church

When we talk about the method of growing a million-person church, don't confuse methods with principles of ministry. There is a huge difference, while they seem to be the same.

At one time (1900 to 1950) going door-to-door to spread the gospel was an effective method of building churches, especially in the South and Midwest United States. That was a method called Door-to-Door Evangelism. But in the last part of the 20th century, it was not as effective in the United States. Women are working; no one is home when the door-to-door evangelist knocks. And because both husband and wife work, when they are home they don't want to be bothered by an interruption at the front door by a stranger. They are not responsive to a stranger coming to their door to present the gospel, or invite them to a church. In the same way door-to-door salesmen no longer are effective; so the principle of evangelism is still effective, but the method of door-to-door outreach in the U. S. is not.

A method is an application of an evangelistic principle to a particular culture, and is effective for a particular length of time, but probably not forever. When the time or culture changes, and a particular method is no longer effective; God raises up a new method to reach a new culture, and a new generation.

Methods are many,
Principles are few;
Methods may change,
But principals never do.

An evangelistic principle is an eternal truth taught in the Bible. A principle will work at all times and cross all cultures.

The Bible principle of sharing the gospel with family, friends, neighbors and business associates worked in Bible times, and still works today in all cultures. However, it becomes a method when a church organizes an outreach program to canvass a neighborhood to take a survey of occupants to find out their church home. It's a method and not a principle because people are not naturally sharing the gospel with acquaintances. When evangelism is organized and follows a planned presentation, it's a method.

When I was doing research for the book *The Ten Greatest Revivals Ever*,¹ I stumbled over a truth that stood out to me that revealed the difference between a method and principle. I discovered the greatest revivals through history were usually driven by one method or in some cases, a few methods. But then, revivals around the world and throughout time were driven by different methods. I discovered that some methods that were effective in some revivals, didn't work at other places. I also discovered that when the people changed, or the time changed, certain methods lost their effectiveness. As a matter of fact, when a Christian group tried to hang on to the method after culture changed, both the revival and method lost its effectiveness.

As a young preacher I thought the gospel invitation at the end of a preaching service where sinners were invited to walk forward and receive Christ had been around since Pentecost. But a study of the history of evangelism proved this was not the case. The gospel invitation was

introduced and popularized by Charles Finney during the 1830 revivals. However, it's not nearly as effective in the 21st century among a skeptical audience of gospel hardened listeners.

The Brush Arbor meetings were effective in the 1800 Second Great Awakening. Street preaching was effective in the First Great Awakening. Sunday school bus evangelism seemed to have a very narrow effective window between 1960-1975. That was a time when old school buses were available to churches. It was also a time when families were willing to let their children ride a bus to a church with strangers.

Because evangelistic methods seem to come and go, I call them "anointed methods" because they seem to have had a time when they were effectively used by God, the Holy Spirit anointed them to win souls to Christ. When they were no longer effective, methods seemed to lose their anointing in our perspective. But it was really the Christian worker who lost the anointing.

So God doesn't anoint a method, or a program or an organized outreach. God anoints people with the Holy Spirit and uses them in service. God uses them according to their useability. There are many reasons why people lose their anointing. Obviously, if there is sin in their life that person loses his/her anointing. It also happens were people get tired in God's work, or lose their enthusiasm, or stop praying with intensity, or stop praying all together. When a preacher uses a method for a long time and he/she loses their "edge" to use that method, they can lose their annotating by the Holy Spirit.

But changing times can change Christian attitudes toward a method that God had been using. The year 1974 seems to be the time Sunday school busing lost its edge. The Arab oil embargo forced gas from 25 cents a gallon to \$1.25 a gallon. Insurance went up from \$1,000 for a fleet of buses to \$1,000 per bus. The dirty undisciplined children brought in by buses made a mess of tidy churches; their boorish behavior didn't mix with squeaky clean Sunday school kids.

Also, leaders learned that work on a bus ministry was such hard demanding work that the average worker was “worn out” in two years. All these factors came to a head in 1974. As a result, thousands of churches dropped their bus ministry around that time. After that date, bus ministry seemed no longer effective.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN METHODS AND PRINCIPLES

The Church Growth movement had the evangelical spot light from 1960 to 1990 and was used of God to help many leaders study evangelistic practices so that they understood the difference between evangelistic methods and evangelist principles. Church Growth was a movement that was characterized by three elements. First, it emphasized reaching lost people, winning them to Christ and getting them in a church so that the church grew. Donald McGavran² said he came up with the term *Church Growth* to replace the term evangelism that had been watered down to be everything from humanitarian aid, to caring for orphans, to recruiting church membership.

Second, Church Growth clarified the New Testament principle of evangelism by emphasizing church planting. McGavran maintained denominations grew—not by growing existing churches—but by planting new churches to reach new converts to Christ.³

But the third and most important contribution of Church Growth was applying scientific research methods to discover, articulate and communicate the New Testament principles that produced growing churches.

Donald A. McGavran, missionary to India under the United Christian Missionary Society (the missions branch of the Disciples of Christ from 1923-1955), is generally recognized as the modern father (or grandfather) of the modern Church Growth Movement, i.e., CGM.

McGavran saw a problem in evangelism every time his denomination started a church among one caste in any city; those in castes above or below were not incorporated into the local congregation.

Churches were planted in different towns, and new churches were begun in different castes, but each church stayed relatively small, i.e., around 100, each constrained by the caste where it was founded.

New believers remained in the caste where they were converted, and did not gravitate to a church in another caste, nor did they attract to Christianity those above or below them sociologically. If that were the end of the story, the worldwide Church Growth Movement might have died before its birth. McGavran questioned why Christianity didn't apparently give converts the ability to cross cultural barriers.

J. Waskom Pickett,⁴ a missionary evangelist, demonstrated to McGavran that the power of evangelism could "bridge" the social caste system and reach many for Christ. Therefore, McGavran began to see every new church as an evangelistic instrument to reach those for Christ in the caste where it was planted. When McGavran realized that a church must be planted in every caste of every village, he understood the task of evangelizing India was much greater than anyone realized. Rather than hibernating into a pessimistic shell, Pickett challenged McGavran to evangelize the millions.

THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

McGavran took a furlough in 1954 and during that time published the *Bridges of God*⁵. That book was and remains an elementary foundation for the Church Growth Movement.

Robertson McQuilkin, the president of Columbia Bible College, wrote it had five Church Growth principles.

1.) Numerical growth,

2.) Focus of receptivity in converts,
3.) People movements (the homogeneous unit principle),
4.) Use of science as a tool to determine successful evangelistic principles,
- 5.) Right method guarantees large response⁶

Dr. McGavran isolates five key events that have contributed immeasurably to the expansion of the movement. The five events include: (1) in 1961 establishing the Institute of Church Growth on the campus of Northwest Christian College (Eugene, Oregon) to develop students knowledgeable in growth concepts; (2) publication of *Church Growth Bulletin* in 1964; (3) relocating the Institute of Church Growth from the campus in Eugene (1961) to Fuller Seminary at Pasadena (1965); (4) establishing the William Carey Library (1969) for mass publication and circulation of Church Growth books; and (5) creation of the Institute for American Church Growth in 1973 by Dr. McGavran and Dr. Win Arn.⁷

On June 16-20, 1969, McGavran conducted a historic gathering of church growth leadership in the first Annual Church Growth Colloquium at the Emmanuel School of Religion, Milligan College, Tennessee. This four-day conference included such topics as “The Scientifically Measurable Factors of Church Growth,” “Why Churches Stop Growing” and “How to Activate Churches.”⁸

While McGavran was teaching the principles of Church Growth for a foreign mission evangelistic outreach, I began thinking and applying Church Growth principles to the American scene. I was interested in the growth of churches ever since I wrote an article and tract, *The Laws of Sunday School Growth*⁹ in 1960. I spent much of the 1960s traveling to individual churches, teaching *The Laws of Sunday School Growth* and also instructing Sunday school teachers how to use Sunday school as an evangelistic outreach arm of the church.

In 1969 I published the *Ten Largest Sunday Schools*¹⁰ and Robert Walker, editor of *Christian Life* magazine said, “The news of the ten largest Sunday schools hit America like a thunderclap.”¹¹ Almost immediately the book was listed on the best-selling list of Christian publications and remained there for the next two years.¹² In the succeeding four years I followed up with four bestselling books, each one on a topic of Church Growth.¹³

C. Peter Wagner, Church Growth professor at Fuller Theological Seminary said about the book on *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools*, “This book is the first American Church Growth volume and the first book on the mega church.”¹⁴

C. Peter Wagner had been involved with the movement, *Evangelism In-Depth*, an evangelistic program/movement that swept across Latin and South America in the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁵ The movement’s spokesman, Kenneth Strachan taught that the key to evangelizing a nation was not with massive crusades and with big-name evangelists, i.e., Billy Graham, or Luis Palau, nor was it with well-known gospel singers; rather, Strachan taught evangelism must be done *in-depth*, i.e., organizing and coordinating evangelistic events at the local neighborhood level, i.e., backyard Bible clubs, door-to-door evangelistic visitation, local evangelistic crusades, etc. Therefore, Moody Science films were shown in the evenings in public piazzas all across each nation. Gospel music concerts were also held in piazzas, featuring artist and musical groups from local churches.

The year of *Evangelism In-Depth* was kicked off in each South American nation with a huge parade down the center of Main Street of major cities where evangelicals marched together for Jesus Christ, the Salvation Army Band heralding the gospel, with pastors, Sunday school teachers marching to show their allegiance to Jesus Christ through their local Protestant churches. Evangelicals joined together across South America to reach their country for Jesus Christ.

C. Peter Wagner was teaching at a theological seminary in Bolivia, South America, and worked with *Evangelism In-Depth* for Bolivia, whereby all the evangelicals of that country were organized into various local campaigns of evangelism. After a year of intensive evangelism in Bolivia, Wagner was greatly surprised to discover that the year-long program had not increased the number of members in the churches.¹⁶ In fact, he went on to say, the percent of annual growth was greater the year preceding—than during and the two years following—the *Evangelism In-Depth* effort!¹⁷ He concluded corporate endeavors to evangelism did not work as effectively as the intense outreach of a local church to reach lost people, win them to Jesus Christ, and bond them to a community of believers.

Wagner was influenced by McGavran and the idea of carrying on the dream of Church Growth in North America captured Wagner's heart. Wagner was invited to teach at Fuller Seminary, so he enrolled in the University of Southern California to earn his Ph.D. in social ethics. His doctoral dissertation became a touchstone book for Church Growth, i.e., *Our Kind of People*.¹⁸

Wagner revitalized the Doctor of Ministry program at Fuller Theological Seminary with his classes on Church Growth. Whereas in the early-70s Fuller had approximately 25 students in the D. Min. program, by 1985 there were over 1,200 students in that program; mainly motivated by Church Growth seminars conducted by Pete Wagner. These classes were also taught by Eddie Gibbs, Arthur Glasser, and others.

Wagner began church planting seminars through the Charles E. Fuller Institute for Evangelism and Church Growth. These classes were taught throughout the late 70s and into the 80s. Denominational officials from almost all denominations attended the seminar to learn how their group could grow by planting churches.

Two results came out of Wagner's seminars: first, the denominations across America began establishing a titled position called Church Growth Director and they began re-focusing evangelism on planting new churches, rather than trying to grow existing churches. Second, many denominational officials attended the one week seminar and turned it into their first class to earn a Doctor of Ministries from Fuller Theological Seminary. As a result, Wagner spread the effective use of Church Growth to denominations beginning at the executive level that began trickling down to state and local church levels.

A GLORIOUS TWENTY YEAR WINDOW

There were 20 glorious years of evangelistic ministry (1970-1990) unlike anything else ever seen in the face of Christianity, i.e., the Church Growth years. There had been other decades of great outreach, but Church Growth years were unique in that they were based on research that established workable biblical principles to reach people for Jesus Christ and bond them into local churches. These years were unique in that they emphasized and allowed for the explosion of mega-churches around the world.¹⁹ In a mega-church one pastor-leader and his congregation planned to saturate their entire "Jerusalem" with the purpose of winning as many to Christ as possible and getting them in their local church.²⁰ It was unlike any other period because there was a multitude of workable methods that appeared on the scene, some methods used by a few churches, other methods used by others. Some methods used in one culture, others worked in a different culture. But the total number of new methods produced exciting results in the kingdom of God.²¹

THE DECLINE OF THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

The "window of Church Growth" seemed to begin closing because those who fell in love with the results of Church Growth also fell in love with the methods they learned from Church Growth and they equated Church Growth with that one method. With primary commitment to

methods, the results of Church Growth declined. Ed Stetzer said it was an allegiance to methods and a loss of the original missional church vision of Donald McGavran.²²

Christian Schwarz tried to downplay the Church Growth models when he advocated a new approach to growth. He advocated *Church Health*.²³

The following are suggestions why Church Growth began to decline. Some of these are primary reasons, others are secondary. Some reasons for decline come from within the movement itself; others from without. And then, just as the buggy whip and running board lost their place in the commercial market, has Church Growth been superseded by a movement more powerful and “anointed” by God?

1. *Loss of Church Growth’s titular head.* When the movement lost Donald McGavran in 1990 to death, obviously the strong voice for Church Growth went silent. Prior to his death, Donald McGavran was the banquet speaker each year at the North American Society for Church Growth. Church Growth leaders looked forward to his yearly exhortation, and right to the end he was strong, never losing his compass-bearing for the Great Commission.²⁴

McGavran quoted Matthew 28:19 often because he believed it deeply, repeating many times the original Greek *matheteusate panta ta ethne*, i.e., “make disciples of all ethnic groups.” In his last speech I said McGavran quoted it 14 times; Wagner, sitting next to me, counted 13 times. Who knows which of us was right; McGavran probably said it more times in his heart than he said audibly. But the voice went silent signifying the approaching twilight of the Church Growth Movement’s glorious age.

2. *The Church Growth Movement lost its rallying voice—C. Peter Wagner.* C. Peter Wagner underwent theological shifts in his own personal life, which meant changes in his ministry emphasis. Wagner always called these his “new assignments of God.”²⁵ In the early years of growth C. Peter Wagner seemed to produce a new book each year on Church Growth,

each one becoming a top seller. It seems that everyone who was caught up in the Church Growth Movement wanted to read the latest book by Wagner.²⁶ When Wagner didn't have any new areas to explore, it seemed he ceased being leader of Church Growth, the movement became like Israel without a clear leader to: (1) defend from attacks, (2) articulate the questions that needed to be answered, and (3) to point the way to emerging generations. C. Peter Wagner was the obviously rallying personality of the Church Growth Movement; he had been the controlling influence in Pasadena, i.e., the *Fuller Factor*.²⁷

3. *The Church Growth Movement followed evolving methodology and became captured by its methods, not principles.* Technically, Church Growth built on principles, but was known for different methodologies. As the American church unknowingly shifted its allegiance from one methodology to another, it was slowly turning its loyalty away from Church Growth. Realistically, scholars should have recognized that any movement runs its course, and all tools or methods ultimately lose their steam.

It seems that the Church Growth Movement was built on several methodologies, i.e., strong evangelistic preaching in the pulpit, including the Sunday morning gospel invitation to receive Christ. Door-to-door invitation evangelism was a method that also lost its effectiveness. Another methodology was Sunday school bus ministry that brought thousands to a local church. Others feel Sunday school itself was a method, while others would deny that assertion. But when applied to time, organizational structure and curriculum, Sunday school meets the criteria of methodology.

4. *The Seeker Church movement hitch-hiked on the evangelistic goals of the Church Growth Movement, but diverted the movement by the success of its methods.* Bill Hybels, pastor and founder of Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, IL, is recognized as the fountainhead, calling his church seeker driven. Rick Warren, pastor and founder of Saddleback

Community Church in Lake Forest, CA, gave the movement more attention while describing his method as seeker sensitive.

Hybels used a research model to plant his church going door-to-door asking, “Why don’t you attend church?” He organized the answers he received into five self-evident truths of the seeker movement: 1) Preaching is boring so he chose relevant topics that answered the questions of seekers; 2) Churches embarrass visitors by asking, “Stand up and speak up, giving your name,” so he designed a service so seekers could worship in anonymity; 3) Churches beg for money so he didn’t take an offering at first but later took the offering but told visitors not to give; 4) Music was old and out of date so he used contemporary music, a praise band, praise and worship ensemble; especially eliminating the choir, organ, and piano that were identified with traditional church music; 5) People had to “dress up” to attend church so he arranged for member to attend in casual attire to make the seekers comfortable.

The data pool for his research was an upper middle class community of upward mobile couples. The methods used by Hybels worked in his community and other communities of the same culture. But when pastors of different socio-economic strata attended Hybels’ conferences, they couldn’t implement his methods back home; some split churches, some stifled churches, others were fired.

Rick Warren loved to wear Hawaiian shirts for preaching so some visiting pastors went home to wear Hawaiian shirts; but it didn’t work because they didn’t minister in a Southern California culture.²⁸

Rick Warren seemed to distance himself from his Church Growth roots when he said, “Church health is the key to church growth.”²⁹

Rick Warren wrote the successful book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, which was more a description of Saddleback and the way he did ministry; it was not an implementation of the

Healthy Church movement. A full explanation of his thoughts is found on his web[LLLE2] site.³⁰

The success of the *seeker movement* drew attention away from the Church Growth Movement and from principles that can be applied across different cultures, and across time. Many seeker churches became contemporary worship churches that ministered to early seeker crowds except the pastor doesn't wear the Hawaiian shirt, but rather had his shirttail out, wore sneakers and spiked hair.

While the contemporary praise worship model is growing and effective in some communities, it can't be transplanted into an African-American inner-city community, nor does it adapt to a community that would rather listen to Southern gospel, or some upper-class community that worships better with classic music. The book, *Hipster Christianity*, is critical of the contemporary praise and worship movement.³¹

5. *The Church Health movement was introduced as a criticism of the Church Growth Movement and tried to take the place of the Church Growth Movement.* Technically its founder, Christian Schwarz, wanted his movement to be called Natural Church Development (NCD). He explained it was based on research from over 1,000 churches in 32 countries on five continents. At a meeting of the North American Church Growth Society in the early 90s, Schwarz was asked to provide access to his research, but he avoided the question and never allowed Church Growth leaders to examine his research or data.

Flavil Yeakley, a respected member of the American Society of Church Growth, and John Ellas wrote a critique of the NCD in the *Journal of the American Society of Church Growth* claiming Schwarz was "fatally flawed, pseudo-scientific, and that he did not follow scientific methods."³² To Schwarz's credit, he recognized that different models needed to be applied to be effective in different churches. But he said there were eight principles for natural church growth: 1) Empowering leadership, 2) Gift-oriented ministry; 3) Passionate spirituality; 4) Functional

structure; 5) Inspiring worship service; 6) Holistic small groups; 7) Need-oriented evangelism; and 8) Loving relationships.³³

Ed Stetzer criticizes the NCD because it was blinded to the needs of various cultures, especially lacking a theology of evangelism and Christology.³⁴

But while many were not aware of the 8 principles of the NCD, nor of the movement itself, they adopted the title phrase “healthy church.” Many said they wanted to be a “healthy church,” rather than as a soul-winning church, or an evangelistic church, or even a growth-oriented church. True, they included evangelism as one of the lesser objectives, but the dominant passion became church health.

6. *The complacency of goals achieved.* When there were only a few mega churches in America, many pastors worked, sacrificed, and did everything possible to become a mega church. Originally, a mega church was identified with 1,000 in attendance, and that goal drove many pastors to “achieve their impossible dream.”

But when pastors began to achieve the impossible dream, like Alexander the Great; they sat down and wept because there were no more kingdoms to conquer. When a church sets its passion on reaching a thousand, and does so, what else is there to do when there are no more perceived mountains to climb?

Other pastors realized that achieving the goal of 1,000 involved hard work, discipline, and sacrifices that they were not willing to make. Pastors wanted more free time to write books, or play golf, or do a hundred other pursuits that occupy a pastor’s time.

Also, reaching the mega church goal of 1,000 in attendance could be the fate of the #1 watched television programs in America. Over the years there have been outstanding television programs that have achieved the illusive #1 ranking. But they lost it the following year.

Why? The American audience gets bored very quickly. They turn the dial to another channel, and #1 begins to slip in ratings until it is dropped from the next fall schedule. Could it be that the pastor and/or church becomes like the “bored” American audience? Once #1 is reached, the pastor and/or church turns attention to other goals.

7. *Perhaps Church Growth has declined because of the Third Generation Syndrome.* After Israel conquered her enemies and occupied the Promised Land, the next generations forgot the Lord and lost the land they conquered. “So the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the LORD which He had done for Israel . . . another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD, nor the work which He had done for Israel. Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals; and they forsook the LORD God of their fathers” (Judg. 2:7, 10, 11).

How could Israel turn to worship the gods of their enemies—the ones they defeated—after incredible victories? There is a basic principle about living in victory: after you win a battle, keep doing the things that made you victorious or you will eventually lose a battle and be conquered by your enemies.

The 2nd and 3rd generations always have trouble remaining true to its founders’ principles. This is reflected in families, churches, or interdenominational movements. Richard Niebuhr writes,

Children born into families of first-generation sect members begin to change the sect into a church even before they reach adulthood. With their coming, the sect must become an educational and disciplinary institution in order to make the new generation conform to its ideas and customs. The second generation holds its convictions less fervently than pioneers of the sects, whose convictions were formed in the heat of conflict and sometimes at the threat of martyrdom. With each succeeding generation, isolation from the world becomes more difficult.³⁵

Many churches worked hard to reach lost people, and as a result they began to grow because of many effective methods. They grew spiritually in answer to prayer, they grew numerically as souls were won to Christ and baptized into their community, they grew financially as new members began to tithe and sacrifice, but they also built new buildings, new auditoriums, and began other ministries, such as Christian schools, counseling centers, television outreach, and all other necessities they thought they needed to maintain a huge church.

But something corroded the “dream” of the mega church. Some pastors began thinking smaller is better, others began thinking their evangelistic methods were out of date, other pastors visited the conference of the latest “hot” church leader and adopted methods and ministries that were not only different from what they’ve been doing, they diverted their energies and spiritual attention of the original pioneers that made the church big. Or worse yet, they adapted a method that worked in the neighborhood or culture of the “hot” church, but was inapplicable to the pastor’s home turf.

8. *Church Growth declined when its leaders forgot the nature of their enemy and who it was they were trying to defeat.* The church in general, and every church in specific, has an enemy personified in satan who “walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). And satan uses his tools to defeat the church, i.e., “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:15).

When the gospel is preached, the primary motive is never to build a huge church for the sake of numbers; however, it was to rescue people from sin by the power of the gospel. Church Growth was built on the power of transforming lives. People who were saved repented from sin and left their evil ways. But it was not just a negative turn from sin; it was also a commitment to holiness and godliness. People involved themselves in a growing church because it was there

they were nurtured, and it was there they helped reach other people and bring them to Jesus Christ.

Battles go well when the enemy is identified, known, and a commitment is made for complete victory. When the Church Growth Movement lost its evangelistic heart of rescuing people from sin, it lost its edge and its place in the loyalty of church leaders.

9. *The application of new methods that don't match the culture of the church.* When the new “next method” doesn't bring results as the original method, attendance begins to decline and people's confidence begins to wane and then leadership begins to question its decisions. When a church doesn't march forth in confidence, it loses its members because of missteps and lack of confidence.

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT?

Just as the Greeks left an indelible influence on the Roman world, even though they were conquered by the Romans, so the Church Growth Movement will leave an indelible influence on the church of Jesus Christ, even though it no longer enjoys the “limelight” of popularity. Gone and forgotten, but there will be some positive things that will contribute to the one million person church. The lessons learned from Church Growth can help reach the multitudes for Christ in the next generation if we attach the new technological methods to biblical principles. What can we learn from the Church Growth Movement that will contribute to the one million person church?

1. *We can be motivated by remembering the church's golden days of victories, i.e., when many were won to Christ; there was successful evangelism, revival and a godly influence on culture.* Many will remember some of the great churches built during the Church Growth decades, even though principles that built those churches may be forgotten, and may even be ignored by future evangelists. These positive memories will encourage faith within individuals, motivate future workers to excellence, and remind believers that the great work of God in the

past, can be done again in their future. No one can deny that average pastors built great churches, against insurmountable barriers, with limited resources, in difficult circumstances. Yes, the God of the Bible interjects history with His power to do supernatural works.

2. *Church Growth used the principles of scientific exploration to discover valid methods by which churches are planted, grow, flourish and die.* The use of science to discover workable principles did not deny the Bible, but the opposite; Church Growth leaders used scientific inquiry into Scripture to discover or apply the principles by which churches grow, then they examined culture (anthropology), people (psychology), institutions (sociology) and history to see how churches grew. But they never tried to compromise scriptural principles with cultural principles, but the Bible always trumped culture.

Yes, the critics accused Church Growth of being about numbers, but remember the greater truth; Church Growth discovered and applied the principles of evangelism to win souls to Christ, and plant churches.

Previous to the Church Growth Movement, there were many large churches built. As an illustration, across the South were many pastors of large Southern Baptist churches who prayed to reach their community, applied the Word of God to their preaching, and as a result, grew some great but isolated churches. However, most of these leaders who built these churches took the lessons to the grave with them. A few became professors in theological seminaries, but even there they didn't apply their laws of growth to culture. They challenged their students to grow a church the way they grew a church. They were probably ignorant of cultural implications. Perhaps that's why most Southern Baptist church planters of the past tried to build the same kind of church every place they went. As a result, the principles they taught might have built the large First Baptist Church of Waycross, GA, but the same principles didn't work in midtown Manhattan, nor the Common of Boston, nor along Laguna Beach in Southern California. Also,

the principles that might have worked in one church in Waycross, GA, wouldn't work in the heart of Africa, nor metropolitan Seoul, Korea. The laws that some of these men used were not properly analyzed, qualified, nor applied according to cultural limitations and/or ethnic differences.

3. *The Church Growth Movement allowed rugged individuals to do great works for God by applying faith to the culture they faced, and produced powerful results for God.* Church Growth produced a few giants of the faith who defied tradition, believed God's Word, understood the conditions by which they ministered, and by tenacity, discipline and trust in God; they built huge churches, constructed Christian organizations, and demonstrated that a Big God still did His work in a Big Way.

The world will not remember the Church Growth researchers who established the laws, wrote to explain biblical and cultural principles of growing churches, and that their principles became a demonstration of the effectiveness of their faith. The world will remember best those pastors who applied Church Growth laws and built great churches. In the same way, the world doesn't remember the scientists and engineers who built the long-range WWII bomber, i.e., the B-29; but many remember the Enola Gay flown by Paul Tibbets and the long trip from Tinian Island to bomb Hiroshima that brought WWII to an end.

The world will remember Jerry Falwell who built one of the largest Sunday schools at Thomas Road Baptist Church in small Lynchburg, VA, a town of 62,000 people. The world will remember Bill Hybels who used seeker-driven principles to build Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, IL, to over 26,000 worshippers. Also, the world will remember Rick Warren who applied the seeker-sensitive principles to build Saddleback Church in Southern California.

The Church Growth age left an example of exceptionalism³⁶ and a demonstration of God's greatness and power. Perhaps because those in that age learned that God runs the world on His laws (including Church Growth laws) and God has promised to honor the right application of those laws; perhaps their knowledge of Church Growth laws allowed them to do things bigger, better, and obviously, they did great things for the glory of God.

During the Church Growth age, Dr. Paul David Yonggi Cho built the largest church since Pentecost, i.e., approximately 750,000 worshippers each week. This huge congregation is measured both by its weekly cell groups in homes, laundry rooms, recreation rooms, and restaurants throughout the city of Seoul, Korea, but also represented those who attended Sunday worship at the main sanctuary on Yoido Island in Seoul, Korea, plus satellite church campuses in Korea and around the world.

Dr. Bill Bright began and built Campus Crusade for Christ International (recently renamed "Cru"),³⁷ one of the largest Christian organizations in the world. Bright founded this organization with the purpose of evangelizing the college and university campuses of the world. Cru promotes evangelism and discipleship in over 190 countries around the world, has 25,000 fulltime missionary workers and is run by 225,000 volunteers around the world. |

Billy Graham began an evangelistic crusade holding some of the largest single gatherings of people in the history of mankind. These meetings were held in state and national capitols around the world. Perhaps his greatest meeting was when he preached to over 1 million people in Seoul, Korea, in 1973.³⁸

Paul Crouch decided that he could evangelize the world through television by setting up a television ministry in Southern California called the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), which is viewed globally on 70 satellites and over 18,000 TV and cable affiliates. TBN is also seen on the Internet globally, is carried on over 287 television stations in the U.S. and on thousands of

other cable television and satellite systems around the world in over 75 countries, where their programming is translated into over eleven languages.³⁹

D. James Kennedy founded Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in 1959 and built it to become the largest Presbyterian church in the United States. From that base he went on to establish Coral Ridge Ministries, Knox Theological Seminary, and Westminster Academy, K-12; but most importantly he established Evangelism Explosion International, Inc., a program that instructs the soul winner who is sharing his faith to lead with the question, “If God were to ask you, ‘What right do you have to enter My heaven?’” In answering Kennedy fully explained that not only must your sins be forgiven, i.e., a minus process, but you must have the righteousness of Jesus Christ, a positive addition of salvation. Evangelism Explosion is now used in every nation and territory, and the leaders claim it is in more languages than any other Christian outreach program.⁴⁰

In addition to the above named spiritual giants, every pastor who determines “to capture his Jerusalem for Christ” and build a mega church, displayed spiritual exceptionalism and demonstrates that God’s power is still available.

4. *Church Growth Movement focused on the primacy of the local church.* It’s always been easy to criticize local churches, and find their weakness, if not find their “sins.” That’s because we have this “treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7). The “vessel” in this scripture passage may be a reference to humans; it also includes a community of humans, i.e., the local church.

Before the age of Church Growth, there were not many books written on the primacy of the church, the effectiveness of the church, or even the necessity of loyalty to one’s local church. True, there was probably an emphasis on one’s personal church as an expression of one’s

personal discipleship to Jesus Christ. But most emphasis was on the church as an individual's obligation to God; whether in personal godliness or personal soul winning.

However, the Church Growth Movement focused attention on organizing churches to fulfill evangelistic outreach. Readers of Church Growth material began to see how other churches were being used of God to reach their "Jerusalem" with the gospel.

Now we can apply this focus on a local church to build its strength and outreach so that it reaches one million persons for Christ.

5. *The Church Growth Movement placed emphasis on pastoral leadership.* John Maxwell began teaching concepts of leadership, breaking leadership down into laws.⁴¹ John not only studied the laws of leadership but implemented them successfully to build a church with over 4,000 in attendance. Then he parleyed his skills into INJOY⁴² and held seminars across the country teaching pastors leadership skills. As a result, pastors learned how to lead their church to growth, experience health, reach out to its Jerusalem, as well as nurture individual believers. Most recently he formed the organization EQUIP to train Christian leaders around the world. If John can train a million Christian leaders, again, why can't a church have a million members?

Prior to the Church Growth Movement, it seems that lay people mostly served God through church committees and small supervisory roles throughout the Sunday school. At the same time, the role of the pastor was focused on ministry, i.e., preaching, teaching, visiting the sick, counseling, conducting funerals and weddings, etc. However, Church Growth began to reverse that strategy, i.e., putting lay people in ministry, and giving church leadership to pastors. Many feel that this perhaps was God's original priority, i.e., see Eph. 4:8-16.

Now it has become apparent that it will take strong pastoral leadership to build a church of one million persons.

6. *The power of the homogeneous unit as the key component of the total church, i.e., the heterogeneous body.* The church is pictured as a physical body (Eph. 1:22, 23; 4:12-16) made up of many cells. Very few throughout church history understood how cells of the physical body functioned or multiplied.

When Donald McGavran first described churches being a homogeneous units, some called him racist because it seemed to imply to them that, “Birds of a feather, flock together.” People thought he was saying black churches ought to be black churches and white churches ought to be white churches, and the homogeneous unit should include only one type of people. Technically, the Church Growth Movement never said the homogeneous unit was the standard to achievement; it was simply following a scientific principle of *describing* the practice of ethnical groups, not *prescribing* it as norm.

The homogeneous unit could be described as affinity groups or cells within a larger church. Technically, the homogenous unit could be described as, “Everyone in a cell or church group knows everyone in that group relates to everyone in that group, and agrees with everyone before anyone will do anything.”⁴³

I’ve described a homogeneous unit as 87 people standing in a church auditorium, in a large circle, facing one another. Then threads are stretched from every person to every other person in the room, so that each person has 87 pieces of thread in his hand. If anyone pulls on any thread, at any time, it links them to another in the room. That doesn’t mean that they agree with the other person on everything, nor does it mean they are exactly alike; but it means they are linked homogeneously in a cell.

Rather than isolating races or groups of people, we should focus on the necessity of the church becoming a *heterogeneous body made up of homogenous cells*.⁴⁴ That means as churches grow beyond a single-cell church to become a multi-cell church which is a middle-sized church

with several cells. Hence, a growing church allows for diversity in a local congregation because people will relate to one another in the cell or primary group where they are located. Then as the multi-cell church continues to grow, it becomes a multi-congregational church, with a multitude of congregations, each one different from one another, but linked by the overriding purpose of the larger church.

What does this mean? A one million-person church will be diverse in ethnic groups, diverse in class differences, diverse in occupations, and diverse styles of life. It will be a heterogeneous body made up of smaller homogeneous cells.

The one million-person church will emphasize numbers and grow larger, but there are unseen and unintended consequences—biblical consequences—churches will resemble the Great Commission in color, language, and ethnic makeup. While the house church usually resembled one kind of people, a multi-congregational church was made of many homogeneous cells, each one diverse from the other; all worshipping as one heterogeneous body.

WHY NOT A MILLION?

The work of God is exciting because it's not about our desires, it's pleasing the One who commanded us to "go into all the world and make disciples of all ethnic group" (Matt. 28:19). The work of God is never boring, it's refreshingly challenging because Jesus promised, "You shall do greater works than I do, because I go to the Father" (John 14:12, *ELT*).

The golden age of Church Growth was both exciting and refreshingly challenging because we were doing something not done before. We were thinking outside the box. We were attempting to build churches larger in size than previous ages. We were attempting to apply the laws we discovered, i.e., in God's Word and in His world.

We dare to think of a church running 10,000 in attendance, then we dream of 100,000 in attendance, and ultimately a congregation of 750,000 believers. We dared to dream of mega churches reaching mega world-class cities within the 1040 window.

But we were not just thinking of numbers alone; we dared to think of a church of contemporary people, reaching contemporary people right in our own neighborhood. We dared to think of a church where we could express our unique spiritual gifts in our own spiritual community. We dared to think of our transformation into the image of Christ.

Now let's keep the dream alive. Since one church reached 750,000, why not dream of a church of one million people? Why not dream of using the Internet for reaching, winning and bonding people to Jesus Christ who are half-a-world away. Why not dream of many church groups touching over a million people each? Why not dream of connecting to them by an i-Pad or the cell phone?

When we read of millions upon millions of worshippers surrounding the throne in heaven, all worshipping God, why can't a church on earth be a prequel to heaven?

And the 144,000 sang a new song with these words:

“You are worthy to take the scroll and break its seals and open it.
For you were slaughtered, and your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe
and language and people and nation.
And you have caused them to become a Kingdom of priests for our God.
And they will reign on the earth.”

Then I looked again, and I heard the voices of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and of the living beings and the elders. And they sang in a mighty chorus:

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered— to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing.”

And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They sang:

“Blessing and honor and glory and power belong to the one sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever” (Rev. 5:9-13, *NLT*).

NOTES

¹ Elmer L. Towns and Douglas Porter, *The Ten Greatest Revivals Ever* (Grand Rapids, MI: Servant Publications/Vine Books, 2000).

² See “Chapter 2: The Church Growth Movement,” *Church Education Trust*; available from <http://www.churcheducationtrust.com/index.html?id=86> (accessed July 27, 2011).

³ Adventis

⁴ See “Background Data for Mission,” *Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church*; available from <http://new.gbglm-umc.org/about/us/ecg/research/backgrounddataformission/index.cfm?i=4702> (accessed June 7, 2011). J. Waskom Pickett went to India as a missionary in 1910 at age 20, having already completed college. He served there the rest of his career . . . He was well acquainted with Ghandi and was regarded as a confidant to the first president of India after the British pulled out, Nehru. He was brilliant, hard-working, and dedicated and served even the lowliest of the Caste system there. In fact he had a special emphasis with the least of them. He was consecrated Bishop in 1935. He would leave India for “retirement” in the US after 46 years of service in the land he came to call home. One of his landmark accomplishments in India was a massive social research study, the first of its kind outside the USA. This led to his publishing of *Christian Mass Movements in India*.

⁵ Donald A. McGavran, *Bridges of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955).

⁶ J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Measuring the Church Growth Movement: How Biblical is It?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), material cited in Elmer L. Towns, *A Practical Encyclopedia: Evangelism and Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995), 77.

⁷ Elmer L. Towns, gen. ed. *A Practical Encyclopedia: Evangelism and Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996), 77. Executive editorial committee included: Dr. Robert Coleman, Dr. Lewis Drummond, Dr. Gary Greig, Dr. Kent Hunter, Dr. Charles Kelley, Dr. Gary McIntosh, Dr. Paige Patterson, Dr. Thom S. Rainer, Dr. Alvin L. Reid, Dr. John Vaughan, Dr. C. Peter Wagner.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

⁹ Elmer L. Towns, *The Laws of Sunday School Growth*, National Sunday School Association, Chicago, IL, 1960.

¹⁰ _____, *Ten Largest Sunday Schools* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1969).

¹¹ _____, *Ten Sunday Schools That Dared to Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1969), 22.

¹² During the dates 1969-1972, I traveled to speak in 84 of the 100 largest churches listed in *Christian Life* magazine. Also I spoke in numerous ministerial associations of large cities on the topic, “The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and How You Can Build a Great Growing Sunday School.”

¹³ These four books on Church Growth were: *A Church Aflame* (with Jerry Falwell), Nashville, TN: Impact Books, 1971), the story of the explosive growth of Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, VA; *America's Fastest Growing Churches* (Nashville, TN: Impact Books, 1972), an analysis of ten churches across America that were growing; *Capturing Your Town for Christ* (with Jerry Falwell), Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming-Revell, 1973), a book that explained with a passion and heart of evangelism at Thomas Road Baptist Church; *World's Largest Sunday School* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc. 1974), an analysis of the growth of First Baptist Church, Hammond, IN, that made it the largest church in the United States.

¹⁴ Towns, gen. ed. *A Practical Encyclopedia: Evangelism and Church Growth*, 77.

¹⁵ LAM (Latin American Mission), “History of the Latin American Mission,” by W. Dayton Roberts and Paul E. Pretiz (Prepared in 1970, updated in 1985, 1994, 1995 and in 2000 by Kenneth D. MacHarg; available from <http://www.lam.org/about/history/> (accessed June 7, 2011).

¹⁶ C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1987), 141.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁸ C. Peter Wagner, *Our Kind of People* (Louisville, KY: J. Knox Press, 1979). This research became the foundation study for the homogeneous unit or reaching people through natural relationships.

¹⁹ Steven Richard (Sam) Towns, “Elmer L. Towns: A Biographical and Chronological Presentation of His Writings” (Doctor of Ministry, Liberty University, 1988) available from http://www.elmertowns.com/bio/Dr._Sam_Towns_Dis--locked.PDF (accessed June 7, 2011).

²⁰ Quote by Jerry Falwell, *Saturation Evangelism: Reaching every available person through every available means*; available from <http://www.liberty.edu/academics/religion/seminary/index.cfm?PID=16985> (accessed June 7, 2011).

²¹ A multitude of local churches began using media (television and radio) to evangelize the masses. Among the early nationwide leaders were Jerry Falwell, Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, VA; Rex Humbard, Cathedral of Tomorrow, Akron, OH; Robert Schuller, Crystal Cathedral, Garden Grove, CA. Beyond these were hundreds of churches that did not televise their ministry through local outlets.

²² Ed Stetzer, “The Evolution of Church Growth, Church Health, and the Missional Church: An Overview of the Church Growth Movement from, and back to, its Missional Roots,” available from <http://www.edstetzer.com/2008/11/14/ChurchGrowth.pdf> (accessed June 9, 2011).

²³ See Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Carol Stream, IL: Church Smart Resources, 1996). The eight principles mentioned are: 1) Empowering leadership; 2) Gift-oriented ministry; 3) Passionate spirituality; 4) Functional structures; 5) Inspiring worship service; 6) Holistic small groups; 7) Need-oriented evangelism; and 8) Loving relationships.

²⁴ For two or three years at the banquet C. Peter Wagner and I would sit together and count how many times Donald McGavran would say, “Matheteusate panta ta ethne.”

²⁵ Wagner evolved through several areas of emphasis: (1) Prayer, (2) The Holy Spirit, (3) Signs and wonders, and (4) The new Apostolic Movement. However in Wagner's defense, these shifts were not born out of weakness, but in his deep attempt to do a better job in carrying out the Great Commission, reaching more people for Christ, and planting more churches.

Wagner's new assignment was researching, writing, and teaching on the spiritual factors in Church Growth. His research (published in Zondervan's *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*) showed that the fastest growing segment of American Christianity was the independent charismatic churches. As he researched their growth, he found that they had a stronger and more up-front view of the person and work of the Holy Spirit than evangelicals. Wagner wrote to me, "However, I could not persuade my Church Growth colleagues to incorporate these charismatic-type insights and behavior patterns into their teaching. In fact, many regarded my research into spiritual factors as something other than pure Church Growth, which it was not. A study of the explosion of Christianity in the Global South today will find these spiritual principles at the very essence of these churches. I have a strong suspicion that the glory of the Church Growth Decades was due to the supernatural favor of God over the movement, and that this favor was eventually withdrawn because the leaders failed to hear what the Spirit was saying to the churches for the next season." (Email to Elmer Towns from C. Peter Wagner, June 16, 2011).

²⁶ Ten plus years of Wagner's books on Church Growth: *Your Church and Church Growth* (Pasadena, CA: Department of Church Growth, Fuller Evangelistic Association, 1976); *Our Kind of People* (Louisville, KY: J. Knox Press, 1979); *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1979); *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel* (Europe: MARC, 1981); *Helping Your Church Grow* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1982); *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1982); *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1983); *Basic Church Growth Research Methods* (Pasadena, CA: Charles E., Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth, 1985); *Church Growth: State of the Art* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1986).

²⁷ In 1979 John Vaughan and I identified a school of Church Growth that we labeled the *Fuller Factor*. The influence from the Fuller Factor involved (1) Fuller Theological Seminary and its school of world missions, (2) the Charles E. Fuller Evangelistic Association, the financial source for Church Growth outreach seminars and Church Growth classes conducted by Charles E. Fuller Evangelistic Association, (3) the American Church Growth Institute, with their president, Win Arn, who wrote books, conducted seminars, and was a consultant to many denominations in Church Growth matters.

²⁸ A humorous event happened the week I wrote this paper. A pastor wearing a Hawaiian shirt told me in Lynchburg, VA, that his church had "fired" him because they disagreed with his program of evangelism. I wondered if it were not his "Hawaiian shirt" in a culture of coats and ties. See Elmer Towns, *Putting an End to Worship Wars* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1997).

²⁹ Ed Stetzer.

³⁰ <http://www.purposedriven.com/en-US/AboutUs/WhatIsPD/12+PD+Characteristics.htm>

³¹ Brett McCracken, *Hipster Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010).

³² John Ellas and Flavil Yeakley, "A Review of Natural Church Development," in *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, volume 9, Spring 1999, 81-90, p 83.

³³ See W. M. Carroll, *A Theological and Methodological Analysis of Natural Church Development* (Louisville: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999).

³⁴ Ed Stetzer.

³⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press, 1954), 19-21.

³⁶ American exceptionalism states that the United States is qualitatively different and better than other nations because of its Declaration of Independence that declares its citizens were endowed by God their Creator and have a right to “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” In the early 1800s, Alexis de Tocqueville was the first to describe the United States as “exceptional” when he was trying to determine why a “rag muffin army” of citizen soldiers defeated the greatest army of England and Europe, led by the greatest generals in the world who graduated from the greatest universities in those countries, and won the War of 1776 and 1812. But that exceptionalism also applies to the church.

³⁷ Campus Crusade for Christ International; available from <http://www.ccci.org/about-us/index.htm> (accessed May 17, 2011).

³⁸ “Korea ’73 Billy Graham Crusade,” *Far-Outliers*, from *Born Again: Evangelicalism in Korea*, by Timothy S. Lee (U. Hawai’i Press, 2010), 94-95; available from <http://faroutliers.blogspot.com/2010/01/korea-billygraham-crusade.html> (accessed May 17, 2011).

³⁹ “Paul Crouch,” *Wikipedia*; available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Crouch (accessed May 17, 2011).

⁴⁰ “D. James Kennedy, Ph.D.,” *Coral Ridge Ministries*; available from <http://www.coralridge.org/partnercentral/about-djk.aspx> (accessed May 17, 2011).

⁴¹ John Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, 2nd edition (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

⁴² “INJOY,” available from <http://www.injoy.com/about/history/> (accessed May 17, 2011).

⁴³ Towns, gen. ed. *A Practical Encyclopedia: Evangelism and Church Growth*, 44.

⁴⁴ The average American church has 87 people and is a homogeneous unit made up of people who are like one another. As a result, approximately 89 percent of all American churches are a single-cell church, made up of less than 100 people, i.e., they tend to be exclusive of diversity and inclusiveness.

Chapter 8

A MULTI-GIFTED LEADER IS NECESSARY TO BUILD A ONE MILLION-PERSON CHURCH

By
Elmer Towns

This chapter will help you see the natural gifts that are evident in leaders throughout history (both secular and Christian leaders) so that you can measure yourself with those who have been labeled a charismatic personality.

A study of church history usually focuses on the great leaders who did exploits for God. They won the multitudes to Christ, built great works, and accomplished the supernatural. We study them because they changed the face of Christianity for the better. We study Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley and Charles Spurgeon. We usually examine what they did for God without looking at the nature of their extraordinary leadership and how they accomplished their work.

This chapter will examine the charismatic personality as it evolves into charismatic leadership. Then we'll try to decide what is there about these principles of leadership that will help build a one million-person church.

Martin Luther King, Jr. preached the "dream" sermon in Washington, D.C. in 1963 to over 1,000,000 people (not a church, but a one-time rally). He had a dream that one day a little black boy and little white boy could play together harmoniously in the South.

"I have a dream today . . . one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers."
Martin Luther King, Jr. ¹

Many of the 1,000,000 people in the crowd chanted “AMEN.” Some yelled “HALLELUJAH.” But they did more than shout “AMEN” and “HALLELUJAH,” they put feet to their faith.

King’s vision of racial equality gripped most of those who heard him. They believed that in their lifetime they would experience freedom; as a matter of fact their watch words were “FREEDOM NOW!”

The faith of King transferred to many marchers in many cities throughout America. When the authorities turned the dogs on them—they kept marching. When the authorities turned the fire hoses on them—they kept marching. When clubbed by deputy sheriffs—they marched on. Why? Because they believed the dream sermon of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The faith of their leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., became theirs and America was forever changed. While many believe King’s faith was naturalistic-faith, not New Testament faith; nevertheless, it illustrates the ingredients necessary to build a one million-person church.

FAITH–CONFIDENCE WAS TRANSFERRED

Half-way around the world another group of people had the same taste for freedom. Mahatma Gandhi wanted to free the nation of India from British domination and control. He felt India ought to be run by Indians, for Indians, on their own cultural terms, not British terms. But how does a man without political power bring the largest ruling empire in the world to its knees? Britain sold salt to them for almost all of their food, but Gandhi inspired millions to stop buying salt; then he led a symbolic march of hundreds of thousands to the sea from which salt comes. But it was far more than a symbolic march, the masses believed their march would make a difference; so they marched in the faith of Gandhi which became their faith. Then the faith of marchers became the faith of those who didn’t march, and in *faith-identification* the masses stopped using the British salt.

Next, Gandhi targeted British cloth, so Gandhi weaved cloth at a crude loom and inspired millions to follow his example. Next, Gandhi targeted British clothing products. So Gandhi began sewing on a crude sewing machine. There was Gandhi sewing his own clothes, so again millions followed his example.

In non-violent passive resistance, millions and millions shared the dream of Gandhi. It was more than Gandhi's faith that became their confidence. The multitudes followed Gandhi because they knew they were making progress, and they knew eventually they would drive the strongest empire in history out of their nation. What can we learn from Gandhi to build a one million-person church?

WHY SOME LEADERS BECOME GREATER THAN OTHERS

Some pastors seem to have an "extra power," so that the masses are moved by their sermons; their requests are unquestionably obeyed by followers, people seem to empty their pocketbooks into the offering plate, and sinners almost run down the aisle at their invitation.

These few unique pastors go forth and preach the gospel, as most pastors, yet their results are startling. They turn communities upside-down, and some even capture whole cities for God. They revive dead churches, restore broken homes, and see alcoholics released from bondage under their ministry. Their results are much greater than the average pastor. They begin their ministry with a charismatic personality or charismatic leadership.²

"Charismatic leadership" is the theme of this chapter. I am convinced a pastor will not become a great leader by reading this analysis; but he will receive some insight into what motivates these pastors.

Charisma comes from the word *charis*, "a gift of grace." The word charisma usually refers to gifted individuals. A study of doctoral dissertations on the topic indicate that leadership charisma is usually found in political, military, and religious circles. Some refer to charisma as "a

personality cult.” Freud referred to men who apparently had charisma as having a “messiah complex.” A popular magazine article referred to the charisma of John Kennedy as sex appeal. These generalizations attempting to reduce charismatic leadership to such simple formulas cannot be accepted.³

Max Weber, the German sociologist, was the first to define the term charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities which are regarded as of divine origin or exemplary.”⁴ This definition describes the personality of a leader but does not include the results of his ministry.

When examining leadership, Weber suggests three broad categories by which society is governed and to which an ultimate appeal of authority is made by the leader when leading his group. (1) Traditional: leadership based on rigid societal forms of antiquity. The monarchy or rule by a tribal chief falls under this category. A person (usually a king) becomes a leader because he was born into the office or the process of history evolves him into that capacity. (2) Legal-rational: leadership based on adherence to laws established by democratic process. A leader depends on being elected to the position for his authority. (3) Charismatic: leadership based on personal magnetism of one man. This area is also termed revolutionary leadership, because an individual leader usually is elevated to his office because of social needs by the masses; those needs are expressed by the populace or perceived by the leader. Weber felt charisma had been too dominant in the past to ignore it as a type of government. Most new revolutionary governments are established upon charisma but ultimately pass to legal-rational and eventually to traditional.⁵ What is it about this type of leadership that is needed to build a world-wide church ministry?

Charismatic leadership in this chapter has nothing to do with the charismatic gifts in Pentecostal-type churches. Some Pentecostal pastors may have charismatic leadership, but the basis of his success is not speaking in tongues, healings, etc. The reason the two may be confused is because of similarity of the term *charisma* (root meaning, “gift of grace”). The extensive use of the term charismatic leadership by sociologists should have eliminated confusion, but it has not.

The following outline will analyze *charisma*.⁶ (1) Charismatic leadership arises during unstable social milieu. (2) The charismatic leader devises a special formula for deliverance. (3) The charismatic leader has a basis on which to guarantee success. (4) The degree of charismatic leadership is measured by the allegiance of the followers. (5) Transcendental/divine-like qualities are attributed to or claimed by the charismatic leader.⁷

CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP ARISES DURING UNSTABLE TIMES

Two of the main characteristics of charismatic leadership are (1) an awareness of the dilemma of the populace and (2) a determination to do something about it. These two qualities alone do not make a man a charismatic leader, but they are necessary ingredients.

Max Weber indicates there must be a crisis, turmoil and psychic strain where people begin looking for a political messiah. He feels that pressurized social conditions alone do not necessarily produce charismatic leaders; times of stress only afford opportunities for the charismatic leader to become visible.⁸

The successful charismatic pastor stands against the established church society of tradition and ritualism. He sees a dead church as a tool in Satan’s hand; therefore, he may attack the traditional churches and maintain his church is correct because it is founded on the Bible. He attacks hypocrisy, just as the Old Testament prophet preaches against sin. He attacks the evils in government, the secularization of public schools and the permissive society.

Richard Fagen writes in the *Western Political Quarterly* concerning the charismatic authority of Fidel Castro, stating that one base of Castro's success was the unstable times in Cuba, which he either created or took advantage of.⁹ This unstable condition is reflective of the French Revolution that gave rise to Napoleon or a similar panic in England that led to the collapse of Prime Minister Chamberlain in 1939, propelling Winston Churchill into the leadership of Parliament. Later in life, Churchill, the writer-historian, gained prestige for producing his multi-volumes of history, in which he holds the philosophy "Man makes history." Churchill projects charisma-like qualifications back on many past political and military leaders, without which, according to Churchill, the free world would have been consumed by the tide of oppression. Interestingly, Churchill who so definitely had charismatic leadership, projects it to others of bygone days . . . or did Churchill so identify with leaders of the past that when Hitler threw all of the strategy of his military machine at the almost defenseless island of England, Churchill had to act out the hero of his dreams? Churchill's grit and charismatic leadership through his speeches turned the tide against Hitler: "We will fight on the beaches, in the fields, and in the streets."

THE CHARISMATIC LEADER DEVISES A SPECIAL FORMULA FOR DELIVERANCE

When charismatic preachers offer a formula, they do more than "rant and rave in the pulpit." Since charisma demands a formula to lead people out of the dilemma, the pastor who correctly uses charisma must: (1) offer a formula to individuals to change their life; and (2) offer a formula to cause a dying or lethargic church to grow rapidly and succeed, (3) provide a "way" to turn around politics and culture, and save society. Bound up in the formula of the charismatic leader are changed lives of individuals, numerical growth in the church, financial success, continued building programs, and continual enlargement of the ministry.

THE CHARISMATIC LEADER HAS A BASIS ON WHICH TO GUARANTEE SUCCESS

The degree of success of his leadership is measured by the allegiance of his followers. Usually, past successes of the leader become the basis on which the people believe he can produce results in the future. The young pastor who can win one alcoholic to Christ is assured of a place of “specialness” in the eyes of his congregation. When he personally leads several “down-and-outs” to Christ, the congregation is willing to give him greater allegiance. He becomes greater than the average preacher in the eyes of his people. A young pastor may attack city council and defeat a liquor ordinance. Since he has shown the boys at city hall, the average man will follow his direction. They know he can get results, so when he asks for tithes and offerings, the people are not reluctant to give.

Carl Friendrich, in his study of charisma, *Journal of Politics*, indicates that there are usually four appeals to authority by the charismatic leader: (1) appeal to absolutes, (2) appeal to tradition, (3) appeal to experts, and (4) appeal to the will of governed.¹⁰ The fundamentalist preacher first appeals to the absolutes of the Word of God. In the early days, Billy Graham often repeated his appeal to authority, “The Bible says . . .”

The Madison Avenue public relations executive cannot create a charismatic leader. Advertising cannot make a great leader, although some have tried it. Publicity may enhance leadership of the traditional pastor or can be used by the charismatic leader once he has gained his following, but the charismatic leader must have a previous basis for his leadership before a public relations man polishes his image.

THE DEGREE OF CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP IS MEASURED BY THE ALLEGIANCE OF THE FOLLOWERS

The charismatic leader is socially validated by his followers and so evaluated for success by the intensity of the personal devotion they give him. The charismatic leader needs to

communicate to his followers a sense of continuity between himself and his mission. Weber says there is no universal gift of charisma, but it is identified with a culture. The charismatic leader can only influence one society or culture to the extent that he shares common histories or value systems. Hence, the minister who grew up in a housing project or on the wrong side of the tracks can be a great leader of the poor.

Robert Tucker suggests another reason why charismatic leaders are successful: the populace response is not necessarily absolute obedience toward their leader, but simply that by virtue of extraordinary qualities, he exercises a kind of domination over the followers. Tucker also suggests, “The personal characteristics of the leader are promoted and copied by a large segment of the group.”¹¹ Hitler, Mussolini and Napoleon had charismatic leadership and their insight into problems supported their mystical leadership. Even though their insight proved wrong, the populace believed them for a while. Bierstadt goes on to say, “Charismatic leadership depends on belief by the people that the person designated is fully able to receive destiny in a way that no ordinary man can fathom.”¹² Becker indicates that the followers of the charismatic leader realize that for society to remain integrated (orientated towards acceptance) one functional prerequisite was the continuance of the past inheritance and the central value system. The charismatic leader promised that, therefore, the people needed him.¹³

TRANSCENDENTAL/DIVINE-LIKE QUALITIES ARE ATTRIBUTED TO/CLAIMED BY THE CHARISMATIC LEADER

Many charismatic leaders possess traits that would distinguish them from ordinary leaders. Two facts are prominent from the sociology literatures: (1) Some charismatic leaders claim divine qualities (this is perhaps a pseudo-charismatic leader), while others (2) have divine-like characteristics thrust upon them by the followers.

CHARISMATIC PERSONALITY

Weber wrote, “Charisma can only be awakened and tested: it cannot be learned.”¹⁴ He went on to summarize that when leadership is channeled through routine strategy, its charismatic character is altered. Leadership is no longer dependent under the personality of the leader, but upon the forms of the newly established institution. The charismatic pastor is concerned with the function of a church, not its forms.

Ann and Dorothy Willner were the only authors brave enough to suggest a personality trait list of charismatic leaders.¹⁵ They have suggested the following list: (1) A high level of energy or extra-ordinary vitality.—The charismatic leader can give long campaigning hours or can exist on little sleep while keeping a heavy schedule, such as when Winston Churchill was prime minister of England in the Second World War. (2) Unusual presence of mind under conditions of stress and challenge.—The charismatic leader has the ability to think on his feet. This gives him the “edge” on both his followers and those who disagree. He usually has a wide vocabulary and can use it appropriately. (3) The charismatic leader is strong-willed and firm in decision-making processes.— His resoluteness is a source of strength to his followers. He usually appears unmoved, stubborn, and, once he has made a decision, will not change from his point of view. Sometimes, this quick ability to make decisions is called naiveté. He is accused of refusing to analyze the issues. His stubbornness gains admiration from his followers, because he will not buckle. Also, his stubbornness might grow out of naiveté with a simplistic view to politics either in Washington or in denominational headquarters. (4) The charismatic leader has unusual mental attainment.—The Willners believe the charismatic leader does not always have high intellect, but he usually has the ability to seize upon information from many sources and by an excellent memory give the impression of being widely read, hence knowledgeable.¹⁶ The charismatic leader has a flair for originality and a capacity for innovation in his own behavior.—Creativity

may be reflected in his speech, ideas, even to the extent of his being a phrase-maker. Catchy slogans will gain attention and keep interest in a sermon. Creativity may be expressed by his unique solution to the unstable social problems of the masses. Or creativity may be a new technique he uses to attract more people to Sunday School. (6) The charismatic leader usually has a lack of understanding of economic or financial matters.—He may be naive in offering simple financial solutions to complex problems. Also, the Willners suggest possibly an indifference or impracticability with respect to personal financial affairs. (7) Charisma has the ability to elicit an extraordinary degree of devotion and self-sacrifice from women.—It is noted that two women made this observation, and perhaps saw this most in churches where churchmen depend upon women for a following. (8) Charismatic leaders have extraordinary eyes which are fierce and hypnotic in effect.—When Billy Graham first preached in Haringay Arena, London, England, he was accused by the press of coaxing people forward through his hypnotic, piercing eyes.

PROBLEMS OF CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

1. *The danger of authoritarian leadership.*—Since the charismatic pastor tends to consolidate power around himself, the members must look to him for guidance. Some large churches are built on the personality of the pastor, while others are built on his leadership. When the pastor realizes he is an under-shepherd, receiving his authority from the Word of God, he gives an authoritative leadership to his church.

2. *Charismatic leadership may produce quantity not quality.*—Charismatic leadership may bring about superficial Christians because these pastors tend to build loyalty to themselves, rather than to Christ. Charismatic leadership tends toward centralized hierarchy, hence it may manipulate individuals. The church should be built on a solid foundation of doctrine and knowledge of the Word of God. A church should be based on quality, where each layman, using his abilities given to him by God, ministers in evangelism and edification.

3. *Charismatic leadership usually attracts the disenfranchised fringe area of society.*—David Moberg in *The Church As a Social Institution* argues that factors of social migration, social disorientation, social change, conflict, and socio-economic disenfranchisement contributes to the rise of new religious bodies, especially through charismatic leadership.¹⁷ These factors could certainly be labeled social distress, and any church built upon these factors alone would be the result of pseudo charismatic leadership, certainly not New Testament charisma.

4. *Members are only personal disciples of the charismatic leader.*—Max Weber in *The Theory of Social and, Economic Organization*¹⁸ describes how the charismatic leader organizes his staff. Subordinates cannot occupy leadership positions in the traditional sense of organized government. By this, Weber meant a subordinate is traditionally chosen for his ability or past competency. The staff member of the charismatic leader is usually chosen on his personal devotion to the leader. Staff members are judged by their enthusiasm for the cause, and personal loyalty to the leader, or both.

WRAP-UP

On the basis of sociological research and a study of large churches, it has been determined that the principles of charismatic leadership can contribute to the rapid growth of a local church. Probably the most fertile soil for rapid growth would be the marginal and mobile groups of our society. The working class would seem more susceptible to the successful strong leader than the middle or upper class.

The type of preaching that would appeal to the masses is a theology of hope in the future and expectation of the present intervening of the power of God. The pastor should have simple faith in God, a strong will to carry out the dictates of God, and yet be a loving, kind leader. He must be financially capable of managing large amounts of money and of inspiring people to

instant action. The pastor must have evidence of a special calling of God upon his life to the ministry, qualifying him to preach the gospel.

The charismatic personality could build a one million-person church, but must be able to communicate his passion and dream through technological tools. He must be aware of all modern methods of reaching people, and be effective in using them.

But it will take more than the power of personality if the pastor will build a true New Testament church of one million persons. He must be the type of Christian he challenges others to become. He must be “God’s man.”

NOTES

¹ See the *I Have a Dream Speech*, U. S. Constitution Online, <<http://www.usconstitution.net/dream.html>,> (accessed 17 September 2008).

² The term *charisma* does not refer to the Pentecostal manifestation of tongues, miracles or other phenomena surrounding the alleged “second blessing.” The term is used by sociologists to designate personal magnetism used by leaders to accomplish a predetermined goal in their organization or movement.

³ Elmer L. Towns, *America’s Fastest Growing Churches* (Nashville, TN: Impact Books, 1972), 194.

⁴ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. by A. M. Henderson and ed. by Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 358.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶ James Davis, “Charisma in the 1952 Campaign,” *American Political Science Review*, XLVIII, (December, 1954), 1085. Davis argues that the social conditions make a political-charismatic leader. He set forth five postulates that determine charisma: (1) Appealing leaders, (2) Despondent followers, (3) Weakness of inhibiting political tradition and institutions that hinder the superman-politician, (4) A degree of political instability (so people will turn to the leader rather than elsewhere for solutions), and (5) Existence of a crisis. These criteria are found in the pastors with charismatic leadership.

⁷ Elmer Towns, *America’s Fastest Growing Churches*, 196-205. This outline is expanded in this book; see chapter 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁹ Richard Fagen, “Charismatic Authority and the Leadership of Fidel Castro,” *Western Political Quarterly*, XVIII, (January, 1965), 275. Fagen made a firsthand study of the Cuban Revolution under Fidel Castro,

examining five hypotheses concerning charismatic leadership: (1) The charismatic leader is always the creation of his followers, (2) There are no universal charismatics, (3) The leader regards himself as elected from above to fulfill a mission, (4) The emergent leader is anti-bureaucratic, and (5) Charismatic authority is unstable in nature. Fagen found all five of these principles were true in Castro's leadership.

¹⁰ Carl Friedrich, "Political Leadership and the Problem of Charismatic Power," *Journal of Politics*, XXIII, (February, 1961), 26.

¹¹ Robert Tucker, "The Theory of Charismatic Leadership," *Daedalus*, XCVIII, No. 3, (Summer, 1968), 747. Tucker advances the "personality cult" concept of charismatic leadership. In this book this is referred to as the pseudo-charismatic leader.

¹² Robert Bierstadt, *Modern Social Sciences* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 269-70.

¹³ Howard Becker, *Modern Sociological Theory* (New York: Dryden Press, 1959), 20ff.

¹⁴ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 367.

¹⁵ Ann and Dorothy Willner, "The Rise and Role of Charismatic Leaders," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, No. 358, (March, 1965), 61-69.

¹⁶ Charles Wegener, "Lord Morgan or Churchill: Mastery Over Men," *Ethics*, LXXVII, (January, 1967), 148-151. Most people consider Churchill a brilliant person, yet Wegener states, "Churchill was a very intuitive and creative individual with a practical bent. He possessed a burning desire for personal distinction. He was poorly educated, not well read, of unstable temperament, but had an indomitable will."

¹⁷ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Chapter 9

CONSIDERING ARGUMENTS AGAINST CHURCH ONLINE

By
Todd Mullins

The readers will be exposed to the arguments, “Does a virtual church fulfill the New Testament criteria of church?” They will see that the biblical descriptions of a church allow for an Online Church of one million persons.

A million people linked to a common event or united for a common cause always makes history. An estimated million people gather in Times Square in New York City every New Year’s Eve to watch the ball drop, a tradition that ushers in the New Year in the Eastern Time Zone for a watching world. A million people around the world died from exposure to radiation released from the 1986 nuclear disaster at the Chernobyl reactor in Ukraine. A million people swarmed the streets of London to celebrate the royal wedding of Prince William to Kate Middleton. A million people gathered at Kennedy Space Center to see the final liftoff of the final space shuttle, Atlantis.

Can you imagine what kind of history a church with a million members could make? There would be a million people collectively worshipping God together. The glory of such mass outpouring of honor and magnification of our great God would be overwhelmingly awesome and powerful to behold. God has always done mighty things when His people are united.

Consider Pentecost . . . Now imagine for a moment what it would be like if a million-member church was focused and united in worship together!

There would be a million people sharing the truth of the Gospel with a million of their friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Can you begin to imagine the impact of such concentrated

evangelical efforts? A revival of unparalleled proportions could take place! God wants to do the same in the church today.

There would be a million people serving God by caring for the sick and needy people around them. Drug and rehab centers could be emptied. Children bouncing from foster home to foster home would find permanent, godly homes. Social work could be reduced dramatically because the church would take up the cause of loving and caring for people at their point of need.

There would be a million people growing in their relationship with God and with one another. Imagine how our marriages and families would change if people truly knew God and His design for relationships. The church could literally transform cultural and societal models of the modern family. Healthy relationships would be the norm, not the exception. If a million people share the same family values, Hollywood would feel tremendous pressure to alter the underlying messages their agenda currently emits. Social messages of tolerance, sexual liberty, and relativism would be replaced with godlier messages of conviction, sexual purity, and truth. A million people focused on cultural change could have tremendous impact together.

God always does remarkable things when His people are bonded together in spirit and in truth. A million people united for the cause of Christ could do countless unbelievable things for the kingdom of God. The possibilities are really endless and very exciting to consider.

We believe strongly in the potential of a church with a million members; but we believe it will be an online church, not a traditional brick and mortar church. You read that right – an online church. Some of you are asking yourself, “What is an *online church*? How does it work? How is it really a church if it’s an in a virtual environment, void of buildings and people sitting side-by-side passing the offering plate?”

Let us start by acknowledging that we understand your hesitations and your questions. We’ve even wrestled with them personally, and we understand that the issue of Church Online is

hotly contested and debated among pastors and church leaders. Many cannot subscribe to its legitimacy, citing too many inconsistencies with the model they are used to or believe is biblically representative of God's intention for the Church.

This is where we should start then. Let's take a look at what the Bible does say about the Church – His bride. Let's evaluate what the local church should and could look like. Let's tackle some of the tough questions of how an online church would be able to adequately function when it comes to performing the sacraments and creating an environment where believers can know God, share in the mission of Christ, use their gifts to serve the kingdom, and care for one another.

DEFINING "CHURCH" Jesus says in Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). When Christ made this statement there were no church buildings or chapels. Even as the early church began in the book of Acts, much of the assembling took place in homes¹ In Romans 16:5, a "house church" is called a church, 1 Corinthians 16:19 ("Aquila and Priscilla, together with the church in their house"). The church in an entire city is also called a "church" (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; and 1 Thess. 1:1). The church in a region is referred to as a "church" in Acts 9:31 Finally, the church throughout the entire world can be referred to as "the church" (Eph. 5:25 and 1 Cor. 12:28).²

As a result of the Bible's mention and definition of the term "church," most theologians would argue that a formal building is not needed for the church to be present or for people to gather together in community. Theologian Wayne Grudem clarifies this thought: "In the New Testament the word 'church' maybe applied to a group of believers at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home all the way to the group of all true believers in the universal church."³ The church is not a building; instead it is the people who gather together.

Throughout the New Testament, the Greek word that is translated into our English word for church is *ekklesia*. The Apostle Paul uses this word when addressing many of the new

churches throughout his epistles. True to other biblical expressions, the word *ekklesia* never refers to a building or structure, but to the gathering of the people. In fact, the word is better translated as “gathering” or “assembly” meeting in a public place. Outside the Bible, the term was used in Greek society to refer to a group of the citizens gathering for a civil interest.⁴

Since a building is not required, the issue of gathering online seems viable. People can interact, talk together, pray with one another, and read Scripture. When two or three, or even two or three thousand gather together online in the name of Christ, He is there among them. Most followers of Christ who have prayed with someone over the phone understand this concept. Even though two people may be separated by continents, when they pray in the name of Jesus Christ they are inviting the presence of Christ into that prayer. They believe that the Spirit of God is with them at that moment even though they are not gathered in the same building or location.

The Apostle Paul addresses the preeminence of Christ is over all things, specifically over the church. “He (Christ) is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence” (Colossians 1:18, *NKJV*). In this passage, the Greek term *ekklesia* means the people gathered together. The church is a gathering of people under the Lordship of Christ. They hold their common citizenship in heaven (Philippians 3:20) and are a part of the same community. Accurately then, the Biblical use of the word “church” refers to the people that make up the congregation, irrelevant to where or how that congregation may gather.

Theologian and author, Millard J. Erickson, defines the church as “the whole body of those who through Christ’s death have been savingly [*sic*] reconciled to God and have received new life. It includes all such persons, whether in heaven or on earth. While universal in nature, it finds expression in local groupings of believers that display the same qualities as does the body of

Christ as a whole.”⁵ While this definition is limited, it does stress the church is made up of God’s people gathering together, and the emphasis of its definition is on membership in the body of Christ. Therefore, there are no limits placed by location where the people gather.

THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

Further Biblical exploration of the definition of the church relates to its purposes. Rick Warren’s book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, has served as a guiding light for many church planters and pastors. Warren argues that any biblical church must be built on the five purposes of worship, ministry, mission, discipleship, and fellowship. Warren attests that these five purposes come from the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) and the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40) and that all Scriptural teaching regarding the church of Jesus Christ can be categorized in one of those five purposes.⁶ Assuming Warren to be correct, the advocate of Church Online simply needs to address these five purposes and define how they are fulfilled in order to prove the validity of Online Church.

I surveyed some pastors about their beliefs about the Online Church. When asked whether they believed the five purposes could take place effectively in the Online Church, one pastor surveyed replied, “I would say that all five purposes take place on some level, but I’m skeptical that they would ever reach their fullest potential through an exclusive online experience. There’s development that takes place through human physical and tangible interaction that I’m not sure you’d fully receive online...” Another pastor wrote, “People can engage in all of these purposes, which demand action to be fully expressed. A person online can grow as a follower and disciple others, they can fellowship with others, they can find ways to ‘serve’ somebody through words of encouragement, giving, etc. online, they can share the Good News, worship the Lord effectively online.” However, he does agree that exacting one’s expression of the purposes solely online is limiting. “For me, it’s not as much a matter of effectiveness as it is the extent to which they can

live out these purposes. If a person is purposefully living out these marks of the Church Online, then they are probably finding ways to express this in ‘real-time, real life’ ways too. However, I believe a person will miss the majority of what the Lord has for them (and others) if their outworking of the purposes is exercised exclusively online.”⁷

While these pastors’ concerns are worthy of consideration, if the proper functioning of the five purposes in the Online Church is agreed to be sufficient evidence of its validity, we must scrutinize whether they can actually take place effectively.

Worship is easily engaged in the Online Church experience through singing, prayers, and Scripture reading. Worshipers are able to sing, pray, and read the Scriptures just as if they were physically present in the building with other congregants.⁸

Some who are apprehensive about comparing participation in a live, physical service experience with a virtual one would suggest that worship online is just a shallow representation of the real thing. One of the pastors I surveyed explains this sentiment of opposition: “While you can broadcast a worship experience, the actual experience is not the same as it would be if you were physically in the room where the service was taking place.” In addition, author Walter Wilson says, “. . .those who log on for twenty minutes do not get the benefits of church membership in the local body. Even those who attend a Sunday service by computer in real time are not joining with the church in celebration. . . they are only observing it.”⁹

Is it really not possible to celebrate in worship online? To suggest that it is mere observation implies that we cannot worship outside church walls. This is certainly not true! As followers of Jesus Christ, we can and should worship him at all times in a variety of ways. We don’t have to be sitting in a church building singing and praying with others to truly worship our God with the community of believers.

Ministry, or serving, is also available in the Online Church. My Church Online invites people to serve by hosting online small groups, mentoring new believers, or hosting the online chat and prayer rooms during the service times. Volunteers currently serve in these capacities from all around the globe. Admittedly, there are fewer opportunities for serving than in a physical location. There is no need for childcare workers, youth volunteers, ushers, or other roles needed to minister to crowds of people physically gathered in shared space.

Rather than view this as limited opportunities to serve, the online pastor should see this as an opportunity to encourage attendees to get involved in serving Christ outside the “walls” of a church by serving in the communities where they live. Many Christian organizations are desperate for Christian volunteers. The fact that people attending Online Church don’t have to help serve in a physical church building allows them to reach out and serve their community and take the love of Christ to the streets. One pastor surveyed has embraced this concept well. “There are ways to serve online and you can always serve in your community no matter where you go to church.” The idea of suggesting online congregants serve in their communities should not be a novel one! Christian service doesn’t and shouldn’t just happen inside the church walls.

Some of the pastors I surveyed lack this vision entirely. When asked whether they believed online congregants could live out the five purposes effectively, one pastor said, “I don’t think this is done really well at all except for instances of needing online prayer partners or counselors. Many of the people who ‘attend’ Online Church are not gifted in those areas and would be willing to serve, but there aren’t really areas of service available to them.”¹⁰

Another pastor said that he too felt all the purposes could be lived out online except for service. He said, “As most would agree, service to others is a MUST relative to the life-cycle of believers. We see in the gospel that Jesus was the perfect example of service to others. As Christ followers, we must all follow that example, which for the online community may be difficult to

effectively achieve. The only exception is online giving, which is a means for those attending online to support the various ministries that serve the local church.”¹¹

Unfortunately, by only considering ministry opportunities within the church, these pastors miss the significant expressions of serving outside their churches and partnering with other Christian organizations for the cause of Christ. The way believers engage their community outside the walls of the church will actually say more for Christ than what happens inside those walls.

Mission or evangelism is probably one of the easiest opportunities for Church Online. “We are the hands and feet of Jesus in our community.” As members are given resources and training through online courses and mentoring, they learn how to be e-vangelists, leveraging technology and online communities to share the love and hope of Christ. People who engage in online communities such as Facebook and Twitter and Myspace are used to opening up about their lives and the issues they are facing. And yet, opponents like author John J. Jewell say this isn’t possible.

One of the main stumbling blocks of online evangelism is the absence of relationships and community. The context of caring relationships and supportive communities is central to the process whereby the Holy Spirit can bring about the inward turning to Christ that lays the groundwork for transformation. Evangelism in a virtual world created by digital technologies may actually be the antithesis of authentic disciple making.¹²

Jewell is wrongly attributing evangelism’s purpose and possibility to man’s abilities alone. He is neglecting the power and role of the Holy Spirit in drawing men unto Himself in truth. This can happen regardless of the way in which one hears the truth. If it were not so, we would have to discredit the salvation decisions of all those who accepted Christ as a result of a Billy Graham crusade on TV or anyone who read a tract and made a decision that way. And what about the countless individuals who come forward as the result of an altar call in our churches? Are they any less “saved” because they don’t have a personal relationship with the pastor? No,

salvation is not contingent upon a relationship with the one sharing the truth; rather, it is contingent upon understanding the need for a Savior and accepting the gift of grace from God, through His Son! Therefore, one could argue easily that relationships and community are not absolutely needed to share the gospel message and help someone take a step of faith.

Christians have a great opportunity to talk openly about matters of faith online. I have heard many stories of Christians inviting their friends to join their church's online services. Through this tool, many that would never step into a physical church building are hearing the message of the gospel and being introduced to Christ. This is especially true with emerging generations. According to Barna's research, one out of every six churchgoing teenagers expects to rely increasingly on the Internet to meet their spiritual needs in the coming years.¹³ Barna goes on to say that "within the next fifteen years a majority of Americans will be completely isolated from the traditional church format."¹⁴ Barna made these comments nearly fifteen years ago! We have to take the message of truth to the Internet where people, young and old, are searching for God's relevance in their lives.

Discipleship is probably the least argued point when it comes to the validity of Church Online. The Internet has long been viewed as a resource for study and learning. Many Christian and educational institutions have established online learning opportunities. Online classes and programs are an easily accepted part of Church Online, giving members the opportunity to grow and learn at their own pace and at a time that is convenient for them. In a physical church setting, members have to attend a physical classroom at a set time to receive the instruction and teaching. Live chatting between teacher and student or posting of comments allows students to engage with the teacher and their peers to ensure that spiritual growth is taking place and to foster interaction and community.

This leaves the last purpose of the church, fellowship. Fellowship is the one topic that is most heavily debated when it comes to the argument against Church Online. The Greek word for “fellowship” is *koinonia*.” It is used throughout the New Testament to describe the relationship the early church had with one another through the bonds of Christ. It is used nineteen times in most editions of the Greek New Testament and suggests community, intimacy, and participation. The word is also directly connected to sharing in the Lord’s Supper, as this act of communion is what ties us together and makes us one.¹⁵

Koinonia is first used in Acts 2:42-47 to describe the way the early church worshiped and functioned together in unity.

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Koinonia implies a common focus and action, a joint participation with a closely connected group of people. There is a commitment not only to Christ, but also to the body of Christ, His church. The Greek word *koinonia* means to “own a share in something together,” as when two or more people share in a business opportunity or shared property. It can also mean they share in a common belief.¹⁶ Obviously when we are in a relationship with the church, we are not only sharing in our common belief of Christ, but we are also sharing together in the mission of the church to reach the world.

The Greek word *koinonos* means a partner or companion.¹⁷ *Koinonia* can even be used to refer to a marriage bond. This is a powerful connection that God intends for the church, one of intimacy and commitment. The word clearly describes a deep knowing and fellowship with one another.¹⁸ Within the church, there is to be a sharing of the joys and sorrows, where brothers and

sisters in Christ carry one another's burdens as Paul commands in Galatians 6:2, *NKJV*: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." Many ask if true fellowship and community can occur in an online environment. Can people truly care for one another and encourage each other virtually? Can people develop a sense of authentic community and fellowship in an online environment?

Some boldly assert that it is not possible to build real community online. One of the pastors I anonymously surveyed warned that "...Church Online could provide a false sense of community and not allow for strong, mature relationships to develop. Participants who attend church solely online tend to live life behind a screen in an almost false reality." Another pastor surveyed said the Online Church "encourages isolation."¹⁹ In addition, Jewell states, "People whose primary communities are Internet-based are attempting to fulfill a need for genuine community through what I call a 'virtual collective.' This virtual collective is a phantom community, a digital masquerade of real community. The virtual collective seems to fill a need for community, but in fact misses the mark."²⁰ He goes on to explain why virtual communities cannot replace Christian community. "Virtual community is community without accountability.

Virtual community does not have canons of truth. Virtual community does not have permanence. Virtual community does not have 'real presence.'"²¹

Clifford Stoll, the author of *Silicon Snake Oil*, agrees with Jewell's position. He believes online community is a fraud. He claims that "only the illusion of community is created via CMC (computer-mediated communication), that the only relationships created are 'shallow, impersonal, and often hostile.'"²²

These statements by Jewell and Stoll force us to consider whether the Online Church can forge an environment where there is accountability, truth, permanence, and a real presence among its participants. This is a vital consideration because, as Jewell puts it, "In the church, the

only real measure of the success of technology is its ability to enhance the quality of community. Community, or the quality of the life of the body of Christ, is a critical and biblically mandated foundation for ministry. If there is no unified, connected community, there is no viable body of Christ to reach the world.”²³

One of the leading opponents to the validity of Church Online is the very popular pastor, author, and theologian, John Piper. John Piper is the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota; yet his influence extends far beyond the borders of his hometown. Countless Christians follow his reformed theology and embrace his perspective on issues pertaining to the church. Of all the dissenting voices against the Church Online, none is as powerful as John Piper’s. Piper also bases most of his dissention around this issue of community and care.

Piper refers to an individual whose worship experience is only online as “sick.” He goes on to say,

I don’t think radio and Internet and television can ever replace the church of Jesus Christ. They can never replace the body of Christ gathered in a local place, where people are face to face with others and participating in singing, prayer, repentance, and confession. They can’t replace experiencing firsthand the assurances of pardon and the Word of God being preached. I think that if all of that came only through media then the church would no longer exist as God designed it to exist.²⁴

Piper believes that radio, television, and the Internet cannot entirely replace the church of Jesus Christ. However, the question for debate isn’t whether Online Church can “replace” the traditional church as we know it. The question is whether the Online Church is a valid expression or model of the church. Can care and connection genuinely take place online even if the people convening online are not in the same physical building?

Perhaps it is important to consider the true nature of spiritual community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer illustrates the difference between human and spiritual community in his book, *Life Together*.

Because Christian community is founded solely on Jesus Christ, it is a spiritual and not a human reality. In this it differs from all other communities. The scriptures call ‘spiritual’ that which is created only by the Holy Spirit. . . . The scriptures term ‘human’ that which comes from the natural urges, powers, and capacities of the human spirit.²⁵

Here Bonhoeffer reminds us that if the Holy Spirit is drawing people together in fellowship and community through their worship of Jesus Christ, it is a spiritual reality that can take place anywhere. One does not need to limit his or her spiritual community to a church building. As discussed earlier in this chapter, God does not define the church in His Word as a building! In his dogmatic approach, Piper seems to ignore the countless millions who are homebound, never able to attend a “traditional” church service in an actual building. They do not have the physical ability to participate in local church life. Their physical disabilities limit their involvement in traditional church community. More than 100 million people in the world have disabilities, making them a part of one of the largest minority groups in our society.²⁶ This group is often overlooked or forgotten. Jesus may have been referring to them in Matthew 25 when He refers to the “least of these.”

Additionally, there are millions of people who live in remote locations throughout the world where the Bible is not available in their language and where there is not a church that is preaching the Word of God.²⁷ Does this mean that their involvement in Church Online is “sick” or “unhealthy,” as Piper argues? Are they automatically disqualified as members of a church because of their inability to attend a physical church facility?

Soon after my church, Christ Fellowship, launched its Online Church campus, a woman named Linda who lives in the mountains of British Columbia began attending. She was in a very remote area where she did not have access to growing, Bible-believing churches like Christ Fellowship. Attending online helped her to connect with the church family in ways that were otherwise unavailable to her. She began chatting online with our Online Campus pastor, David, and others present and soon began serving as a life group host and a chat host. She also serves by

doing some needed administrative work during the week. Linda is an excellent example of how important the Church Online is to those without a church family in their communities. The church is able to reach people like Linda by being present in community online.

Piper continues in his attack of Church Online:

The embrace, the hug, the handshake; the ear, the eye: these are all physical things that are not intended to be replaced with glass screens or sound waves coming through a box. Christ means for there to be a body of people who are face to face with each other, loving each other, exhorting each other, helping each other, and getting face to face with each other—to each other and to him—in worship.²⁸

Here Piper argues that true community cannot take place in an online environment. He contends that care, encouragement, and exhortation can only take place as people are “face to face with each other.” He assumes that “community” is bound by geography and physical human interaction. However, as author Andrew Careaga points out, “In cyberspace, communities are most likely to develop among people with common interests or beliefs, rather than geographically.”²⁹

My church leadership has witnessed the exact opposite of Piper’s notion in our Church Online experience at Christ Fellowship. Through the use of online chat, those attending the Church Online can participate by talking with each other, encouraging each other, and even praying for one another.

Recently, a lady in our online live chat shared a personal need for prayer and wisdom for a crisis she was facing. Before David could even respond to her, others in the chat began to pray for her needs. In fact, everyone participating in the chat began to focus on encouraging her and praying for her. Later David was able to invite her to a private prayer chat where he was able to counsel her as well. By the time he was done speaking with her, she was encouraged and inspired that her online family was standing with her in this struggle.

Church Online can function in many ways like a traditional church. Just as a traditional church would receive calls regarding individual members who are going into the hospital, so does an online pastor receive calls regarding members from the Church Online family. One key difference is location. While most calls that come into a physical church campus address local needs, the congregation online is literally from around the world.

Recently, David, received a call from an individual who was diagnosed with cancer and was in a hospital in New York City. After spending time praying with the lady over the phone, he remarked that if she was locally hospitalized, he would go to visit her. Since the Church Online isn't just made up of random people watching an Internet stream, but rather a group of people caring for one another from around the world, the online pastor was able to contact a few members that live in the New York City area. He asked them to personally visit and pray with this sister in Christ. A university student up in New York took it upon herself to be the representative of Christ and Christ Fellowship and go be with the cancer patient. She went to the hospital, gave hope, inspiration, and prayed with the lady.

Virginia is an elderly homebound individual that attends Christ Fellowship online every week. She is actively involved in their small groups and prayer groups. Recently she called in to ask for assistance because her wheelchair broke and she was in need of a new one. Obviously she felt comfortable, as any church member should, to turn to her church family to help her with this need. This was one of the first times the online church at Christ Fellowship was faced with the issue of benevolence coupled with the issue of proximity and distance.

David wasn't sure how to solve this situation. After praying with her, he was determined to view the issue as if she were local. Believing it is the church's responsibility to care for their congregants in the best possible manner, David to carefully consider how he could assist in meeting Virginia's need, even if she lived far away making it difficult to help practically.

We have a woman on staff named Sarah who helps people with their medical needs and insurance claims. She has helped hundreds of families receive the medical care and attention they need and helped them save hundreds of thousands of dollars by knowing which resources to use. By simply applying her talents to this online community member's need, we were able to solve the problem. The appropriate grants and applications were completed, and Virginia had her new motorized wheelchair within two weeks. Attaining this chair was something she couldn't do on her own. Her church online cared for her and stepped up and met this important need in her life.

Community and care can happen in an online environment. It is happening through the Online Church every day as people extend the same care and kindness online as they do in person. Author Walter P. Wilson says, "In the world of Internet technology, communication is not place-specific, but person-specific. That means ministry is conducted with a person, wherever that person may be."³⁰

OPPOSITION TO CHANGE

In addition to defending that it can live out the five core purposes, Church Online must also contend with a persistent opposition to change. The church has notoriously been slow to embrace change as it relates to cultural shifts. "Unfortunately, the church's track record of responding to the threats of new media is not good. Whenever new challenges to the faith arise, the church tends to respond inappropriately. All too often, modern congregations either stick their heads in the sand, ignoring the changes sweeping through the larger culture, or they become reactionary, further alienating those whom they should be reaching."³¹

Some react adversely to online ministry because of the negative things that take place online. "Any form of technology undoubtedly influences behavior, and the Internet *does* pose dangers to our society. But the Internet is no more an implement of evil than a hammer."³² Both

the Internet and a hammer are tools that can be used for good or evil. The person, not the tool, is responsible for how the tool is used.

The church is called to spread the love and message of Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world! We cannot alienate those who still need that love and message simply because there is evil in the world. Light exposes darkness so let's let our light shine online where it is desperately needed (Ephesians 5:13).

While the presence of evil is one reason to oppose online ministry, some just simply do not want to change. Wilson also notes, "Many Christians seem to value stability and tradition over change. It's not hard to understand that, because stability is comfortable, easy and predictable. . . Change is uncomfortable, and if we have a choice, that's not the way we choose to go through life."³³ However, the ability to adapt and change our methodology to reach the lost is vital to those perishing. Rick Warren reminds us that "our message must never change, but the way we deliver that message must be constantly updated to reach each new generation."³⁴ The message will never change, but the method must because as Wilson points out, "This is a generation that does not use the Internet as a tool but as a way of life."³⁵ We must take the message of truth to them.

I have seen the impact of this perspective in my own church. We have always embraced changing methods to reach people for Christ. This attitude and perspective originates not from the youngest members but from the oldest. Dick Smith is the founding elder of the congregation.

Through his personal walk with Christ, he continues to influence this congregation of more than 20,000 at an age of 83.

Early on in the ministry of Christ Fellowship when the music began to change to reach a younger generation, Dick was the first to celebrate the decision. He did not celebrate because he personally wanted a more aggressive style of worship, but because he wanted our church to be a

place where his grandchildren and their children would want to come to encounter Christ. Dick was also the first to support taking the church online. Again, this was not for his benefit, but for the benefit of reaching more with the gospel. When the elders of the church continue to celebrate innovation and risk-taking, a congregation can reach into new territory for Christ. My church is blessed with a healthy, multi-generational expression of faith. Respect and reverence for those who have walked with Christ for decades is blended with the enthusiasm and energy of the emerging generations. This harmony creates countless opportunities for growth and innovation.

We must adapt in order to grow. We must be relevant in order to reach out. For the church to thrive and fulfill its mission, we have to learn to embrace new things that will not compromise the message. We must constantly implement the things that will enhance our mission by being relevant to those who will never cross the threshold of our buildings. “The Internet is here to stay. So, too, are the thousands of seekers who feel alienated from the traditional church and are turning elsewhere to find relevance, meaning, and spiritual connections.”³⁶ We must embrace change.

CHALLENGES FOR THE USERS

Of all the challenges against the validity of Church Online, the greatest are the challenges many participants bring upon themselves. Some use Church Online as simply a matter of convenience. They don't live in a remote part of the world or in a village without an evangelical church. They live just down the street from Christ Fellowship and simply have chosen to worship in their pajamas rather than get dressed and participate in the local church.

Although one could argue that Church Online is in reality a viable church experience, then why would this be a problem? Unfortunately, I have found that those who live close to one of our church campuses but use Church Online as a point of convenience do not become involved with the community online. Yes, they can stay in tune with the preaching and experience a

worship service. They can even submit prayer requests and pray for others in the chat room. Yet notably, most do not. They simply remain unengaged online or in person. Their haphazard attendance makes it difficult for them to function and serve within the physical church or the virtual church.

Many opponents to Church Online argue this as their main point of conflict. They believe that Church Online feeds into the consumer mentality that many have within the church today. People shop around to find the preaching they like the most or the worship that matches their preferences. Opponents argue that Church Online only exacerbates that flaw within the church. One can listen to the worship from Life Church then switch over to North Point to hear Andy Stanley preach. If they don't like what Andy is preaching about that week, they can jump to a myriad of other Online Churches without any sense of connection or community.

The bottom line of critics is that just because the Online Church has the greatest potential to build a million-member church, what inherent value does that church hold if its members are merely consumers? Numbers matter little if the masses are unhealthy and completely disconnected! The challenge remains. Can this type of intimacy and commitment be experienced online? Can Church Online provide a community where the church can live together in a deep way? Is it possible to carry the burdens of people you have only met online in a chat room?

It's true; for some, Church Online becomes a place to escape from such commitments. Not long ago David connected with a lady who lived just outside of Atlanta, Georgia. She started to become demanding. She wasn't offensive, but he could tell there was something wrong with her perspective and connection to the church at large. Atlanta has several church options and opportunities. With that in mind, David began to probe a bit into her prior church involvement and experience. With numerous good strong Christian churches around her, he discovered that she had serious issues and concerns with each one. She began using Church Online as an escape

from her personal issues regarding fellowship with others and the Bride of Christ. As soon as David discovered this, he began to counsel her regarding these issues and encouraged fellowship, healing, and wholeness in a local church. She ultimately needed to both show and experience grace.

Over the next few months David prayed with her and continued to counsel her with the Word of God. Within three months, she began attending a local church once again and met with her pastor to begin the steps to reconciliation. Transparency and counseling with the Church Online was a critical part of her journey to spiritual health and healing.

As stated, Church Online can easily become a place to hide, a place where nobody knows your name or history. These challenges, however, often lead to opportunities. Jenny, a young lady who participates in Christ Fellowship's Church Online, almost always asked for prayer. After about four weeks of praying for her regularly, she began to open up to David about her life. She worked in local gentlemen's club and was uncomfortable coming to church. She knew what she was doing professionally and the lifestyle that she was living were completely wrong. She was trying to find a way out but was entrapped with the lifestyle and the money it provided her.

David connected Jenny with his wife for further counseling. Since she lived locally, they were able to meet with her in person and invited her to a concert at church. While she was there, she met some people her age. She began to connect with them and soon began attending services regularly. Jenny prayed to receive Christ, and trusted in His grace and power to help her turn from the life she was living. Today she is walking in victory and grace and growing through weekly Bible studies in the church. Her life has been transformed by the grace and power of God. She is walking in true *koinonia*, and God used the Church Online to make this a reality in Jenny's life.

Still, not all Church Online attendees live locally or even try to reach out to anyone through chat or prayer rooms. Thousands simply observe rather than participate. *Koinonia* cannot happen through attendance or observation alone. Many who gather online feel they are fulfilling their church obligation simply by watching the service. This is similar to countless Christians who simply attend a church service at a physical location week after week. True fellowship and connection do not occur. Again, numbers matter little if those people are not truly experiencing *koinonia*.

Around the world, millions of Christians show up on Sunday morning with no understanding of true *koinonia*. There is no sense of commitment or community. There is no intimacy, only a quick handshake or greeting. They are not participating in church life as the early church did. The same misfortune can occur easily on Church Online. However, that doesn't mean Church Online is not capable of becoming a place of community and deep fellowship. If it did, we would have to shut the doors of most all churches across America. Likewise, just because there are those attending Church Online as observers only does not imply it is any less of a church experience.

We will always have people in our churches, the physical and virtual churches, who are observing. Many observe before they choose to participate. We have to provide the opportunities for community and we have to challenge them to connect, but it is the Holy Spirit who helps them see the need for it and draws them to true *koinonia*.

WRAP-UP

If the million-member church is going to be forged online, questions must be asked, and answers must be discovered. The difficulty of distributing the sacraments or performing baptisms continues to cause many churches to avoid this form of ministry. The challenge of building healthy relationships also remains problematic within much of the Christian community. Some

pastors, like Piper, have taken zealous stands against the possibility of valid community taking place online; while others have given first hand testimony to its existence and fruitfulness.

Simply because a church struggles in an area of effectiveness is no justification for not pursuing this new method of ministry. Some physical churches would admit there are areas of ministry where they fail. That does not mean they should shut their doors and quit trying. Just because they have not yet figured out how to do effective discipleship or evangelism doesn't disqualify them from being the church. If that were so, countless churches would be disqualified immediately. No, we as the church must continue to grow and develop, especially in the areas where we are weak. As we listen to the Holy Spirit and apply new techniques and methods, we will overcome our shortcomings and effectively reach and disciple people for Christ.

NOTES

- ¹ Graydon F. Snyder, *Church Life Before Constantine* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1991), 166.
- ² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 857.
- ³ Ibid., 857.
- ⁴ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 195-196.
- ⁵ Erickson, 1044.
- ⁶ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 102-103.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ The issue of communion and baptism as elements of corporate worship will be addressed later in this chapter.
- ⁹ Wilson, 23.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.

- 12 Jewell, 95.
- 13 Careaga, 34.
- 14 Ibid., 35.
- 15 *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, James Orr (ed.); available from <http://www.studydrive.org/enc/isb/view.cgi?number=T2225>, s.vv. “communion” and “fellowship,” (accessed March 3, 2011).
- 16 Thayer, 353.
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- 30 Wilson, 62.

Chapter 10

THE BEGINNING OF A CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS

By
Todd Mullins

As you read, you will be challenged with a virtual future when everyone will rely on computer technology for the necessities of life; therefore, the church must embrace the virtual church if it is to carry the gospel to everyone and into every part of the world.

In 1439, the world as it was completely changed when Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press. It took 10 years to perfect, and in 1450 the first poem rolled off that printing press. It was then that Gutenberg conceived the idea of printing and distributing the Bible. In 1455, 180 Gutenberg Bibles were printed. This invention would effectively change the world.¹ For the last five hundred years, the primary delivery system for learning and faith development has been print.² It revolutionized education, communication, literacy, and above all, the spread of the gospel. The printing press catalyzed both the Renaissance and the Reformation.

Since that time, there has never been a discovery or invention that could even come close to the changes brought about by the power of the printing press—until the Internet. Once again we find ourselves catapulted to a new level, a new level of assimilating information, communicating with others, educating ourselves, and keeping up with friendships. The Internet has affected all of humanity, from the wealthiest to the poorest, and even those with little or no access to it.³ The movement for clean water is an example of that. When a remote village gets a clean water well, it is most likely due to an Internet campaign bringing awareness to individuals willing to help. One cannot discuss the potential of Church Online without first considering the potential of the online world. In the early 1990s as the commercialization of the Internet began,

no one could have imagined the profound impact it would have on society today. What began as a means of storing and transferring information has become a tool of business, education, and relationships. Today the Internet is used to buy and sell commodities from around the world. Finances are managed, educational classes are taught, and personal moments are shared.

Today the Internet allows people to work from virtually any place in the world. The traditional office setting is becoming unnecessary and, in some cases, obsolete in many professions. As a result, people are able to live where they desire and travel to distant countries while developing careers at the same time. People are discovering new and fresh ways to expand their business opportunities in their community and around the world.

The Internet has caused the world to drastically shrink in size. People today are not only more aware of cultures and civilizations halfway around the world, but the Internet allows them to actually know and build friendships with people there. When I was growing up, it was rare to travel to distant places. The only means of accessing these worlds was through encyclopedias and textbooks. This is not so any longer. The Internet invites its users to discover exotic places and people. It allows them to visually communicate with people worlds away and encourages them to discover and expand their horizons and relationships.

As a result, the sociology of this current culture is very “one-world” minded. Rather than the national-centric world I grew up in where patriotism was second nature, children today are growing up in a world where east not only meets west, but they cohabitate and produce offspring, creating a melting pot of ideas and perceptions about the world we live in today. Connectivity among various nationalities and people groups continues to draw in the circumference of the world.

With the advanced technology of mobile devices, the access to information and people from around the globe continues to feed this “one-world” view. Now at any given moment, one

can “facetime” someone on their phone from the other side of the world, not only talking with them, but actually seeing them while they talk. Mobile phones and handheld computers can provide directions to a specific location and make dinner reservations before they arrive.⁴

The Internet plays a significant role in the area of relationship-building as well. Social networks link people from around the world in online community. One such network, Facebook, has more than 500 million users. Facebook touches one in twelve people worldwide, making it the third largest “nation” in the world. It adds approximately 700,000 new users daily.⁵ Each user shares personal information with his or her “friends” and has the ability to interact and share thoughts and ideas throughout the day. Users can also join in groups based on common interests or organizations.

Christ Fellowship uses a Facebook page that has more than 7000 users that stay connected with the church on a daily basis. Through this page, they are able to send out Scriptures for the day, ask for prayer requests, and remind their “Facebook family” of upcoming church activities.

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Of course Facebook is just one type of social networking taking place online. In addition to others, the Internet allows families separated by distance to connect through e-mail, instant messaging, and video conferencing. Grandparents can see their grandchildren taking their first steps even though they may be continents away. Soldiers in the middle of the desert can stay in touch with their families and loved ones and not have to wait for the mail carriers to bring them news from home. All this relational connection is available now because of the Internet.

What does the future of the Internet look like? How will the advances in technology offer even greater connectivity with the world and the people around us? Technology advances at such

an alarming rate. What is new and cutting edge today will be outdated within a few months. With such advancements, the future of the world online will include even greater access to information sharing and communication. Hologram imaging and even clearer video conferencing will soon shorten the distance between individuals. All of these advances will also be available to advance the mission of the church.

Church Online currently takes various shapes and expressions. As churches better leverage current technology and prepare for the advancing technology; the potential for ministry online is endless. Church Online removes the barriers of distance and time, allowing individuals to be reached and ministered to 24 hours a day. The new digital generation that is emerging needs resources and training to be e-vangelists to a growing online world.

Most church services are offered on Sunday mornings with some churches offering Saturday night services. Pastors and volunteers are available to share the message of God's hope and grace with those who are searching. Those needing prayer can find prayer partners ready to help them in their time of trouble. However, what about when the service is over and the church doors are locked? Who is available to meet and pray with someone in need at 2:00 a.m.?

Traditionally, the only means by which one can meet such needs is a phone chain. Church Online can eliminate this antiquated practice. It offers the potential for continual services and prayer rooms to be available around the clock. Currently, my church's online campus has volunteers residing in other countries that help to lead their online services that are timed for the convenience of people attending in differing time zones. With the training and deploying of additional service leaders, more and more online services could populate the Internet, allowing more people to be reached for Christ. It would be extremely possible, even likely, that one day soon the Church Online would have services taking place online 24 hours a day with people from

around the world able to pray with those gathering online in their own time zone. You can see how easy it would be to have a million-member church meeting online!

Additionally, Bible classes could be made more readily available online. Online learning institutions are filling the Internet. Even Christian universities like Liberty University are training leaders around the world using an online format in addition to traditional classrooms.⁶ This practice has afforded educational institutions the opportunity to educate the world. One never has to leave his or her home to receive a quality education. In fact, several friends and colleagues of mine have received online degrees while making great contributions to the Kingdom of God from the place where God has called them.

Churches could easily access the same programs and implement the same approach to post their discipleship courses online, allowing people to grow spiritually without having to be in a physical church building at a specific time. Currently, some of Christ Fellowship's classes are available online, but the potential to offer all their classes is in the near future. A primary goal of the church is to develop Christ-followers and discipleship is a pathway to reaching this goal. Accordingly, having classes online would certainly cultivate a sense of community and provide outlets for growth.

Church Online is also a powerful vehicle for one-on-one mentoring. Through instant messaging and video conferencing mentors can connect without having to coordinate schedules and meet in person. Online church could post classes and discussion boards where those being mentored are coached and developed on various subjects. This allows an even greater fulfillment of making disciples by allowing personal and intentional interactions with one another.

When the very first disciples were beginning to fulfill the Great Commission and go into all the world, they leveraged the infrastructure of their conquerors. At that time the Ancient

Roman Empire extended through most of Europe to Northern Africa and throughout the Middle East. Rome's approach was to convert conquered people to Roman thought and ideologies. They would impose their language and culture on nations and people, slowly changing the way they thought and lived.⁷

To maintain influence over their subjects and to accommodate the transport of their military conquest, Rome built extensive roadways throughout their domain. This network of roads not only allowed Rome to maintain communication and control, but it also provided a means for the gospel of Christ to reach the known world. It is ironic that the very entity that seemed to be set against Christianity became the means God would use to help spread the Good News.

Just as the Roman network of roads became a tool the apostles used to spread the message of Christ, another highway, the Internet, has been established and can do the same thing. This network expands throughout most of the known world. It crosses physical and cultural barriers and provides an open door into homes and offices around the globe. It has no limitations like the confines of roads. The superhighway of information is always expanding its reach to people all over the world. As the church better leverages this tool, it will only serve to expand the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

Continue to do the same old things, and you'll get the same old results. Try to see the future. We are moving into a world that requires that we do things very differently. The unchurched will remain unchurched. Don't expect them to show up at your door. Create a network that reaches out to their world, and ask God to begin touching their lives. He will. We need only declare His Word. His Spirit will leverage the Internet for the advantage of the kingdom.⁸

EVANGELISM

Of all the potentials of Church Online, the greatest is its ability to evangelize. The Church Online is a church without walls, without geography, without borders. It crosses oceans in seconds, and takes the message of the gospel to places the name of Jesus is not yet known.

There are countries such as Afghanistan, North Korea, China, and Sudan where Christian missionaries are not allowed, where the teaching of the truth of Christ is not only forbidden by law but also punishable by death. In countries like these, Church Online can become a powerful tool for evangelism. In nations like China where the church is forced underground, Church Online becomes an open door for people to find out more about the grace of Jesus. Although some countries limit and monitor Internet activity, it is increasingly difficult for all Internet activity to be scrutinized.

Aalim is a Muslim from Syria studying in Iran. Coming from a country where Christianity is illegal, the Internet allows him the freedom to discuss his faith with others online. He e-mailed my church's online pastor, David, reaching out for help. He had accepted Christ into his life but was afraid because as he put it, "Here in these countries, if I say I am a Christian, they are going to kill me because in Islam you can't change your religion. Please help me. Teach me how to be patient like Jesus."⁹

David conversed with Aalim by e-mail until he thought about connecting him with a man in our church named Kasam who may be able to more intimately understand Aalim's circumstances. Kasam is from Egypt and has a ministry in the Middle East with Muslims. He has many connections to Christians all over the Middle East and to the underground church there as well. Kasam's discipleship has helped Aalim to remain steadfast in his faith despite the fears and uncertainty of his future. Online church brings light for believers trying to live out their faith in dark parts of the world.

Like Aalim, who is forbidden to walk into a physical church building and worship, members could join online in worship, teaching of the Word, reading of the Word, and prayer. Prayer rooms allow for them to be ministered to by trained pastors and prayer partners. Translation devices allowing people to type in their own language and have it converted to the language of the host¹⁰ are already being used by LifeChurch.tv and other online churches.

The opportunity for evangelism is endless. As far as the Internet reaches, there is the prospect of reaching one more with the message of Jesus Christ. Christ Fellowship online welcomed people from more than 100 different countries in the last year. Church Online allows for the spreading of the gospel and the intentional follow up that comes through online discipleship tools and classes. Even when the church reaches into countries with potential language barriers, evangelistic and training resources abound in multitudes of languages from around the world.

The opportunity for evangelism not only extends to foreign soil, but also here at home. Many people have an apprehension of walking through the doors of a local church. Perhaps hurts from their past, negative experiences, or simply the fear of the unknown keep them from walking through the doors. Church Online allows the attendee to observe what a service is like, talk with a pastor, and get an overall feel for the church before they ever step in a building. In some cases the Church Online becomes a “pre-evangelistic” tool to invite people to church.

I have seen this case in my own church. Congregants will actually invite their friends and neighbors to participate in a service online to learn more about the church. Dozens of people now actively involved in Christ Fellowship made a stop at their online campus before attending one of our physical campuses. After watching the services for a few months they felt comfortable to step out and bring their family to a physical service.

Kathy, a resident of Palm Beach Gardens, FL, where the our original campus is located, found the Christ Fellowship Facebook page and began communicating with David to ask questions about their programs and beliefs.¹¹ Her husband Bob was Jewish and did not wish to join a Christian church, but he agreed to let her and their children attend the church of her choice.

David invited Kathy to observe a Christ Fellowship service online, and she did. Their conversations continued as she asked for prayer for various situations her family was experiencing. Eventually she signed her youngest child up for a baby dedication at the Gardens campus. It was her first time to attend a physical campus of Christ Fellowship. Following the service, Kathy and Bob invited the David and his family to lunch where they all got to meet in person and begin building a relationship offline.

A few months later, Bob accepted Christ at our Christmas Eve service. A very busy and successful businessman who traveled frequently, Bob didn't have a lot of time to join one of our discipleship classes at the church to grow in his new relationship with Christ so David mentored him online. Bob's life changed radically. His friends, business associates, clients, and family all recognized the changes. Bob and Kathy's faith and commitment to Christ and to Christ Fellowship has changed their marriage, their family, their business, and countless thousands of individuals they touch on a regular basis. And it all started because Kathy was able to connect with our church family through the online church. She felt safe being able to observe the church online before stepping out to attend a physical campus.

The potential for the Church Online to be a powerful evangelistic tool is immeasurable. It reaches to the backwoods of Canada, and a dusty village in Italy, to a household in Perth, Australia, where an entire family came to Christ. Approximately a year ago on a Sunday morning, our online campus gathered for worship. At our physical campuses, we were preparing to take communion as a part of the worship service. On weekends where we share in communion,

David enters the live chat and directs participants to find some juice and bread or crackers for the elements. That particular Sunday, my dad explained the significance of the elements and offered a chance to come into a relationship with Christ. Many in the sanctuary that day asked Christ into their life as Lord and Savior, and online a man named Mitchell in Perth, Australia, sat weeping at his computer screen as the truth of the gospel pierced his heart.

He prayed to invite Christ into his life.

Right after the prayer, Mitchell entered the live chat and told David (as well as everyone else participating) what had just taken place in his life. Immediately, he was flooded with prayers and encouragement for his step of faith and his declaration of Christ as his Lord. As the next service began, Mitchell gathered his wife and daughters around the computer. He wanted them to hear the truth that had just transformed his life. He was able to help lead his wife and children into their own personal relationship with Jesus!

Another woman named Mary searching for the truth joined the Christ Fellowship Facebook page. David occasionally sends welcome messages to the newcomers on the page so he reached out to Mary and introduced himself and told her he was available to answer questions or help her however he could. She wrote back immediately and said, “Thank you for “friend requesting” me. It seems strange that I would see that you sent that note just as my friend is talking to me about praying and trusting in God. She is born again or saved, not sure which is the right term to use, but I have been having a very tough time and she has been trying to help.

Anyway, I wanted to say thank you. I guess He does work in mysterious ways.” Their conversation leading to Mary’s salvation during an online chat on Facebook follows:

4:07pmDavid

It’s kind of funny because I don’t really make a habit of doing it a lot. Every once in a while I’ll have a look at who’s new in our group and send out a few messages, but that’s it. Are you from around here? I’ll pray for you ok. God promises us that if we seek Him we’ll find Him. Happy hunting!

4:15pmMary

Well he was working through your fingers today. I live out in the acreage and have been feeling the pull to him for about a year now. I just haven't really acted, I guess you could say. Maybe it is time. I know I feel broken and I'm ready for some hope!

4:42pmMary

One more thing... if you don't mind... What is the prayer to bring God into your heart?

4:46pmDavid

Hey, I'm going to grab something that I wrote a while back for the Web... it's called Knowing God Personally. I want you to read that... then I'll send you a simple prayer that you can pray. and anytime now or later, you can ask me any question you like about any of it!

Do you desire purpose, meaning and a reason to live? Deep down most of us ponder these things and wonder why we feel empty. We each have an emptiness in our lives, and regardless of how hard we try, nothing we do can fill the void in a lasting way. Relationships, possessions, success and even religion fall short of occupying this space

A personal relationship with God fills this emptiness.

The following four principles will help you discover a personal relationship with God.

1. Realize that God loves you and has created you to know Him personally

“For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

What prevents us from having this relationship?

2. People are separated from God by their own choices, which the Bible calls sin. This makes it impossible to know God personally or experience His love.

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:23.

3. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, provided the way to have relationship with God. “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me’.” John 14:6

“Christ died for our sins...He was buried...He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...He appeared to Peter, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred...” 1 Corinthians 15:3-6

But it's not enough to know this truth:

4. We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Then we can know God personally and experience His love.

“As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.” John 1:12

“By grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works that no one should boast.” Ephesians 2:8,9

[Christ speaking] “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him.” Revelation 3:20

Receiving Christ involves turning to God and trusting Christ to come into our lives to forgive us of our sins and to make us what He wants us to be. You can receive Christ now by asking God to forgive you and by inviting Christ to be Lord (CEO) of your life. God knows your heart and is not as concerned with your words as He is with the attitude of your heart.

David

I'm right here if you have any questions.

4:56pmMary

I read your passage and I do understand it. It's just amazing to me what happened today with the friend request from you. I've had a pull to the church over the past year.

4:59pmDavid

So you understand what I sent you? I hope you know that God has a purpose and a plan for you.

5:00pmMary

Yes I do...Well... heck why didn't I check with him sooner? LOL Cause what I'm doing obviously isn't working.

5:00pmDavid

Better late than never!

5:00pmMary

True. You're an online Pastor? Do you do a service online?

5:02pmDavid

Well I'm a Pastor, and online just happens to be the place I work for Christ Fellowship. We provide services for people who can't get to church...small groups and discussions for people who may not be close by or maybe out of the country, support groups for those who might be suffering or recovering from illness, disease, or sickness... whatever. I personally believe that the church ought to go where the people are at and offer hope, and people are definitely on the Internet!

5:05pmMary

I agree... :):) Well it worked today!

5:05pmDavid

So Mary...are you going to let me lead you in a prayer of surrendering your life to the power and presence of God?

5:05pmMary

Yes ... I will

5:06pmDavid

I want you to do something...I want you to either type in exactly what I type... kind of representing you saying it or read what I'm saying out loud.

5:07pmMary

Okay...How about both!

5:07pmDavid

Perfect....I just want you to really feel it, and mean it, not just read it.

5:08pmMary

I understand.

5:08pmDavid

Lord Jesus, I want to know You personally...

5:08pmMary

Lord Jesus, I want to know You personally...

5:09pmDavid

Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins...

5:09pmMary

Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins....

5:09pmDavid

I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord...

5:09pmMary

I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord.....

5:09pmDavid

Thank You for forgiving me of my sins and giving me eternal life...

5:10pmMary

Thank You for forgiving me of my sins and giving me eternal life...

5:10pmDavid

Take control of my life...

5:10pmMary

Take control of my life...

5:10pmDavid

Make me the kind of person You want me to be...

5:11pmMary

Make me the kind of person You want me to be...

5:11pmDavid

In Jesus' Name, amen.

5:11pmMary In Jesus'

Name, amen.

5:11pmDavid

The Bible says that you are a NEW creation, all things have passed away, and you are made new.

5:12pmMary

Thank you David!

5:12pmDavid

Mary, this is only the beginning.

5:12pmMary

I know... and I'm ready.

5:12pmDavid

You have a purpose, and meaning for your life... and now you get to discover that. I will help you...it won't be easy, but you are not alone.

5:13pmMary

Thank you. I know, it's not going to be easy. Thank you!

5:14pmDavid

I want to give you a book that will help you. It's called The Purpose Driven Life. And I want to give you a Bible.

David continued talking with Mary and invited her to begin attending services at Christ Fellowship, especially since she lived nearby. She came that weekend and met the online pastor who had led her to Christ. The following week, she attended a class to become assimilated into the church family.

Soon after, she contacted David to tell him her story and background leading up to her new relationship with Christ. She and her husband were in the midst of a divorce. He was abusing substances, and it was ruining their marriage.

Within a few months of her new relationship with Christ, her husband began going to our recovery classes, and they signed up for marriage counseling. Their marriage was restored, and her husband is now sober. Months later, her husband, too, gave his heart to the Lord, and David baptized Mary, her husband, and their oldest child together at the beach. They are now regular, growing members of our church family.

People just like Mary are desperately seeking for truth. Mankind is wired by God to long for Him and only find true fulfillment as they walk in right relationship with Him. That's why the term "spirituality" is one of the words most frequently entered in online search engines. As Malphurs and Malphurs mention in their book *Church Next*, there are approximately 28 million people who have used the Internet to find religious information and materials and up to three million searching for this information daily.¹² People want to understand the meaning of life and the truth about God and they turn to online resources to learn. The potential for Church Online to be there and answer their questions and lead them to Christ is remarkable. It provides a place of healing and hope at the very place the world is coming to search for answers.

In John 6:44 Jesus declares, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (*NKJV*). The actual work of evangelism is not a human thing, it's the work of God's Spirit to draw the lost to Himself. Our role is to communicate the message of salvation and the

grace of God. The Holy Spirit will work in the heart of the sinner, revealing his need for God. The Bible clearly teaches that the Holy Spirit is not limited by time or space. Psalm 139:7-10 says, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You *are* there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You *are there*. If I take the wings of the morning, *And* dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me” (NKJV). Accordingly, computer screens or cables do not limit His work.

Similarly when we pray with someone while speaking on the phone, we believe God is there with us through His Holy Spirit. We pray for healing or encouragement or even for someone to experience the grace of God through salvation. None of us would discount the ability of the Holy Spirit and omnipotent God to move through these prayers. Our God is not handicapped because we are not there in person with the individual. In the same way that telephones leverage technology to connect people to each other and to the power of God, the Internet and Church Online is doing so as well.

EQUIPPING E-VANGELISTS¹³

Church Online also has the ability to inspire an army of “e-vangelists,” a generation of young people, who have been raised on technology and who will use it for the Kingdom of God. One of the emerging generations is being called the “Net Generation.” They have grown up with computers and the Internet. Surfing the Web and checking their e-mail on their mobile devices is a part of their everyday lives. They instinctively turn to the Internet to connect and communicate. Before they choose a restaurant or a church or a job, they research it online. The primary means of connection with others takes place on the Internet as well. “These young people are remaking every institution of modern life, from the workplace to the marketplace, from politics to education, and down to the basic structure of the family.”¹⁴

This generation of believers is also a part of our physical (and virtual) churches and is ready for action. Their peers, however, are grossly lost and searching for truth. “Young people, steeped in this postmodern culture and heavily influenced by what the entertainment industry feeds them, pick and choose ingredients of their own personal spirituality from a variety of belief systems. A kind of eclectic spirituality is in vogue these days, and it is a predictable outcome of the postmodern ethos.”¹⁵

The church must create online church venues in which young believers can reach their peers with the truth of Christ’s grace and God’s plan for their lives. Church Online has the potential to harness their abilities and skill sets and prepare these young believers to share Christ with the online world.

People online are open to discussing personal and spiritual matters. Perhaps the anonymity adds to the feeling of security and willingness to be open. Anonymity online actually lends itself well to discussions of a spiritual nature. For some reason, those seeking can sometimes feel a sense of inadequacy or weakness so anonymity allows them to ask their questions freely and objectively without feeling like their foundations are being scrutinized outwardly. “Questions about God can be asked in complete privacy on the Internet. The Internet displays no culture, no race, no gender, and no age. It provides a seeker with the ability to navigate his or her way to the foot of Calvary’s Cross.”¹⁶

Spiritual topics are among the leading issues discussed and researched online.¹⁷ Unfortunately though, many are being led away from the truth of Christ. The Internet is filled with websites and blogs pointing spiritual-seekers into dangerous areas and into spiritual darkness. New Age teachings and eastern religious thoughts threaten to entrap those looking to the Internet for answers. By equipping an army of e-vangelists to take to the Internet to share the hope of Christ, the Church Online can not only present the seeker with truth, but can also help

them wrestle with questions that are hindering their decision to give their lives to Christ. By training e-vangelists from around the world, the church can constantly be available online. Not restricted by time zones or physical limitations, the Church Online can be available and “open” 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Many evangelicals are unprepared to fulfill 1 Peter 3:15: “always *be* ready to *give* a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (*NKJV*). The first step in equipping this online army, as with any army of believers, would be to make sure they understand the important tenets of their faith and how to clearly articulate them to others. In doing so the Church Online would also be fulfilling Ephesians 4:12-13 “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith” (*NKJV*). The objective would be to raise up and equip apologists who are ready to guide online spiritual seekers to the truth of Jesus Christ, thus fulfilling the Great Commission of the church.

In preparation for equipping this army, our church has purchased the website domain names for www.stillnotsure.com and www.whatdoidonow.com to help the e-vangelists with their mission. Many people they engage with online may not be ready to make a decision for Christ at that moment. Many questions may remain unanswered so www.stillnotsure.com will be a resource to answer some of those questions, allowing the seeker to dig deeper. This website will also become a resource for the e-vangelists as they face questions for which they may not know the answer.

www.whatdoidonow.com will be a website designed to help the new convert take their next step in faith. Providing Bible studies, Scripture readings, and daily devotionals, this site will provide foundational instruction for those just beginning their journey with Christ. Online tools become an immediate connection for an online community. The person making the decision for Christ while online doesn’t have to wait for traditional mail to arrive with Bible study materials

or drive to a physical bookstore to purchase a Bible. Instead, he or she can instantly access online resources. The potential to leverage the Online Church to reach a lost world is truly limitless.

However, the potential of the Online Church model is being recognized by various, non-Christian religious groups as well. In fact, “More than three million individuals go online every day looking for spiritual content...”¹⁸ And there are more than a million religious websites up and running online for people to peruse various faiths.¹⁹

The Church of the Latter Day Saints has recently decided to leverage the Internet to convert more to Mormonism. A recent article in the *Salt Lake Tribune* indicates that until recently, Internet usage for Mormons was extremely limited. However, motivated by a desire to proselytize as many people as possible by whatever means necessary, Mormon leaders are strategically using the Internet to publish invitations for conversion and to facilitate online chats with seekers.

Scott Swofford, director of media for the LDS Missionary Department at church headquarters in Salt Lake City, said, “Our leaders were struggling for years to find a more effective, less annoying way to get our message across than knocking on doors.... It’s a lot more effective than [door-to-door] tracting in many places.”²⁰

Muslims and other world religions are also leveraging the Internet to reach out and teach their lies.

The conversion of Christians in Europe and the United States to Islam has become a matter of debate in some Western countries. Muslim scholars have called on immigrant Muslims to become involved in summoning non-Muslims to their faith. Indeed, the call on Muslim migrants to proselytize has become central in contemporary Islamic writings, not only in books, but also in sermons—many online on YouTube—and others on DVDs, and Islamic Websites. The strategies that the global Islamic media use to promote conversion of Christians to Islam illustrate both the perceptions of Islamists and can expose themes to defend and promote in cultural and public diplomacy.²¹

“The Internet is a-spiritual, a-religious, and a-moral. In and of itself, the Internet is not a Christian tool any more than it is a Muslim, Hindu, or atheist tool. It is a reflection of the world

we live in with all its diversity, beauty, prejudice, sin, and pathology.”²² The message of God’s true and perfect love is being gravely threatened and undermined throughout the Internet. The Internet, aptly nicknamed the “Information Super Highway,” is an ideal place to entice the seeker and ensnare them with faulty information. We who know the truth of Christ must use every tool we can to share the gospel and raise up disciples. The Church Online can become one of those tools.

SPECIAL NEEDS

Christ Fellowship has a unique ministry to people and families with special needs. Through this ministry, we have built a strong partnership with Joni Erickson and Friends Ministry. Joni, a paraplegic with a platform of hope to the world, has told about the millions of people who are disabled and homebound around the world. The potential for the Church Online to minister to them is profound. As the church reaches out to minister to people at their point of need, she aptly responds to the parable Jesus tells in the Gospel of Matthew 25, “inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (*NKJV*).

The Church Online has incredible potential to connect with the special needs community and provide a church home for thousands that are homebound and forgotten. They need the church and often cannot physically, emotionally, or mentally participate at a physical campus. The Church Online provides a solution to this all too familiar situation.

The realization of this great need surfaced for us specifically when a man named Don showed up in the online chat room. The online pastor soon discovered that Don was a quadriplegic and could not easily get out of his home. As a results, he never thought he could be a part of a church family. Soon after making his situation known, David went to visit Don in his home. After that initial visit, Don’s heart softened, and he gave his life to Jesus Christ. David even arranged for Don’s baptism.

As a further result, Don's parents gave their hearts to the Lord and have since been baptized as well. Don is active in the Church Online and in his online small group. He is training to be an online group leader for our discipleship class *Triumph over Suffering*. Don is just one story of one who was homebound and found the power of Jesus at Church Online. How many more, just like him, are waiting for the love and grace of God to reach them at their point of need?

CHURCH PLANTING

Church Online also has the potential to become a model for church planting. Christ Fellowship's Church Online hears about groups meeting together around a large computer or television, worshiping together during service. These groups of sometimes twenty or more people have a great affinity to each other and to the Lord. Normally they spring up on a college campus or where someone has recently moved away from one of our physical locations. There is great potential for these home groups to actually become churches. We have not yet decided if these will be treated as multi-site or satellite churches under our banner, or if each group will become its own entity. We like the idea of keeping them under Christ Fellowship because it would help ensure stability, continuity, and permanence. We would treat each "group" as a satellite church and appoint leaders, e-vangelists, counselors, and prayer partners in each. If we allowed each group to be its own "church community," many would fade away with changing leadership and/or personnel.

Using the tools and resources that Church Online currently provides or could provide, group leaders sensing the call of God could start a church, could mentor the group and develop the group into a church. They could begin pastoring without carrying the burden of preaching every weekend. They could use the streaming worship service until God provides them their own worship leader. They could use archived sermon series for midweek Bible studies. They could

also leverage the Church Online discipleship classes and tools. This entire process allows a church plant to crawl before walking, allowing for a greater chance for success than just starting on their own.

The potential of Church Online to lead to more physical churches being planted speaks once again to the possibility of even greater evangelism across our nation and the world. Through leveraging technology, Church Online has the capability of truly reaching and transforming the world for Christ, one community of believers at a time.

POTENTIAL FOR COMMUNITY

As mentioned previously, social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and My Space have already established online communities. Online dating sites such as EHarmony.com have taken online relationships to an even higher level of commitment and intimacy. As more and more people become more comfortable with discovering and developing relationships online, the Church Online has even greater potential to develop community and fellowship among its members.

Currently, people are praying for one another and sending each other notes and e-mails. Some send electronic hugs and smiley faces through their chat. None of these online expressions can replace an actual hug when you're going through a hard time, but it is a start. Knowing that your church family is there for you and praying for you is a powerful demonstration of support. Opening up your e-mail and finding your inbox flooded with messages from your Church Online friends is encouraging. Yet is there even more potential?

There have been so many technological advances in the past ten to fifteen years. Video chatting is normal. Video chatting from your phone is becoming commonplace. Friends living on the other side of the world from one another can have a conversation "face to face." And although it may not be the same as being there, they couldn't begin to ascribe a value to the experience. All

of this is accomplished through technology. When discussing the potential of the Church Online community one must ask what impending advances will further enhance this online community? What role does virtual reality play in the coming years?

The term “virtual reality” simply refers to a computer-simulated environment that replicates a physical space and experience. The term gained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s as science-fiction books and movies began painting a picture of future worlds where the simulated would replace the actual. Video gaming leveraged virtual reality technology to give gamers a more realistic experience. Recent advances in this technology by Xbox 360 and Nintendo have eliminated the need for joysticks and game controls. The user is now invited to “enter the game” by wearing virtual reality sensors on their body and actually participating as a gaming icon. Recent advances by European researchers have led to virtual interaction between people through the use of robotics and haptic technology. Haptic technology is a tactile response technology that leverages the user’s sense of touch by providing vibrations and movement. The mechanical stimulation is in conjunction with virtual visual stimulation creating a realistic experience.²³

Using this technology, scientists have allowed two people to dance with each other without being in the same location. Each user experiences the touch and sensation of dancing with a partner without ever actually being together physically in the same location.

Researchers suggest that a day is coming soon when this technology will move from our gaming devices into our everyday life. Just as we are currently able to video chat with loved ones through the Internet, we will be able to give virtual hugs and hold hands online. Three dimensional graphics are also improving and becoming more life-like. Using the Internet’s capacity to create realistic environments, eventually you will be able to sit down with friends for dinner, each in various cities, and yet feel as if you are together in the same room. Virtual reality

experiences will become more and more realistic giving the users a sense of truly “being present.”

Although many would agree that this experience is somewhat lacking the intimacy afforded by actual proximal interaction, it far exceeds the limitations of a letter, a telegraph, or a phone call. Virtual reality allows a deeper connection and experience than we have ever known. Simply because we have never experienced it, doesn't disqualify its validity or value. Two hundred years ago many would have argued that man would never ride in vehicles at 70 miles per hour to get to work or that a heavy machine made of metal would fly through the sky. Fifty years ago people would never have dreamed that computers would fit in the palm of your hand and everyone would have one. A decade ago people didn't trust buying items online rather than in a physical store, yet last year 65% of all online users shopped on the Internet.²⁴

EMBRACING THE FUTURE

Many people judge the future based on the present. They base their comfort of what will be acceptable upon what they currently experience. Most people do not embrace change well. The thought of building lasting relationships and community online is only called into question if one has never experienced that in a virtual world. There will come a day when virtual reality may be indistinguishable from the physical reality. It may not be in our lifetime, but there will come a time when touch, taste, smell, and sound from any form may be completely reproduced virtually and our senses will not be able to discern the actual from the virtual.

Although not currently there, there are many ways that the virtual experience surpasses the physical experience. One is shopping. Many people would prefer shopping online to fighting the crowds and the traffic. Selection online is not limited by the stores that are available in a person's town. Online stores are open 24 hours a day. All of these factors surpass the limitations of a physical store.

An Army soldier prefers virtually flying an unmanned drone on a mission over the skies of Iraq to physically flying in a plane over enemy territory. Using robots, the Marines can virtually maneuver through potential land mines without the loss of life. These virtual experiences also surpass the physical.

Finally, I prefer to pay bills online. In years past, I would have to write checks and get them in the mail. My ancestors had to drive their wagon from creditor to creditor to pay their bills in person using chickens and eggs. When I pay my bills online, money is removed from my account and transferred to an accounts receivable somewhere in virtual space. This virtual experience surpasses the physical.

As the world continues to evolve and technology continues to advance, the ability for community and relationships to be more richly experienced online will advance with it. The Church Online will advance right in step and be able to provide deepening and lasting community in the decades to come.

The church must embrace the Internet because of the potential it affords to reach the ends of the earth with the love and message of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Walter Wilson summarized this thought well when he said, "I suggest we as Christians not view the Internet as technology, but as God's moving to bring the gospel to every man, woman, and child upon the earth...With the Internet we have the opportunity to reach every man, woman, and child upon the face of the earth..."²⁵ It is potentially the very tool that God will choose to use to reach every tribe in every nation. It is the tool that God could use to build a million-member church. The church must consider this challenge carefully and be openly willing to take up the charge from God to carry out His mission online.

NOTES

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Chapter 11

PROGRAMS FOR AN ONLINE CHURCH

By
Todd Mullins

You will see how programs operate in an Online Church. Both natural and biblical rationales will be examined and applied.

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the primary definition for the word “church” means “a building for public and especially for Christian worship.”¹ Although recognized to also mean a body of religious believers, most people use the word “church” to imply the actual building where the believers meet. This most common definition plays against the very concept of a virtual church, as a virtual church has no building or facility. There is no physical sanctuary for people to gather to worship God.

Although the hurdle remains for someone with limited biblical knowledge, the Word of God clearly defines the church not as a building or structure but as the people who gather together, wherever they may gather. In the first century when the church began, there were no church buildings in which to meet. The church gathered in homes, synagogues, the school of Tyrannus (Acts 18:9), the house of Justus (Acts 18:7), near a river (Acts 16:13), and in Solomon’s court of the temple. All were vibrant expressions of the community of believers bound together by the bonds of Christ.

The word “church” comes with baggage for many people. The very word can conjure up various meanings based upon one’s experience with a church. Those who grew up Catholic have one interpretation of church. Even within the Catholic Church, there are varied degrees of experiences. Some attended church where the mass was performed in Latin and they didn’t understand what was being said, much less the relevancy to their life. Others grew up in a

Catholic church where the passion for Christ filled the parish. This differentiation was dependent upon the priest and his personal faith.

Still others grew up in fundamental churches where legalism and/or separation from sin may have played into their perspective of church. Some may have grown up in a church where they witnessed an expression of praise worship music, or the charismatic gifts. Some grew up in a Bible-teaching church where Sunday morning was more like school than worship. Regardless of one's upbringing, everyone comes to the discussion with a view of what he or she believes the church will be like.

DEALING WITH EXPECTATIONS

With that outlook also comes an expectation of what the church should be or should do for each individual and family. People who grew up in a church with dynamic programs for children and teenagers expect a church to have similar programs. If they attended a church where there was powerful music and a lively worship experience, they would approach a church looking for a similar experience. If they grew up in a more orthodox setting, they may expect a traditional church with more liturgy and formality.

How do these expectations position Church Online for those looking for a church home?

How will people approach a church that is dissimilar to anything they have experienced before? Is Church Online that different at all? Perhaps the starting point is recognizing that society has changed. Most people do not attend church, and most are fine with it.² Fifty to sixty years ago, people had a general understanding of church, and our nation was still Christian in its ideologies. Today that has changed. We have quickly moved from a nation that was modern to one that is now post-Christian.³ Christianity is no longer the dominant religious underpinning of the culture. No longer are our principles and values widely guided by the Word of God and the teachings of Christ. Secular humanistic thought prevails.⁴

This change in culture has brought with it an exodus from the church.⁵ Generations have now grown up with no personal experience of what church should look like. This can work to our benefit. No longer are churches, physical or virtual, bound to the traditions established by committees and denominations from decades past. Today the church can step out and meet the culture where it is and introduce it to the message and love of Christ in relevant ways.

Church Online enters the story at the perfect time in history. Never before have so many people worldwide had such access to the Internet. According to Internet World Stats, there are 1.9 billion people online with the highest increase (1,825.3%) coming from the Middle East.⁶ Never before have so many been without a preconceived idea of what church “should be.” This gives the Church Online the freedom to ask what we must do as the Church to spread the message of Christ and make disciples at this time in history.

Those of us in the church may be the biggest hindrances to boiling down the essence of what truly makes a church a church. We have our opinions of what is important and our experiences of how we have operated in the past. This often makes it challenging to think differently or to step out and try new methods to reach emerging generations.⁷

CHRIST FELLOWSHIP CONSIDERS THE NECESSITY OF CHURCH PROGRAMS

We launched our church online as another one of our campuses in our multi-site organizational structure. Our leadership had our own perspective of how to plant churches and start campuses that we had to overcome. When a physical church or campus is planted, it needs a physical location. The size of the launch team determines the size of the facility needed. When we launched a new physical campus in a nearby town, we estimated that we would begin with 700 people. We had approximately that many driving from this town to their first church campus thirty minutes away. As a result, we found an elementary school that could hold 700 people with facilities for nurseries, children’s ministries, student ministries, and some onsite storage. Within

the first few months of opening, we discovered we had drastically underestimated the response as we were soon hitting the 1000 mark in attendance.

We ran out of room in the cafeteria and ran out of chairs. Even after purchasing more chairs, we soon had to add multiple services. The parking lot soon became an issue because with more people attending we were quickly running out of parking spots. Volunteers were asked to park in a field behind the school, allowing more parking spots for visitors. Weekly we had to turn a cafeteria into a sanctuary, a gymnasium into a children's church, and classrooms into nurseries. All of these ministries were expected at this new campus.

Months later when we launched the Church Online we had to ask ourselves what was necessary for us to be church in an online environment. We didn't need to rent a facility or purchase chairs or worry about parking. Many of the very issues that were critical to the effective launch of a physical location weren't even a thought as we prepared to begin Church Online.

We had similar deliberations when we launched that first campus in the elementary school. Our original campus had a plethora of ministries including men's ministry, women's ministry, special needs ministry, children's and youth ministry, and even a mechanics' ministry to help single mothers with their vehicle needs. The question was "which of these ministries *had* to be reproduced for this new, physical campus to be a church?"

Through much debate, we narrowed the list to worship, children's ministry, youth ministry, congregational care, and Life Groups. These ministries would be our main focus for discipleship in the formative years. All other ministries could and would wait without compromising the mission, evangelization, discipleship, and care of the people attending. It didn't make this campus less of a church just because all the options weren't available at this location. It simply met the minimum of the definition of what we believed a church was to

include. Through the years as leaders emerged, additional ministries have been born to continue to help the Internet congregation grow deeper and reach more people even more effectively.

THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH AS IT RELATES TO PROGRAMMING

The same debate must take place for Church Online. What must be at the core of its focus and purpose? Just as the Word of God must direct the focus and purpose of every church, so it must direct the church in a virtual world.

As discussed earlier, after having studying various Scriptures and participating in numerous discussions, Christ Fellowship embraced Rick Warren's philosophy of the five purposes of the church.⁸ Warren contends that the five key purposes for the church are found in two passages of Scripture, the Great Commandment found in Matthew 22:36-40 which says, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (NKJV).

The second passage is the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, which says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age." Amen (NKJV).

Again, from these passages Warren identifies the purposes of the church as worship, discipleship, fellowship, ministry, and mission.⁹ At the very core of any church, these five purposes must be lived out for that church to be effective. For Church Online, these same purposes must find their place in the ministries provided. The key components mentioned in the previous chapter include these five purposes and have been thoroughly addressed. They must be the solid foundation for Church Online. However, what about other seemingly important

ministries such as children's or student ministries? Does Church Online need to provide them in order to be revered as a "real," purposeful church? What about recovery ministry or grief care? Is the Online Church any less authentic without these programs to care for the needs of their attendees?

As mentioned, Christ Fellowship would have never thought of launching their new campus for 700 people without a children's pastor and a youth pastor. We selected each physical location based upon the proximity of their children's classes to where the adults would gather for worship. It was a critical decision. Yet with Church Online, no thought had been given to a children's ministry. Our current online attendance is approximately 7000 weekly. No church in America with 7000 people would ever consider not having ministries for the children and teens. Yet Church Online is in a virtual world, which potentially greatly alters needs for extensive programming.

At first this could be a point to celebrate. No nurseries to staff. No rooms to prepare. No chairs to set up each week. There is no need to train teachers and store supplies. But is this the proper approach? Is there a better way to analyze the question?

As far as my research indicates, no church meeting online is currently providing any type of ministry to children and youth. All worship services and ministry opportunities, including classes, are geared towards adults.

THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN'S MINISTRY ONLINE

Perhaps the Church Online can change its attention from "What should be?" to "What could be?" The church can obviously be a church without a children's ministry or children's pastor. There are churches in the United States and around the world that do not have a children's ministry.¹⁰ The children and teens are simply a part of the adult services. Several pastors at my church grew up in churches with no specific ministry to children, and their faith as adults is solid

and well rounded. However, if the desire of the church is to deepen the faith of each believer, then speaking the language of the child or teenager can only help reach that goal. It's the very reason most churches have age-specific ministries. How a child in second grade learns and grows is different from a tenth grader or from a mother in her forties. The issues and concerns they are dealing with are varied, and the best way for them to take a step in faith will play out very differently. With this in mind, what would a children's ministry online look like?

Believing that the parent is the most influential person in a child's life, the greatest service any children's ministry could offer is to provide resources and equip parents to help their children know and love God. This is true for any church but potentially the main foundation of a children's ministry for Church Online. In this sense, the limitations of Church Online may actually force a purer form of ministry. Parents are not able to simply drop their children off at church and expect some paid church staff to teach their children about Jesus as they would in a traditional church building. They have to do it themselves. They must learn how to have spiritual conversations with their children and encourage godliness. As parents, they must understand the basics of the faith and be able to pass them along to their children.

Consequently, the Church Online children's ministry would need to focus on how to best provide resources for the parents. Online tools, age-appropriate Bible studies, and spiritual discussion questions could be the starting point. Church Online could have websites attached to their main site dedicated to these resources and trainings, leveraging volunteers gifted in teaching. Church Online could provide training videos that walk parents through sharing faith in Christ with their children. Links to articles and other online resources would be beneficial. Many parents are not even sure where to begin when it comes to talking with their children about things of faith. Basic online resources would start them in the right direction.

For Online Churches with more advanced IT departments and resources, a more thorough website dedicated to the children would be beneficial. Some churches already provide websites designed for the children as a part of their main website.¹¹ These dedicated pages could be interactive and provide learning opportunities for children in the Church Online. The online ministry for children does not need to be complex. The previous week's lessons, videos, and Bible verses can be uploaded to the dedicated site. These along with a video training for the parents can equip the parents to lead their children through the Christian education process. Most Christian parents would not resist the responsibility of spiritually leading their children, but many do not know how. Providing online training for the parents through video and print will be the resources the parents need to take their rightful place as their children's spiritual leaders.

Parents could sign up for daily e-mails or texts that could remind them of the Scripture memory verse or follow up questions from the week's lesson. Similarly to how Bible clubs used to mail Bible lessons for children to complete and mail back, the online application could allow for families to work through lessons together and provide interactive questions to ensure the child is learning the Scriptures.

In many ways this hands-on participation by the parents would far exceed what most children receive in the physical church settings, where many parents view the children's ministry as a glorified babysitter. An online children's ministry would require active participation from the parents reinstating them as the key spiritual leaders for their children as God intended.

An online children's ministry would be extremely successful. Already 86% of children in the United States have at least one computer in their home, and 74% have an Internet connection.¹² The most common activity they participate in is gaming and communication.¹³ Leveraging this phenomenon for the Kingdom of God would only help children grow in their understanding of the Word of God and their relationship with Christ.

THE FUTURE OF YOUTH MINISTRY ONLINE

Likewise, the conditions for Church Online ministering to teenagers are ripe. This generation of teenagers is more technically advanced than any other in history.¹⁴ They have grown up with video games and computers. They understand the Internet better than most adults. They have been labeled the “Net Generation” due to their attachment and experience with the online world. With that foundation, the Church Online has a strong leverage point to reach this generation with the message and purposes of Christ.

Similar to an online children’s ministry, a ministry to teenagers online would start with the understanding that parents are still the most influential factor in a child’s spiritual life. Even though as teens grow older, peers begin to have greater influence over their lives and decisions, parents still remain the number one guide for spiritual matters for their children.¹⁵ Therefore a priority for an online youth ministry would be to equip the parents to talk about God with their child. So many parents will discuss all sorts of issues with their teens but avoid the topic of God or the working of the Holy Spirit.

The most critical assignment parents have is to help their children know and love Christ.

They are assigned by God the responsibility to help their children follow His ways.

Deuteronomy 6:6-7 says, “And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up” (*NKJV*).

The responsibility to help children grow in the ways of the Lord clearly falls in the lap of their parents, but so many don’t know where to begin. The Church Online can help by equipping and empowering the parent to step out and assume this critical role as their children’s spiritual leader. Links to various online resources that speak about Christian parenting would help parents know how to lead discussions. Videos addressing issues that teens are facing positioned within

the context of a biblical worldview could open the doors for healthy conversations between parents and teens.

In addition to parental resources, the site could offer sections just for teens to connect and interact with online youth volunteers. In a physical church, godly volunteers that can relate and connect with teenagers are critical to any fruitful youth program. No longer can one youth pastor minister to dozens of students.¹⁶ By inviting young adults and parents that feel called to minister to teenagers, the youth pastor expands his influence over the teens. Likewise an online youth ministry could enlist qualified adults to connect and mentor online. Online Life Groups for students could also be established to create more opportunities for community development and spiritual growth. With this generation already building so many of their relationships online, building spiritually healthy relationships through an online youth group would be completely natural and welcomed.

Ideally, many of the larger churches that have Church Online or are contemplating doing Church Online have multiple staff in their youth ministry departments. More than likely some of those staff are already very active in online communities and could help launch this online youth ministry. The potential for ministry to teens in an online Christian environment is unlimited.

With a majority of teenagers already connected through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, building a platform that uses these mediums would be a natural bridge to an online youth ministry. Churches would make a mistake to think they could build an online platform that competes with these social giants. Instead, finding ways to build community within these already used and established media platforms is going to be pivotal to its success. Christ Fellowship has more than 7,000 members that use the church's Facebook fan page with more than one million hits per month. We use the fan page to send out Scripture, words of encouragement, special event announcements, as well as to gather prayer requests. The same

could be the starting point for an online youth ministry that would build community and connection for students online.

Additionally, a youth ministry could broadcast their services online allowing those who do not live near a church that has a youth program to connect with the teaching and worship from a dynamic youth ministry. Similar to how weekend services are broadcast, the youth service could be broadcasted with chat rooms and prayer rooms being led by online volunteers. Online discussion of critical topics facing teens would be natural as so many teens are already sharing and discussion such topics online with friends. The advantage with the online youth ministry would be that they are sharing with trained Christian adults who can help guide them to a biblical perspective regarding the issues. In his book *Windows PCs in the Ministry*, author Steve Hewitt gives practical advice for streaming services without high complexity or high cost. Using services like www.churchonvideo.tv or StreamingChurch.tv student ministries could afford to stream their youth services online and keep students connected and growing.¹⁷

In addition to teens that don't live in a community with a vibrant youth ministry, this online youth ministry also could be critical for those teens that do not have transportation or cannot rely on their parents to drive them to and from church. Because most youth services take place mid-week, time does not allow many parents to make it home from work, prepare dinner, and get their children back out for the youth service. An online youth ministry would help those students stay consistent and connected.

However, in an informal survey I conducted with youth pastors, the concern was raised that an online youth ministry in itself would not completely meet the needs of their students. Most felt that the students still needed face-to-face time with other Christian teenagers and adults. Most of the youth pastors did agree that an online youth ministry would be a positive supplement to their youth programs for students that cannot be consistent in their attendance due to work or

school requirements, but it could not completely replace traditional youth programs in the local church.

The following question was posed to youth pastors regarding the viability of online youth ministry. Their answers follow:

- Question: Anyone doing youth ministry online? What church has the best online youth ministry presence? Would Church Online work for student ministry?
- Answers:
 - William N.: No won't work....we need to assemble our self. We need interaction and communion with each other. If Jesus had our technology would he have had the last supper on line? We need to gather together not isolate ourselves.
 - Jenna L.: I've never done it but I think for the average teen it would be a good idea... I'd love to have an online young adult program that does meet occasionally but bases is online because getting the time to go somewhere is very slim
 - Joanna F.: If the goal of youth ministry is students growing deeper in their relationship with Christ, that requires knowing Him more and being known....which is about real face time with others. Online tools are important, but a ministry run on line with occasional gatherings leads to a feeling of autonomy and anonymity, neither of which promotes a deeper relationship with Christ. We also want students to go out into their world, not just have another reason to be on an electronic device. Online tools, like Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc. open a window...Face Time opens the door. ▪ Jenna L.: But you are also more likely to get an unbelieving teen to check out a Website and get connected than enter a church door. I understand the need for traditional youth groups but the online is a great new wave that I think could be really effective
 - Joanna F.: I never said the Face Time had to be in church...in fact, most relationships for teens happen outside of youth group, but still face to face. It's a long process that costs us our time...picking them up, driving them places, buying them coffee, taking their late night calls, being there for tragedy, confronting them in sin, and being consistently...there...loving them and proving to them that Jesus is worth it. What teens want more than anything is for us to be real, not phony. You can't evaluate than through an online connection point.
 - William N.: I like your comments Joanna. We need stop accommodating people. If they won't go to a church...do you really think they will check out online. I agree we need to be directly involved in their lives. People don't want to know how much you know they want to know how much you care.
 - Joanna F.: Actually William we do need to accommodate people by meeting them where they are, and most of the teen generation are looking to the Internet for information and connection...but it can't only be there. It's a complex answer to be sure. If Jesus were alive today, I imagine He would not have a problem texting or blogging, all with the intent to share Himself with us in person, ultimately. The truth of Christ is unchanging, but the delivery and method changes, necessarily, with

culture. As the hands and feet of Christ, we need to go where they are before they will come to us. Thanks, Dave, for such an interesting topic:)

- Jenna L.: Dave if you do find an online ministry, please let me know I am VERY interested in one :)
- Dave S.: Great feedback guys. I love the discussion. I think with the advance of technology we will need to consider online options for not only discipleship but also gatherings for worship and preaching. Online is a huge platform that we must utilize.

Currently, very few online discipleship resources are available for teens. Even fewer sites are geared towards equipping parents to lead their own children. This area represents an enormous opportunity for the church, both the physical church and the Online Church. The equipping of our parents is critical to capturing the hearts of our teenagers for God.

THE NECESSITY OF WORSHIP ONLINE

With or without a specific ministry for children and teens, the Online Church is a place where people gather to worship God. I personally recognize the participants of our church online from our physical, broadcasting campus each week. Often, individuals are mentioned by name acknowledging our church family meeting in multiple locations around the world. Groups that are gathering perhaps in their dormitory room from college or a small town in Europe who have made themselves known to our online pastor are welcomed by name. Additionally, David greets each person that joins the online chat as the service is beginning. As the worship service starts, each person is encouraged to focus on God and His truth as they participate with their church family. People have often commented that they feel free and comfortable worshipping at Church Online. Some have mentioned that had it not been for Church Online they would not have otherwise had the opportunity to connect with God in a corporate setting.

Several months ago, a lady by the name of Shara was worshipping online. She was a regular attendee of one of our satellite campuses. This day she was struggling in several areas of her life and asked for prayer. At the end of the service, David had a conversation with her and she admitted that for the first time during worship she was able to completely yield to God. She

wept openly during her time of worship. She had never cried before in church. She admitted to being proud, afraid, and self-conscious. That day God did something very special in her heart, and it changed her. For Shelly, worshipping online that day brought profound freedom and joy to her soul.

Giving is also an expression of worship (Pro. 3:9). At Church Online, David shares a personal stewardship lesson before providing those online with the opportunity to participate in giving tithes and offerings. A simple “Give Online” hyperlink button is on the viewer screen. Once the participant clicks on the button, a new window opens that allows the participant to give electronically while not being disconnected from the worship experience. Our church feels that providing biblical instruction on tithing along with opportunities to give online are necessary aspects of the traditional church that must translate to the online church as well.

Communion is another essential element of worship (1 Cor. 11:17-34). As previously mentioned, David gives those participating online advance notice that communion will be taking place as a part of worship during that service. In addition to preparing their hearts for this time of reflection and celebration, they are encouraged to gather some elements such as juice and bread so they can participate with the rest of their church family. Sometimes communion is taken along with the entire church at the physical campus and other times David will come on screen and lead those attending church online through the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. We have discovered that participating in communion is vital for those participating in church online. As they worship in community with others, they desire the corporate nature of celebrating communion together.

THE NECESSITY OF DISCIPLESHIP ONLINE

One key responsibility of any church is to make disciples (Matt. 28:19-20). The church isn’t called to make converts, but rather to make disciples who follow in the way and truth of

Christ. Therefore, to fulfill the Great Commission and thus the mission of the church, a robust discipleship program is critical. This is one key area that must be constantly analyzed and improved in any church, whether physical or virtual. Still, the virtual church has the potential to leverage technology to strongly enhance the learning experience.

Schools have long determined that learning can occur online. From online home schooling courses to universities, educational institutions have leveraged the Internet to help people learn and develop.¹⁸ Several churches offer their classes online for those in their congregation who cannot attend a midweek class.¹⁹ Learning can and does occur in an online environment. The question is how can Church Online leverage this experience even further. The advantage of having your congregation already connecting and growing through the Internet makes the bridge to online learning less of a hurdle. Those participating in Church Online are familiar with navigating online resources and experiences.²⁰

Currently my church is offering several classes for our Church Online community:

Get In the Game (Christ Fellowship's Membership Class) – Taught and facilitated through Skype²¹, Livestream²², and USTREAM²³;

Foundations (teaching the foundations of the faith) – Taught and facilitated through Skype, Mogulus, Livestream, and USTREAM;

Budget Coaching – Taught and facilitated through USTREAM;

Triumph over Suffering – Taught and facilitated through Mogulus and LiveStream;

XEE (an Evangelism Training from Evangelism Explosion) – Taught and facilitated through Mogulus and LiveStream

IMAX (Maximizing the weekend sermon) – Taught and facilitated through Mogulus and LiveStream;

Online Women's Bible Study – Taught and facilitated through Skype;

Live Like You Were Dying – Taught and facilitated through Skype.

This past year, I brought together the online pastor and the Director of Adult Ministries (for their physical campuses) and challenged them to build a new online platform that would serve both the Church Online as well as the rest of the Christ Fellowship church family. Understanding that all people are at a different place in their spiritual journey, a thorough discipleship ministry should be able to analyze where a person is on that journey—from pre-Christian to young in the faith to solid believer—and then direct them to the appropriate growth opportunities. Similar expectations are necessary for an online discipleship program.

This challenge came as a result of our leadership’s examination of Willow Creek’s *Reveal Study*. In it they describe what many churches already knew. The *Reveal Study* discovered that churches, especially large mega-churches, are very good at attracting the lost and helping them accept Christ, but poor at helping them go very far in their relationship with Jesus.

The decline of the church’s influence as people mature spiritually suggests that the church may have put too much emphasis on the spiritual equivalence of the diaper changing and homework-helping stage of care. Much like parents, the church may need to shift its relationship with its maturing disciples into something different in order to maintain an appropriate level of influence and provide the support they need.²⁴

Furthermore, the report clarified that typical mega-churches could help new believers take their first steps of faith in laying a good spiritual foundation but often failed at producing solid “reproducing” believers.²⁵

We knew that was an area of weakness that needed attention. Due to the rapid growth of the church over the years, the ability to create a healthy process that truly produced strong disciples had been lacking. Our discipleship process had some gaping holes in it. There were places that were solid but just as many places that were ineffective.

In 2008 in response to Willow Creek’s *Reveal Study*, we began to dismantle our discipleship strategy. Pastors, church staff, and key lay leaders were included in the deconstruction and analysis of the ministry. A series of meetings that stretched over sixteen

months in partnership with other key churches across America, including Willow Creek, has resulted in a new discipleship platform that is solid and robust. Taking the lessons learned from Willow Creek's subsequent study, *Follow Me*, we built a discipleship tool that not only helps new Christians take their first steps of growth through mentors and coaches, but helps those who have walked with Christ for decades continue to be challenged and grow in their faith. Those mature Christians are challenged to be constantly reproducing their faith through a variety of mentoring opportunities within the discipleship model.

In the early months as this new discipleship model was introduced, hundreds of people were beginning to discover what spiritual growth and enrichment looks like in their life. All of this was done through the lens of leveraging the online environment to help people grow, whether they were a part of one of our physical campuses or our online campus. Approaching the construction of a new discipleship model with this perspective allowed the church to build something once for both the virtual and physical world. The crossover is seamless as many of the tools for those at a physical campus are actually housed in a virtual setting. This enables those on the journey to further their study online throughout the week and interact with others from their class.

Christ Fellowship's Discipleship Journey is a relationally based, mentor-driven model for equipping people to grow in their relationship with God and others in our church family. It is an intentional journey of faith guided by trained mentors and supported by online resources that empower participants to impact their world with the love and message of Jesus Christ. The effectiveness of this program is evaluated by believers who are connecting, growing, and serving in their church and the surrounding communities. Ultimately, the goal is for disciples who are making disciples evidenced by the multiplication of mentors and journey groups that spawn ongoing healthy spiritual relationships.

The Discipleship Journey begins with an inviting welcome supported by trained hosts who introduce guests to the Discovery Class, which serves as the starting point for the journey ahead. In this class, participants meet a mentor who will walk with them through a four-week Journey group experience. Each week progressively builds upon the next as the mentor engages with the participant around purposeful topics such as identity in Christ, spiritual disciplines, stewardship, generosity, and core beliefs/values. This happens within the online environment using video chatting and instant messaging based on the video teaching. Additionally, there are “bridges” between the weekly online meetings. These bridges are weekly assignments that the participants complete that give them and their mentor more context in which to process what they are learning. Toward the end of the journey group, each participant completes an online assessment that evaluates their spiritual maturity level within three areas: connecting, growing, and serving.

The purpose of the assessment is three-fold: (1) To gauge where they are in their spiritual maturity; (2) To help them understand where they would be most interested in serving and; (3) To declare their commitment to be a member of the church family. The outcome of the assessment provides the participant and their mentor with the best next steps for the participant’s spiritual growth. Class options, sermons to watch, and books to read that are all customized to the participant’s personal spiritual journey are some of the next steps provided. As participants take the recommended steps in each area, they are able to update their assessment, and new opportunities are provided for continued learning and growth.

Each stage of the assessment is stored as a part of the participant’s online profile, giving the online pastors and mentors great insight to each member’s spiritual road map. This tool will help not only those in Church Online, but those in the church’s physical campuses that are using the church’s online classes for growth and spiritual development.

THE NECESSITY OF FELLOWSHIP ONLINE

One of the important elements of any church body is its ability to connect with and care for one another.²⁶ This issue and how it is experienced at Church Online has been addressed earlier at length, but it is important to note again here that fellowship is essential to the church so it is equally essential for Church Online.

To summarize, many opportunities are available for people to connect with one another through Church Online. The live chat that takes place before, during, and after each service allows members to connect with each other and ask for prayer or advice. Those participating can also ask to speak with a pastor and have almost immediate access to David and our trained counselors. Online chat hosts help to answer questions and direct people to tools that can help them on their spiritual journey.

Life Groups serve as small groups where people can gather throughout the week via video conferencing to study the Word, pray for each other, and build relationships. Those connected to Life Groups build strong ties to others in the church and are supportive of one another through times of struggle and need. This is very much like the physical church. Those who simply attend but don't connect find themselves lacking deep relationships and care in times of need.

Fellowship is a building block of a healthy church.

THE NECESSITY OF MINISTRY ONLINE

God made us to serve others. It is a critical part of any body of believers. The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 2:10, "It is God himself who has made us what we are and given us new lives from Christ Jesus; and long ages ago he planned that we should spend these lives helping others" (Ephesians 2:10, *Living Bible*). This Scripture emphasizes that the lives we have are from

God and for His purposes. Ages ago He planned for us to use our lives serving Him and serving others. Just as God has made everything for a purpose, we have been made to serve.

As followers of Christ we have also been saved to serve. Again the Apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy 1:9, “It is God who saved us and chose us for his holy work...” (2 Timothy 1:9, *Living Bible*). That “holy work” is our ministry or service. While Church Online provides instruction and places for people to learn to serve, serving isn’t just what happens “in” a church. The church is made up of people. The church isn’t a building or a location. It is people living out their faith every day.²⁷ Therefore serving doesn’t have to take place within the context of a church facility for it to be authentic service to God.

In fact, as discussed before, the Church Online with its limited needs for volunteers has the opportunity to go and be the church in the world. There are limited needs for service hosts, small group leaders, and mentors. This limitation can actual be a great asset as it can encourage more people to go into the world to serve and love. People not serving in a nursery or cleaning a church facility can dedicate that time serving in a homeless shelter in their town or caring for an elderly couple in their neighborhood. Church members not serving in a parking lot or volunteering in a choir can spend those hours each week volunteering for a crisis pregnancy center. The issue is serving. The focus is on others. This can be done within the needs and ministries of an Online Church or outside in the community. Both are opportunities to fulfill the calling of God on a person’s life.

THE NECESSITY OF EVANGELISM ONLINE

Previously we discussed how the Online Church is poised to evangelize the lost. Hundreds of millions of people are online who have never heard the truth of Christ.²⁸ They aren’t walking into our physical churches. They are online, and a Church Online is positioned to reach them in ways that traditional, physical churches cannot.²⁹ To reach people that no one is reaching,

you have to do things that no one else is doing. Church Online becomes a tool for evangelism to those that are unreached or hard to reach. Church Online can be the church for people living in remote areas where there are no churches. Church Online can reach into prisons and evangelize and disciple inmates.

Encouraging the “Net Generation” to become online evangelists and apologists could cause a tidal wave of evangelism opportunities. As these e-vangelists approach everyday life on the Internet through the lens of sharing the gospel, their influence will have major impact for Christ. As more and more community and social networking takes place online, more opportunities emerge for the Church Online to have a powerful presence.

CONSIDERING MISCELLANEOUS PROGRAMS AND MINISTRIES

Churches that are just starting out usually begin with the bare essentials for ministry. Weekend worship experiences along with some type of small group connection may be all they have in the beginning. Even a children’s or youth ministry may not be a part of the beginning focus. However, as that church expands and reaches more people, the expectation to add additional ministries naturally follows.

The Church Online is in its infancy stages, just learning what is critical for its effectiveness and success. As it continues to mature, there will be the demand and opportunity for auxiliary ministries to emerge. As with any church there is no right or wrong answer when it comes to auxiliary ministries. Nowhere in the Bible does it demand that a church have a children’s ministry or a youth pastor. Still, the addition of these ministries is an opportunity to reach more people for Christ.

Since one key target group for Church Online is those with disabilities and special needs, Church Online would be wise to consider the full opportunities with this group of people.³⁰ Those who are deaf would greatly benefit from American Sign Language (ASL) enhancement housed

within the online video player. In fact, when congregants surveyed from my church were asked what suggestions they would make for the church's improvement, a remarkable amount of people asked for this adaptation to be made for those in need.³¹ Very few Online Churches are offering ASL during their weekend services. Our church leadership has been approached several times with requests for this feature. Once again the argument emerges that if no one is reaching this people group for Christ, this becomes an opportunity for Church Online to meet a need and speak a language that would invite the deaf, disabled community into a church family. Additionally, Church Online could easily facilitate Bible study groups that target a variety of demographic groups including men's, women's, and seniors', for example. By simply leveraging teaching that is being used at its physical locations and training more chat room hosts to lead the online group discussions, more people could connect with each other around the truth of God's Word.

WRAP-UP

All that being said, these auxiliary ministry options are just that—options. They are not necessary or critical ministries for Church Online to fulfill the biblical definition of church.

Churches can be the church without a men's ministry. Churches can fulfill the Great Commission without a ministry for the deaf. What they must do is preach the gospel of Jesus Christ without compromise, hold out the hope of God, and help people become fully devoted disciples of Jesus.

As Church Online helps people worship God, grow in their faith, serve one another, grow in community, and share their faith, the Church Online is fulfilling its God-given purpose. As Church Online matures and is tempted to add additional ministry opportunities, it must always make sure it is accomplishing these five purposes well.

NOTES

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- ² B. A. Robinson, "How Many North Americans Attend Religious Services (and how many lie about going)?" *Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance*, (August 10, 2007); available from http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel_rate.htm (accessed March 11, 2011).
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- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Robinson.
- ⁶ Miniwatts Marketing Group, June 30, 2010; available from <http://www.Internetworldstats.com/stats.htm> (accessed January 2, 2011).
- ⁷ Estes.
- ⁸ Warren, 107.
- ⁹ Norman Wade Cox (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, Volume 1 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1958). See the section *The Function of the Church*; The Worship of God: 274; The Word of God – The church as the body of Christ exists to proclaim the Word of God . . . : 275; The service of God: 275; Evangelism: 407, 416.
- ¹⁰ Jared Kennedy, "The History of Family Ministry, Part 4: The Family Ministry Movement" (May 1, 2010); available from <http://sojournkids.com/2010/05/the-history-of-family-ministry-part-4-the-family-ministrymovement/> (accessed March 11, 2011).
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- ¹⁷ Hewitt.
- ¹⁸ I. E. Allen and J. Seaman, “Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States” (Needham: Sloan Consortium, 2008); available from <http://sloanconsortium.org/> (accessed March 11, 2011).
- ¹⁹ Sea Coast Church, available from <http://www.seacoast.org/> (accessed March 11, 2011) and Saddleback Church; available from <http://www.saddleback.com/> (accessed March 11, 2011).
- ²⁰ Estes.
- ²¹ Wikipedia, “Skype”; available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skype> (accessed March 5, 2011). Skype (pronounced /'skaɪp/) is a [software application](#) that allows users to make [voice calls and chats over the Internet](#). Calls to other users within the Skype service are free, while calls to both traditional [landline telephones](#) and [mobile phone](#) can be made for a fee using a debit-based user account system. Skype has also become popular for its additional features which include [instant messaging](#), [file transfer](#), and [video conferencing](#).
- ²² Wikipedia, “Livestream”; available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Livestream> (accessed March 5, 2011). Livestream, formerly known as Mogulus, is a live streaming video platform that allows users to view and broadcast video content using a camera and a computer through the Internet. It offers a free ad-supported service and multi-tiered premium services. Livestream also offers wireless HD broadcasting in the form of a device combination called Livepack, described as “a satellite television truck in a backpack.”
- ²³ Wikipedia, “Ustream”; available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ustream.tv> (accessed March 5, 2011). Ustream, established March 2007, is a network of diverse channels providing a platform for [live casting](#) and live [video streaming](#) of events online.
- ²⁴ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where are You?* (Barrington: Willow Creek, 2007), 55.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ²⁶ Estes.
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- ²⁸ See <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm> (accessed March 11, 2011).
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Chapter 12

ADMINISTERING THE ORDINANCES ONLINE

By
Todd Mullins

You will survey the arguments against administering the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Table online. But you will see how they can be answered, especially when viewed from an online perspective. Any church that allows for exceptions to administering them in the physical presence of a congregation is an argument for online celebration.

Beyond the outward issue of community and the inward, fundamental opposition to change, the administration of the sacraments of Communion and Baptism are often among the leading arguments against Church Online. How do members participate in the Lord's Supper? How can a person be baptized virtually? These are valid doctrinal questions worthy of consideration.

Most Online Churches currently encourage their members to get their own bread and juice or wine in preparation for communion. Later in the service, when communion is explained and prayed over, they are invited to share in the elements they personally prepared. This may be in conjunction with the church that is streaming its service or as an online community with their online pastor. Either way, this is viewed by many as a valid expression of remembering the Lord's Supper within the context of community.

For Catholics, however, the issue of communion being offered online is absurd and sacrilegious since they believe the wafer and wine become the actual body and blood of our Lord. Their theological position of transubstantiation supports their belief that the bread becomes the body of Christ when the priest raises it in the air and says, "This is my body." They would therefore argue that communion must be administered by the priest within the context of a

physical location. However, both Catholic and Presbyterian churches have what they call “extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist” that go into nursing homes, jails, and to those who are bedridden to administer the sacraments. They are not priests themselves, but they are blessed and sent by a priest as an acceptable substitute.¹

While the Catholic position of The Lord’s Supper fails to acknowledge the “symbolic character of Christ’s statements” (Matthew 26) and the “clear New Testament teaching on the finality and completeness of Christ’s sacrifice once for all time for all our sins” (Hebrews 9:25-28),² many Protestants would agree with their Catholic friends on the issue of clergy administered sacraments. The thought of someone at home getting a piece of bread and some juice or wine seems too common and irreverent. However, according to Wayne Grudem,

The New Testament gives no instructions at all that place restrictions on the people who can preside at Communion. And since Scripture places no such restrictions on us, it would not seem to be justified to say that only priests can dispense the elements of the Lord’s Supper. Moreover, since the New Testament teaches that all believers are priests and members of a ‘royal priesthood’ (1 Peter 2:9, Hebrews 4:16, 10:19-22), we should not specify a certain class of people who have the rights of priests, as in the old covenant, but we should emphasize that all believers share the great spiritual privilege of coming near to God.³

The purpose of communion is to remember the sacrifice of the Lord and commit one’s life in response to that sacrifice.⁴ Protestants believe the sacrament of communion is symbolic. The bread symbolizes the body of Christ while the juice symbolizes the blood He shed on the cross. If this is indeed a symbolic act, then, as Grudem advocates, the location and ceremony do not make the experience more “holy.”

One of the pastors I surveyed said, “I don’t believe there is anything wrong with performing these sacraments in any setting. The important part isn’t the location or surrounding circumstances. The important thing is the heart of the believer and the understanding of the significance of the specific sacrament.”

Most denominations don't address the topic of "online communion" in their bylaws as it has become a more recent phenomenon. However many denominations offer guidelines for worship within their churches. The Presbyterian Church has a "Book of Order" that is published every few years that addresses the issues of church government, worship, and church discipline. Realizing their denomination crosses the globe, their General Counsel makes room for slight variances in issues such as communion. Elements for communion may be substituted if local context requires. This may be the case in locations around the world where bread or wine are not readily available or would be impractical for regular use. The guiding concept behind this ruling is the fact that communion is symbolic.

Since bread and wine are not readily available to all those participating in a Church Online service, is there another way to address the elements of communion? Since we do not believe that the bread actually becomes the body of Christ, is there a digital form of "bread" that could be used to remember the body of Christ? Since our location is "synthetic" could there be a synthetic replacement of the elements that would allow for an equally sacred remembrance of Christ's sacrifice?

In discussing the place of the sacraments in our religious expressions, one cannot ignore the practices of the Quakers. One of the most distinctive features of the Quakers from most all other Christian churches and denominations is their lack of observance of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Still the Quakers remain a group of Christians fully devoted to the Word of God. If they can remain a community without celebrating communion, then it is possible an online church could remain a community.

"Sacrament" comes from the word "sacred," meaning a sacrament is a sacred event or "expression where man meets God, where the natural intersects with the supernatural."⁵ Quakers believe that all of life is sacred, that all of life belongs to God, and every person should live in

constant communion with Christ. No ritualistic moment in a church service is needed to recognize that fellowship. Additionally, they hold the belief that all days are holy unto God, not just Sundays. The Quakers do not believe that observing the sacraments of Communion or Baptism is wrong; they are just not necessary or required for Christian fellowship or discipleship.

Quakers believe that the presence and power of Christ is not dependent on symbolic rites or actions, but upon daily surrender to and communion with the Holy Spirit. They fear that religious rituals can quickly lose their meaning and become “religious.” The Quakers walk in such a way before their God that they make every meal a table at the Lord’s Supper, pausing to reflect on the grace of God through Christ. The reality of communion is not about the elements but about the attitude of the heart. The presence of Christ with and in His church does not require a symbolic exercise, but a real and daily connection with the Holy Spirit.⁶ Some online churches will probably follow their example.

This teaching is not coming from some liberal group that doesn’t embrace the inerrancy of Scripture. Rather it comes from a group considered by many to be narrow-minded and even out of touch with modern society. Yet the authenticity of their faith is refreshing and thought provoking. Countless Christians attend churches every week and participate in the Lord’s Supper without any real thought to allowing the Holy Spirit to be powerful and evident in their everyday lives. They move through the religious motions of communion without being in communion with the Spirit of God. Could it be that God would rather have someone participate in a lifestyle of daily communion with Christ and never partake in the elements of physical communion? If that is a worthy argument, then communion online becomes a moot point. The attitude of the heart of the person observing communion is what truly matters. Whether the bread and juice are provided by the church or the local supermarket becomes less of the issue. The issue is the focus of the heart and life walking in surrender and communion with the Holy Spirit.

Clearly, the questioning of the administration of the sacred elements may appear borderline heretical to some, yet the questions must be asked as society and technology move forward. In fact, as theologian Millard Erickson notes, the means of administering the elements in communion is at once “a factor that unites and divides Christendom.”⁷ Denominations have been at odds over proper methodology for ages, but as Erickson points out, we must focus on the meaning of the practice and less on the method.

The subject of the spiritual or practical value of the Lord’s Supper has become lost in the dispute over theoretical issues. The theoretical questions are important (they affect the spiritual considerations), and so they ought not to be too quickly dismissed. If, however, we get bogged down in the technical issues, and do not move on to deal with the practical meaning, we will have missed the whole point of Christ’s having established the Supper. Experience of the meaning of the Lord’s Supper, not just comprehension, is our goal.⁸

Regardless of where one stands on this issue of communion, the Church Online does usually address the issue, allowing people to prepare the elements for themselves. The elements are typically prayed over by a pastor before the online members are invited to take them. Church Online opponents will sometimes yield on this point as many of the concerns are logically addressed.

However, the issue of baptism is altogether different. Here is where many Online Churches differ in their opinions. Some Church Online supporters say that members who want to be baptized need to go to a physical church to have this performed. If they are handicapped and live locally, they are encouraged to find a way into the church, or members from the church may go physically to their house. Some online pastors have contacted churches in towns near where their online parishioners live and have asked for a minister in their town to perform the baptism.

One of the pastors I surveyed agreed with this position. “Baptism can be accomplished by building networks of believers who might partner with the church to administer communion and/or missional teams might travel to various parts of the online campus each year and baptize people . . .”

However, strong proponents of Church Online do not support this option as it invalidates the legitimacy of Church Online, making it dependent upon a physical church for its existence. These Church Online advocates encourage online congregants to find someone in their family or a close friend to perform a baptism for them, often while the online pastor video casts in for the ceremony.

Just like the question of administering one's own communion, some have questioned whether baptism administered by anyone other than clergy is appropriate or irreverent. In fact, some of the pastors surveyed didn't even wrestle with the argument in their answers. One of the pastors' answers strongly implied that they believed that baptism of the believer was reserved for clergy alone. "A pastor performs the sacraments in the leadership of a congregation so it would be difficult to participate when a person is at home—particularly baptism."⁹

Theologian G. W. Bromily remarked about this very issue in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*.

Discussion has been raised concerning proper ministers and subjects of the action. In the first instance there may be agreement with Augustine that Christ himself is the true minister ('he will baptize you,' Matthew 3:11). But Christ does not give the external baptism directly; he commits this to his disciples (John 4:2). This is taken to mean that baptism should be administered by those to whom there is entrusted, by inward calling and outward calling, the ministry of Word and sacrament, though laymen have been allowed to baptize in the Roman Church, and some early Baptists conceived the strange notion of baptizing themselves.¹⁰

Wayne Grudem agrees with Bromily's position. "We should recognize here that Scripture simply does not specify any restrictions on who can perform the ceremony of baptism. . . if we truly believe in the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:4-10), then there seems to be no need in principle to restrict the right to perform baptism only to ordained clergy."¹¹

Believing that alternative modes of baptism are permissible, Potential Church (formerly Flamingo Road Church) in Cooper City, Florida, was one of the first online churches to perform an Internet baptism. The online pastor and the baptismal candidate set up computers with Web

cameras. The candidate filled her bathtub with water and asked a friend to perform the actual baptism; while the online pastor oversaw the spiritual aspects of the baptism. The service was broadcast live over the Internet to the members of their church online and is posted on YouTube.com.

As awkward as this online baptism may appear, this young lady took a step of obedience and shared her testimony with the world. The truth is she reached many more people by sharing her baptism on the Internet than she would have in the confines of a traditional church. The online service even captured the attention of media who reported the phenomenon.

The arguments concerning communion and baptism are very similar as both are symbolic. Baptism symbolizes the new life we have received in Christ.¹² Romans 6:4 tells us, “We were therefore buried with him through baptism and into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” Throughout the New Testament we are taught that baptism symbolizes the death and resurrection of Christ in a believer’s life (Colossians 2:12, Titus 3:5).

Because baptism is a symbol, could that symbolism be communicated and celebrated differently? Is water even necessary for the symbolism to hold true? If we believe that something mysterious or miraculous happens in the water, we must be reminded that God is the One who does the mysterious and the miraculous. Could He not accomplish the same with “virtual water?” Bromily believes the “type of water and circumstances of administration are not important. . . . Other ceremonies may be used at discretion so long as they are not unscriptural and do not distract from the true action.”¹³

However, it is important to note that in Greek, the word “baptism” most clearly means “to dip or to plunge under water.”¹⁴ In the Bible, we see various examples of baptism by immersion. “John baptized Aenon ‘because there was plenty of water’ (John 3:23). When

baptized by John, Jesus came ‘up out of the water’ (Mark 1:10). Upon hearing the good news, the Ethiopian eunuch said to Philip, ‘Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?’ (Acts 8:36). Then they both went down into the water. Philip baptized him, and they came up out of the water (v. 38-39).”¹⁵

Each example shows that the employed mode of baptism was in water by immersion. However, while some theologians insist that because the biblical mode is immersion, others, like Erickson, suggest that perhaps while immersion is historically authoritative it isn’t authoritatively normative.¹⁶ In other words, it is not mandated that we perform the same cultural practice, just that we keep the meaning intact. “Those to whom the mode does not seem crucial maintain that there is no essential link between the meaning of baptism and the way in which it is administered.”¹⁷ This position leaves room for special considerations such as home/self-administration, a virtual representation of water, and for the special needs community who cannot have traditional baptism by immersion because of physical or proximal limitations.

Additionally, baptism is often referred to as an outward testimony of what God has accomplished on the inside of a believer.¹⁸ It is portrayed as identifying oneself as a follower of Christ. If baptism serves as a testimony to friends and family, couldn’t that testimony be better communicated in an online environment than within the confines of a church? In an online environment, the believer has the opportunity to share what Christ means to them, the difference He has made in their life, and the new path they are walking with the entire world. When this same testimony takes place inside a church, only those in attendance have the opportunity to hear the story.

Ultimately the heart of the gospel is about connecting man back to God through the transforming power of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). The goal of Church Online is to strengthen the faith of the weak and cause people to draw closer to God. If someone in Perth, Australia, can

acquire their own communion elements and share with an online community around the Lord's Supper, then Church Online is fulfilling its purpose. The bread and juice in their home in Australia is no different than the crackers and juice served at a physical church.

The Holy Spirit uses them both to remind us of the sacrifice of Christ.

Similarly, the Holy Spirit works through the sacrament of Holy Baptism. God takes care of the spiritual aspect within the sacrament. "...We remember that behind the external action there lies the true baptism, which is that of the shed blood of Christ."¹⁹ The physical aspects of the sacraments help us connect with the divine.

Baptism in an online environment continues to be one of the unresolved challenges for Church Online. However, many are not willing to engage in debate at the expense of moving forward with a valid online ministry. The church at large has never agreed on every issue of faith yet has remained effective in reaching the world for Jesus. Online baptism may continue to be such an issue. However, as one pastor surveyed put it, "Church Online is outside of the box of the typical bricks and mortar church and if we can accept that individuals come fully prepared to attend a worship service, then we must be outside of the box regarding the implementation of the sacraments."

NOTES

¹ Peter A. Kwasniewski, "Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist," *Eternal World Television Network* (Spring 2002) taken from Sapiaentia: Newsletter of the Confraternity of Catholic Clergy © 2002, Spring 2002, page 13; available from <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Liturgy/EXTRMIN.HTM> (accessed March 16, 2011).

² Grudem, 992-993.

³ Ibid., 993.

⁴ Erickson, 1119.

⁵ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through The Centuries, A History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 381-382.

- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Erickson, 1116.
- ⁸ Ibid., 1117.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ G. W. Bromily, "Baptism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, second edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 129.
- ¹¹ Grudem, 983.
- ¹² Erickson, 1105.
- ¹³ Bromily, 129.
- ¹⁴ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), 1:305-306.
- ¹⁵ Erickson, 1113.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Erickson, 1105.
- ¹⁹ Bromily, 130.

Chapter 13

MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ONLINE CHURCH

By
Todd Mullins

You may read the results of author Todd Mullins' doctoral thesis. These results can be studied further at <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/>.

For something to be effective, it must produce its desired outcome.¹ For effectiveness to be evaluated, two critical steps must occur. First, the desired outcome must be determined, i.e., what is the goal? Second, there must be measurement tools in place to determine if and when these goals are reached.

We grow up familiar with measuring effectiveness. In school students quickly understand that to pass a grade level they must learn the material and be able to communicate their gained knowledge. Test scores attempt to measure the effectiveness of the learning experience.

Businesses also understand the importance of measuring effectiveness.² Without set goals, companies will function aimlessly, never effectively meeting the demands of their clientele, their owners (stockholders) or society at large. They measure effectiveness in sales and profit. If sales are down, they must analyze everything from marketing to customer demand, to customer service.

Likewise in the church, we must become better at marking and measuring our success in everything we do. We are not about selling clothes or convincing the world they need a new gadget. We are about matters of eternal significance so it is imperative that we constantly evaluate to determine if we are communicating the message of the gospel in the most effective way possible. The message will never change, but the methods with which we communicate must

constantly change and evolve. The Church Online is one way today's church is adapting to reach the culture for Christ. With this new adventure comes the need for clear goals and new measurement tools to evaluate effectiveness. Goals must be specific. To simply state that the goal is to reach more people for Christ is ambiguous and indistinct. There's a good chance that any church who begins to even stream their services will reach at least one more person for Christ with just a little effort.

Goals for Church Online need to be established for each area that is critical to any church: worship, evangelism, discipleship, fellowship (or community), and serving. In addition, due to the debate concerning the administration of the ordinances, Church Online must measure how they are fulfilling these ordinances of the church. Once the goals have been set, regular evaluation of these areas must be performed to guarantee effectiveness.

When my church began church online, clear goals were not set. We were simply attempting to enhance the experience for those viewing their live worship stream on the Internet. As you know, we assigned an online pastor in hopes that he could create more community and care for those watching online. We had no other effective way to measure that desire other than individual stories. As powerful as those stories may be, they became anecdotal and not a means for thorough evaluation.

MEASURING ATTENDANCE ONLINE

Within the first few months, our leadership began to measure the number of people joining online. Measuring the number of attendees is a complex assignment. Unlike at a physical location, you cannot simply count the number of people in the room. We began by measuring Internet Protocol (IP) addresses, the numerical label assigned to each computer device. By counting IP addresses we knew how many computers were connected to their service. We could

even determine the length of time each computer was connected and the country where the attendee was located.

Still we could not be sure how many people were logging on with each computer IP address. Soon we surveyed those joining Church Online and asked a few simple questions to determine who was actually attending. Not taking into consideration some large groups that were gathering together, we found that the average attendance per computer was 2.1. This allowed us to establish the approximate number of people joining in for worship online. We took the total number of IP addresses, reduced that number by 20% to allow for those that may have connected more than once, and multiplied that number by 2.1. Using this very conservative formula, we determined that we had thousands joining in every week for services.³

Among the various online churches, there is not a consensus as to how to measure attendance. No standard measurement tool for quantifying Internet statistics and attendance exists. Bobby Gruenwald of Life Church says, “Currently, no standard of measurement exists for online attendance and isn’t likely to emerge in an area of such diversity.”⁴ Life Church chooses to measure the point of maximum online IP addresses that occur simultaneously. Some Online Churches only measure those that stay connected for a minimum of 20 minutes; while others measure every IP address that connects to their site if even for only seconds.⁵

Currently, the method we use to measure online attendance seems conservative and appropriate and gives us a point from which to measure growth and development. However, it is an area that falls under scrutiny from those opposing the Online Church. Should better, more accurate indicators of evaluation be made available, we would be among the first to implement such tools because of our great concern about providing community and discipleship to everyone attending church online.

MEASURING ONLINE GIVING

In addition to attendance, online giving became the next metric we began to evaluate. During the offering time, online attenders were encouraged to give and support the church just as they would in any other church. We soon realized this measurement wasn't exact as many viewers were active members at one of their other campuses but were watching online that particular week. Soon we implemented a campus selection button with the online giving mechanism. Those who are primarily a part of Church Online select that button before they give. This has helped to clearly see how much the online attenders are giving.

It's interesting to note that this is an area in which I feel we've failed. With approximately 7000 people attending online each weekend, the offerings from the Church Online are currently \$2000 to \$4000 each week. When the Online Church began, giving was half that amount.⁶ The poor response was analyzed, and it was surmised that perhaps those joining online were becoming disconnected during the announcements that preceded the offering because they were primarily geared to the physical campuses. David began to "disconnect" from the live service and place a pre-recorded video of himself challenging the online community to participate in the giving and mission of the church. As a result, they have seen the offerings double. Although this is a move in a positive direction, we are determined to continue to analyze and measure this metric to help online members be more generous and obedient.

In his book *SimChurch*, Estes argues that the "good news is that it is a whole lot cheaper to build a state-of-the-art worship auditorium in the virtual world than it is in the real world. The bad news is that, at least anecdotally, there seems to be a much lower giving rate among virtual churchgoers than real-world churchgoers."⁷ We have found this to be shockingly accurate. Our real-world churchgoers give at an average of \$35 per adult attendee, while online churchgoers only give an average of less than one dollar per person. The contrast is sobering.

MEASURING THE WORSHIP EXPERIENCE ONLINE

Beyond attendance and offerings, what should Church Online measure? What components are critical for Church Online to be an effective church? The first area is the worship experience. Although not the most important aspect of a church, it is the one that leaves a lasting impression on first time visitors and regular attenders alike. Church Online must provide a warm experience for those attending, making it easy to connect with the online pastor and others in the congregation so they feel as though they can worship effectively.

Eighty-seven percent of pastors surveyed with Online Churches said they believe their church is effective at facilitating services in which their attendees worship online well. And when surveyed, 60% of Church Online congregants at Christ Fellowship agreed that they worship online effectively; while another 34.6% somewhat agreed. This is a high percentage, but had I surveyed my congregation when my church first launched its online campus, this likely would not have been the case. People noted that they found it trying and frustrating to connect because Christ Fellowship didn't have a solid video player that housed their online chat. People actually had to launch Skype, a video conferencing and instant messaging online application. Even if they had already had a Skype account, it was inconvenient. If they didn't understand Skype, it was nearly impossible. This struggle using Skype continued for the first couple of years. Finally, to enhance the experience, we invested in creating our own custom video player with a built-in instant messaging board. Attendees still have the option of going unnoticed, but if someone wants to connect for prayer or for interacting with the community, the option is easily accessible.

In addition to the online pastor, there are service hosts in the chat area talking with people and praying for needs as they arise. They are able to take a conversation into a private chat room if someone needs personal attention. They also can monitor the chat to make sure it stays positive

and appropriate. If someone enters the chat with the intent to disrupt, the service host can move them to a private area or can block them from the discussion altogether.

The chat feature is not essential for someone to experience worship online, but it is important for someone to be able to easily connect with a pastor or counselor for prayer and counsel online. It is critical for creating a sense of community. Estes argues that features such as chat rooms provide peer-to-peer communication. “If we and other people come together and are present in the same place in the virtual world, we can create real community. This real community allows for the possibility of a real church, and for a real God to be present with us.”⁸ One pastor surveyed agreed that his online church’s best feature to date was the “chat room to facilitate interaction. . . .The chat room itself isn’t great, but I believe it proves the importance of social interaction and questioning.” Without it, church online isn’t much different from watching a church service on television. The online chat allows the worship service to be interactive and engaging. It provides a platform for interaction and connection.

One of Christ Fellowship’s online attendees surveyed verified that they “like that we have the opportunity to chat with others and some are from around the world...” This participant went on to say, “I have been encouraged by others online. And I can e-mail Pastor David with questions and concerns.”

While many do take advantage of the chat feature while attending Online Church, I found that of those surveyed, many made suggestions asking for “more online connection and interaction” and some asking, “Is there anything else I can do online besides seeing the service?”⁹ Both of these statements indicate that our online church needs to improve its communication of opportunities to join these accompanying conversations, helping attendees to connect authentically with one another and with our church leadership.

Additionally, our worship experience has a built in slideshow presenter where David can share important messages during the service. This may be used as they prepare for offering, providing an easy connection to the online giving page, or it can provide a link to a place to learn more about an upcoming online class. The purpose of the slideshow presenter is to further engage the attendee while they are at church. It would compare to having a credit card swipe at every seat in your sanctuary at offering time or a small computer for each person to register for a class at announcement time. The online worship experience has the opportunity for even greater effectiveness than a traditional physical worship service.

During the worship experience, David greets attendees. Additionally, at the physical location, my dad or I will refer to those gathering online, welcoming them to the worship service. Many have said that this personalized greeting makes them feel that we are speaking directly to them. They feel as though they are truly a part of the congregation even though they may be thousands of miles away. I believe this also encourages greater commitment to engaging with others during the service and not simply observing.

Furthermore, my church expects online congregants to participate as though they were physically present, and we tell them so. As a result, online worshipers join in singing and praying and Scripture reading during the service. Some will even type words of praise and worship in the chat room as a tangible expression of their participation. These words help join the online community together by focusing on God.

When the time comes for the message, sermon notes are available online as well. Those attending can print the notes or simply type their own notes and have those sent to their e-mail inbox or printer. This further encourages the online congregation to participate and learn and not simply casually watch. Again, having a keyboard at your fingertips to type notes and Scriptures is far more efficient than handwriting notes that later need to be typed or filed.

Additionally, when attendees want to share prayer requests, there is a tab where they can submit a request for a team to pray with them during the coming week. There is no need to go to a welcome center to fill out a prayer card like one would have to do in a physical campus. If an attendee wants to pray with someone during or following the service, there are prayer partners available in the chat room.

These are just a few ways that the Church Online worship experience is more efficient than a physical church service. It offers both convenience and accessibility. Online, one can have instant access to the online pastor and prayer partners. At a physical location one must wait or perhaps make an appointment to speak with the pastor. This does create some difficulty for David in services that are more heavily populated. During those more intense times, he has to depend on the prayer partners and service hosts to help care for the needs of the congregation. However, having immediate access to the leadership of the church is much easier than in physical campuses because of chat room features online. In fact, 63.5% of those surveyed agreed that they felt they could connect with a pastor via e-mail or online chat when needed or desired with an additional 25.8% asserting they somewhat agree; and 59.3% said they agreed that they felt comfortable praying with others online with another 27.2% somewhat agreeing. Both of these above average percentages indicate that Christ Fellowship is fostering an environment of community and care between their leadership and their attendees.

Heather and her husband Robert used to live in South Florida and attended one of my church's multi-site campuses before moving out of state. Robert is in the construction business and when the economy broke down in recent years, Robert and Heather had to pack up and move to where there was work. They were very disappointed to leave their home church. Heather explained, though, how God made a way for them to take their church family with them.

I don't do well with change! At first I thought...an online campus, how peculiar and totally out of my comfort zone! YET, after a continual bugging by the Holy Spirit and a

heart laden with loneliness, I tried it. I am so glad I did! It was simply-significantly life changing!...I met friends in the online chat, and we have become family! In three years, I can't tell you how many cities I have lived in, my head is still spinning; YET I can tell you that my soul is stable and wherever I am sent in this country, I have the same church, the same online family that comes with me!¹⁰

Heather's testimony is just one of many more who have a home at Church Online and despite not being in a physical space with others, feel welcomed and cared for online.

Overall the online worship experience has evolved to be very inclusive and welcoming. Just as in a physical church, people can quietly slip in and slip out unnoticed, one can do that with Church Online as well. However, if attendees want to connect, the Church Online worship experience allows them to do so more easily. The worship and comments from the broadcasting campus create an atmosphere of participation, and the video player and online tools make engaging more efficient. Many of these enhancements have occurred in the last twelve to eighteen months. Continued improvements and adaptations will only further enhance the church online worship experience in the days ahead.

MEASURING EVANGELISM ONLINE

One of the key purposes of the church is to evangelize the world, sharing the message of Christ with every ethnic group of people and/or nation.¹¹ This mission is rooted in the commissioning of the church by Christ in Matthew 28:19-20, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age." Amen (*NKJV*). As previously discussed, the Internet allows the church to literally go into all nations and preach the gospel.¹² Through the Internet, the church is not limited by international borders, government regulations (except in a few countries), or prejudices against Christian missionaries. We have access to billions of people, 24/7.

Church Online leverages this opportunity far beyond just a Christian website. A website can present information, but Church Online allows for interaction and discussion around the person of Christ.¹³ Seekers are not left to discover truth for themselves on a website, but are engaged by pastors and trained prayer partners as they connect in an Online Church environment. Seventy-three percent of pastors with Online Churches believed they were effectively evangelizing online.

Several months ago, a teacher named Becky who attends one of Christ Fellowship's multi-site campuses, had a 16-year-old student named Linda approach her regarding some personal issues she was having. Linda knew her teacher Beth was a believer and asked her to pray for her. Beth prayed for her and invited her to attend a service at Christ Fellowship.

Although she would have liked to attend, Linda knew that she had no way of getting to Christ Fellowship so she declined. Beth immediately thought of the Church Online and gave Linda the link and encouraged her to participate in church via the Internet.

A few weeks later as Beth was welcoming the students into her classroom, she noticed the student approaching, said good morning, and asked how she was doing. The student flashed Beth a gigantic smile and said that she had accepted Christ the weekend before. Beth asked her where and how that happened, and the student said that she had been participating in Church Online for several months, and that past weekend she felt like she finally understood what it meant to have a personal relationship with Christ. The Online Church is creating inroads for the gospel to be shared with people who would otherwise not hear its saving message of truth.

MEASURING DISCIPLESHIP ONLINE

Not only does Church Online help the church at large fulfill the mission to take Christ into all the world, but it specifically helps the church make disciples. The church is called not just to make converts, but to be a disciple-maker. A disciple of Christ is one who understands and

embraces the teachings of Christ and surrenders to His Lordship in their life. It is a process of growing more like Christ.¹⁴ Church Online provides a platform for that to occur. Christian websites can inform and provide tools for spiritual growth, but only the church can come alongside a new Christian and help him or her to mature and take the first spiritual steps and continue growing to maturity.

Discipleship is a critical process for any healthy church. Helping people grow in their relationship with Christ and become more like Jesus is paramount to a true Christian community.¹⁵ This is true not only for the physical church, but also for the virtual church. Of course the entry place for both churches is the weekend worship experience and the sermon. Anointed and purposeful preaching of God's Word will challenge a congregation to grow and hunger for more of God's truth. Preaching and teaching should actually point people to deeper study and discovery. Eighty-three percent of pastors with online churches surveyed believe they are effective in biblical instruction and teaching online. And 87% of my online church congregants surveyed agree that they are satisfied with the biblical instruction and teaching they receive online; while 12% somewhat agree. Only 1.1% somewhat disagreed leaving 0% to completely disagree. This is an indicator of the Online Church's success in helping people online to grow. Different online churches measure spiritual growth differently. Potential Church measures growth in their online congregation by "discipleship steps" taken by the members. Troy Gramling, the lead pastor at Potential, says that church is "a process of taking one step after another along the faith journey. As a church, Flamingo Road [Potential Church] measures growth and discipleship through steps taken. Baptism is a step. Financial giving is a discipleship step. Serving is a discipleship step."¹⁶ Potential Church believes that is the same for their physical locations as well as their online campus.

In addition to preaching and teaching online, the Online Church can also facilitate growth by connecting people into online Bible studies and Life Groups. Although at Christ Fellowship we didn't begin our online church immediately with Life Groups, the church online now recruits and trains Life Group hosts from all around the world to lead groups online. These Life Groups participate in Bible studies and spend time praying for each other. As with physical Life Groups, they satisfy both a discipleship component as well as a community component.¹⁷ And while many of our online church participants agreed that being a part of Life Groups helped them connect with others and grow in their faith, some surveyed suggested that they didn't know how to connect. Others obviously were not aware such opportunities were available because they made suggestions for groups to be made available online. This indicates the need for greater emphasis on inviting people to take advantage of the Life Groups.

In the online Life Groups, an attempt is made to group people together from the same region of the world to accommodate time zone preferences. This has also, in some cases, made it possible for in-person meetings for further connection and development of friendships.

One such situation at my online church included Tom and Christa, who live in New York. They had been attending church online for quite a long time and with regularity when David was introduced to a college student in the New York area who was pretty much on her own in the city, so he connected the three of them and encouraged them to meet. Almost immediately they met and decided to watch services together and have then enjoyed times of fellowship together offline.

Online classes and discipleship remain an area for further development for Christ Fellowship. In fact, of all the suggestions made by the online congregants who were surveyed from my church, an overwhelming number of responses regarded the need for greater variety of

classes and equal opportunities akin to being physically present of one of their traditional, physical campuses.

Our leaders acknowledge that restricted resources have limited their ability to get more classes recorded and monitored online. However, this will change in the coming year as we have dedicated media staff to the creation of more online classes. Maturing our online congregation is becoming our number one goal for church online in the coming year.

MEASURING CONGREGATIONAL CARE ONLINE

Another key component of church that must be evaluated is the way the congregation is cared for as they face the trials of life. In a traditional, physical church, parishioners would have access to a pastor or counselor to discuss their needs. Someone would meet with them for prayer and Biblical guidance. In church online, the same ministry takes place although not always face-to-face. When the person is local, perhaps homebound or suffering from a long-term illness, David visits and prays with them in person. Just like a traditional church pastor, David is responsible to shepherd the online congregation. “Like traditional pastoral ministry, virtual church pastoral ministry will hinge on how the pastor handles people, relationships, and community far more than on how he manages technology.”¹⁸

Recently David received a call to perform a hospital visit to a lady he did not know. She had been ill for some time and needed to speak with a pastor. As David entered her hospital room, the lady’s eyes lit up as she exclaimed, “Pastor David, it’s so nice to meet you!” They had never spoken before, but she recognized David from the church online services. David noticed the laptop next to her bed as she explained that through the months of her illness she had been able to stay connected with her church family through church online.

However, the majority of those in Christ Fellowship’s church online live hundreds and thousands of miles away. A personal visit would be impossible. In these situations, David video

conferences, e-mails, or phones the person in need and spend time praying with them. While this may not be exactly the same as being physically present, it can be equally effective in showing care and concern for those church members in need. In fact, of those surveyed from our online church, 75.2% either agreed or somewhat agreed that they feel they can receive or extend to others care during pivotal moments of life (e.g., birth, death, marriage, hospitalization, divorce) via e-mail or other online social mediums.

Matt is a soldier in the United States Army. He attended one of Christ Fellowship's physical campuses and was heading on his third mission when the Church Online was launched. Matt had access to the Internet and was able to join the online services on the weekends. He was uncomfortable in the chat room but would speak privately with David. Often, they would schedule times throughout the week to video chat. On one such occasion, David could tell Matt was discouraged. He looked burdened, sad, and lonely. When David asked him if everything was all right, Matt started to get emotional. He missed home and his family. He began to tell David what his day had been like. A suicide bomber had blown up a United States military vehicle. Matt was responsible for the recovery and clean up. He mentioned to David that no one could possibly understand what it's like to scrape human remains off an exploded vehicle, to collect the pieces, and to put everything back in order in the unit. Before Matt signed off that day, David was able to pray for his encouragement and healing. David thanked God for Matt, for his bravery and commitment, and he asked God to give him His peace and surround him with His love.

Upon Matt's return to the United States, he told David how important their connection was to him while he was away. Matt expressed that the spiritual counsel and care he received through church online was what brought him through his time away.

JT was a Sergeant in the United States Army. While deployed in Iraq, JT would collect a few of his friends and join Christ Fellowship for church online. JT testified that the blessing of

having church online was something that strengthened him each week while deployed. As a token of his appreciation, JT wanted to give something meaningful back to Christ Fellowship. He went to his commanding officer and told him what Christ Fellowship had been doing for the troops. They took the flag that had been flown over the Army headquarters in Iraq, had a ceremony commemorating Christ Fellowship, and sent that flag to us along with a letter and certificate from the commanding officer. The tattered flag that had once flown over the US Army camp now flies in one of the sanctuaries of Christ Fellowship as a symbol of the impact the Online Church is having on our military stationed around the world, fighting for the freedom afforded us to worship freely.

These two stories speak of the genuine care that takes place through Church Online—real people loving and caring for one another in times of need. That is what the church family does for each other. The Bible commands us to “carry one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2), pray for each other (James 5:16), comfort each other as God has comforted us (2 Corinthians 1:4) and to help each other in times of need (Philippians 2:4). Church Online is effectively fulfilling these commands, no matter the distance.

MEASURING SERVING ONLINE

One additional critical area for all churches is challenging their congregation to serve.¹⁹ The Bible tells us in Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (*NKJV*). The Bible continues to teach that we are created to serve one another. The Apostle Paul teaches in Ephesians 2:10, “It is God himself who has made us what we are and given us new lives from Christ Jesus; and long ages ago he planned that we should spend these lives helping others” (Ephesians 2:10, *Living Bible*). We have been created to serve.

In many traditional, physical churches there are opportunities to serve in the nurseries, children's ministry, music departments, and student ministries. In fact, in many churches there are dozens, even hundreds, of areas in which to serve. In contrast, as noted earlier, the Church Online has fewer areas for serving. However, 44% of my church's online congregants surveyed agreed that they feel they can exercise their spiritual gifts online with another 31.1% somewhat agreeing.

Volunteers can host a Life Group, host a service, or serve as a prayer partner or an online mentor. Those with the gift of teaching can help teach online classes. But the list of opportunities is limited. Most online churches don't need ushers, nursery workers, or parking lot attendants. This can be seen either as a dilemma or an opportunity.

Jesus calls the church to not only serve one another, but to serve the world (Matt. 20:28). Too often, people in traditional, physical church settings view serving as something that occurs only within the four walls of the church. In fact, due to the overwhelming need for volunteers within the ministries of the church, many churches cannot afford to encourage their members to serve outside the church. Just the opposite is true for Church Online. With a limited need for volunteers, Church Online can encourage its participants to go into their communities with the love of Christ. Opportunities to be the hands of Christ exist all around us. In addition to great parachurch ministries that are in constant need of volunteers, there are opportunities to serve neighbors, single parents, and the elderly in our own neighborhoods. The message of serving as Christ served doesn't change with Church Online, but the application does.²⁰ However, it may actually be more biblical than how it is played out in traditional, physical churches around the world.²¹

Fifty percent of pastors with online churches reported in surveys that they felt they were effective at offering opportunities or encouraging their online attendees to use their gifts to serve others. Currently, our church online effectively helps those who want to serve within the virtual

church, as well as those whose passions lay within the community. The message is focused on becoming the hands and feet of Christ to the world. That admonition is the same if you live in America or in a village in Eastern Europe. Regardless of location, everyone can humbly serve those in need with the love of Christ.

Where we can improve is providing our online congregation with more examples of people who are using their God-given gifts to serve within the community. They need to expose online attendees to examples of those serving at soup kitchens, caring for the elderly, or helping to meet the needs of a single mom. In fact, a few attendees who were surveyed made suggestions that the online church have video testimonies of people using their gifts to serve in the kingdom. Examples in story form celebrate what God is doing through the virtual church family as well as point people to examples of spiritual maturity.

MEASURING THE ADMINISTRATION OF CHURCH ORDINANCES ONLINE

In addition to these evaluations, Church Online must monitor how well it performs the administration of the ordinances of baptism and communion. The manner in which some online churches perform these ordinances was discussed earlier. Still, a process of evaluation needs to be established. Helping followers of Christ to participate in these significant steps of faith is vital for any church to do well.

There should be a better process than simply mentioning that communion will be taking place and encouraging the online participants to quickly find crackers and juice. My church has discussed sending communion elements through the mail to those participating online. Church supply companies sell individually sealed communion supplies that could be sent out monthly to the online church congregation with a letter from the pastor indicating the weekend that communion will take place.²² Scripture and further explanation of the meaning of communion would prepare the online participants for this sacred celebration. Two factors have prohibited use

from this opportunity—cost and the lack of updated information from those joining online.

Again, because communion is so central to the celebration of faith in Christ, the Online Church must look for new ways to enhance the experience.

Similarly, encouraging those wishing to be baptized to find a local church or fly to one of our physical campuses to have baptism performed is not acceptable either. Both options imply that Church Online cannot address the admonition of baptism and that a physical church is necessary for the fulfillment of this ordinance. While my church has not come to a resolution either, Church Online must address how it can best administer these two ordinances. Currently, no evaluation on the effectiveness of administering these ordinances exists. However, it is clear from surveying both church pastors who have online churches and attendees of my church's online church, that this is the weakest area of effectiveness for the Online Church. Pastors surveyed only felt 46% effective in this area, with many citing that they simply do not administer communion and baptism online. And only 31% of those surveyed in my online campus felt they agreed that they could effectively receive the ordinances of the Church Online. This is an area that definitely needs improvement as discussed in detail earlier.

THE CHURCH ONLINE IS EFFECTIVE

No church is 100 percent effective in every area of ministry. There is constant room for development and improvement. Likewise, the Church Online must progress and develop areas of ministry to enhance its effectiveness. That being said, the Church Online is effective.²³ Countless stories of lives being reached and changed for Christ through Church Online continue to affirm its effectiveness. People are being reached that would otherwise have not been reached. People are growing in their relationship with God through Church Online, and people are serving and caring for one another. The surveys conducted indicate that God is at work through Church Online.

Through surveys and internal examination, it is clear there is room for improvement and growth in the noted areas of ministry. These needs justify measurement tools to help the Church Online adapt and mature in the years ahead. Periodic surveys of the online congregation and in depth analysis of the results of online discipleship can guide the future growth of Church Online. With these in place, Church Online is positioned to be a powerful tool for the kingdom of God. The church at large cannot resist the opportunity to meet people where they are. Instead we must embrace technology as the new medium through which to communicate a timeless message of God's grace and hope for the world.

NOTES

¹ *The Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*; available <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/effective>, s.v. "effective," (accessed March 11, 2011).

² "Why Companies Need to Measure and Increase Sales Productivity," *MeasureProductivity* (January 30, 2008); available from <http://www.measureproductivity.com/why-companies-need-to-measure-and-increase-salesproductivity.htm> (accessed March 13, 2011).

³ **Christ Fellowship Church Online Attendance**
Feb. 2009 2576 – Average Weekly
Feb 2010 3983 – Average Weekly
Feb 2011 9074 – Average Weekly
* John Maxwell Series Jan 2011 13074 Average Weekly – Highest Month Ever

⁴ James Long and Lindy Lowry, "How Online Worship is Changing Church," *Outreach Magazine*, October 6, 2010; available from <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/features/3822-How-Online-Worship-ChangingChurch.html> (accessed January 18, 2011).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ **Christ Fellowship Church Online Giving:**
Average Giving Per Month Jan/Feb
2009 \$1210
2010 \$1668
2011 \$2519

⁷ Estes.

⁸ Estes.

- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Kim, e-mail message to Pastor David Helbig, February 16, 2011.
- 11 Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 104.
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- 18 Estes.
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- 20 Estes.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Celebration Cups available from <http://www.celebrationcups.com/> (accessed March 11, 2011).
- 23 Estes.

Chapter 14

What Now?

By
Todd Mullins

The authors conclude that the Online Church is here to stay. The question is no longer if it is valid, the question is how extensively will the average church use the Internet, and how effective will it become? Effective enough to build the first million-member church?

Years of observing and leading an online church have unearthed valuable lessons. These lessons, often in the form of wrong assumptions, have laid the groundwork for change and enhancement of the ministry through the years. Maintaining a flexible and teachable attitude has allowed for the growth and development of this controversial platform of ministry.

First, there is the extremity of opinions related to Church Online. One would think that every Christian would support the expansion of the gospel, especially into an area of media that is filled with questionable material and blatant sin. We thought everyone in the church would support this new effort. Even when successes were validated by some churches, still there was controversy as to whether or not online church was a constituted “biblical church.” We learned there is contention when defining Church Online as a church. When considering online church as a supplement for those traveling or ill, there was no opposition at all. Everyone seems to embrace the benefits of helping people who may be bed-ridden or whose career forces them to travel. The contention comes when we attempt to define Church Online as “church” where no other physical connection to a physical location is required. Even among my church staff there is a variety of opinions and concerns that Church Online does not meet the standards and expectations of “biblical church.” Those contemplating starting an online church should not expect full support

from their church membership or even church staff. Diversity of theological perspectives on the subject can and will lead to differing opinions. However, a solid understanding of the advantages and concerns can lay the best foundation for acceptance and success for the ministry.

We found that many people's opinions about Church Online were not based on experiencing an online church, but from their current use of the Internet and social media. Those surveyed over the age of 50 tended to discount the ability of Church Online to meet all the requirements of biblical church. They contended that authentic relationship building could not happen in a virtual environment. When pressed on the issue, most in that category were not connected to any environment of social media. Those over 50 that supported the idea of Church Online were generally more technically connected through the Internet, had Facebook accounts, and had used online video and chat programs such as Skype.

Additionally, those under 30 were almost always on the opposite side of the equation, supporting the idea of Church Online. However, even still, many of those with traditional church backgrounds questioned if all the functions of the church could be experienced online. The largest group supporting the validity of Church Online were those under 30 from non-traditional church (or no church) backgrounds. These were the most experienced with online community and the least connected to traditional church expectations. Realizing these differences will help the new online church planter know his audience and where his support or conflict may arise.

Furthermore, our leadership has learned that stories of people changing and growing in the Lord will impact some people's opinion of Church Online. When the Holy Spirit uses Church Online to reach someone otherwise untouched by the truth of the gospel, questions and skepticism are drastically reduced or eliminated. People have a hard time arguing with stories of redemption and hope being shared via the Church Online. Still the question for most isn't, "Can

the Internet be used to reach people for Christ?” The question remains, “Can a church exist in an online environment and fulfill all the functions of a biblical church?”

Throughout this process we have seen that the biggest obstacle to answering that question is the fact that Church Online is unproven. Online churches are new. Many are still trying to implement substantial discipleship tools much less address all the concerns around building strong community. Internet churches can cite numbers of visitors or hits to their site, but the question of spiritual growth and connection remains unqualified. It will take continued development and applicable measuring tools to validate Church Online in the years to come.

Online church leaders need to accept that the debate will continue for years to come. Their work online must continue as well. Only as we continue to challenge the concerns and leverage the opportunities will the legitimacy of Church Online be discovered.

It has also been observed that relatively few people or churches are actively discussing the issues that face Church Online. Most valid conversations are from churches engaging in church online or considering starting an online church, and those numbers are still very few.¹ Without compelling dialogue, the issues and concerns will not be fully addressed. Churches engaging in church online need to openly discuss their challenges without attempting to argue or defend their position. An open dialogue may reveal the very answers to some of the questions facing Church Online today. Blogs and online forums could be the solution for new ideas that would make Church Online a more effective tool for the Kingdom of God.

One of the faulty assumptions made by my church was believing that the congregation for church online would be exclusive to its own campus. In other words, it was assumed that the majority of the people joining in each week online would identify themselves exclusively as members of the online campus. What we at Christ Fellowship came to realize is that church online became a ministry tool for people from the physical church campuses as well. People who

travel connect online. People who are sick connect online. People who spend their winters near the church join online during the summer from their homes in the north. These people affiliate themselves with Christ Fellowship and not necessarily with our church online. This creates a further obstacle to creating community as temporary users don't see themselves as active participants within a body of believers.

The biggest mistake that my church made was attempting to launch church online without adequate staffing or support from key departments such as media or information technology (IT). The online church campus was launched with one part-time pastor focused on its oversight and development. Within a few months, the online church was being visited by thousands of people each weekend. Although all of these people did not each require contact or care, church online was not able to expand or develop with one part-time employee.

Even after designating full-time focus to church online, the online pastor, David, was only able to take on so much. His primary focus was on executing the weekend services and caring for those who asked for pastoral care. In his spare time, he also had to make videos and interact with the IT department to troubleshoot technical issues. The limitations became quickly evident to all.

We have since expanded the online team, but not to the point that allows for continued, extensive development. The obvious lesson is that something of this magnitude that is touching thousands of people every week is worthy of the proper resources. When one considers the potential of Church Online to reach people with the message of the gospel and the tools for discipleship, the merit for additional funding only becomes more evident.

Among the greatest lessons learned is that the Internet is not the church any more than our buildings are the church. The church is made up of the people of God gathering together to live out the purposes of God.² At Church Online, people worship together, pray together, grow together, and take communion together. Just as no particular church does all things well, there are

some things that Church Online does not do well. Finding a balance between those strengths and weaknesses is a reality for every church, whether physical or online.

My team and I have learned that Isaiah 55:11 is as valid on the Internet as it is in person: “So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; It shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11, *NKJV*).

As the Word of God has been proclaimed online, it is accomplishing great things for God. It is not returning void. It is drawing people to Christ.

Church Online removes barriers.³ It removes barriers for people who are anxious about coming into a physical church building, allowing them to observe online before visiting in person. It removes barriers such as limited seating and parking spaces. Church Online removes barriers to growing the largest church in the world. Church Online removes the barriers of proximity or location. People living in remote places around the world can participate in a church halfway around the world. Church Online removes the barrier of time as multiple services around the clock can help people experience deeper fellowship with God and one another. And finally, Church Online removes the barriers for the disabled. Countless men and women who have no way to leave their homes are invited to participate in a loving church family. They can finally belong and take part in biblical community.

Some barriers do still exist though. Church Online has its drawbacks as well as its benefits. Some functions of the church are more difficult to execute in a virtual environment. Of course it is those functions of baptism, communion, and care that provide the greatest argument against the validity of Church Online. Just as those who defend Church Online cannot ignore the concerns, so those who oppose Church Online cannot ignore its benefits.

Research indicates that millions of people are living life online.⁴ They are shopping online, banking online, and building friendships online. In 2010, Generation “Y” (born between

January 1977 and December 1997)⁵ outnumbered the Baby Boomer generation,⁶ and 96% of them belong to a social network.⁷ Social media is capturing the heart of this generation. In fact, social media has overtaken pornography as the number one activity online.⁸ Also, according to a survey conducted by Match.com, “17 percent of those who married in the past three years met online, making it the third-most-frequent method of introduction, behind meeting through a mutual acquaintance or at work or school.”⁹ Relationships are being fostered online.

Facebook is the largest online social media tool with more than 500 million active users. On their own website, Facebook reports that 50% of those users log on to Facebook in any given day. Over the course of a month, people spend more than 700 billion minutes on Facebook.¹⁰ Just a few years ago, Facebook was seen as a Web-based social network that people would use sporadically to try and connect with old or new friends. Today Facebook has become integrated into every facet of life. It’s no longer a tool to help people connect; it is the way people connect. People schedule parties and gatherings, carry on conversations with friends, and display real time updates regarding their life and activities.

Understanding this phenomenon, the Church Online can push past the doubters of online community and leverage the technology to build healthy spiritual relationships online. Christ Fellowship’s fan page on Facebook, with more than a million hits each month, is arguably the broadest platform at our disposal to reach people with the love and message of Jesus Christ.

INNOVATIONS THE CHURCH CAN USE TO ENHANCE MINISTRY ONLINE

One church previously mentioned that has leveraged technology for the Kingdom of God is Life Church in Edmond, Oklahoma (Lifechurch.tv). Life Church was one of the very first churches to introduce an Online Church and provide it with staff and pastors.¹¹ They have even established a virtual church in Second Life, a virtual world where users, called Residents, interact

with each other through avatars. Residents socialize, meet other residents, participate in group activities, and even go to church—all in an online environment.¹²

In addition to launching online worship environments, Life Church has dedicated significant resources in the areas of finances and staffing to create a “Digerati Team.” Digerati are the elite of the computer industry and online environments.¹³ Believing in the importance of technology and creating online environments, Life Church continues to build and support tools that help people use technology to connect with God and with one another.

YouVersion is a free online Bible application that allows users to access the Bible in twenty-two different languages. Free access via mobile devices ensures that users can access the Word of God anytime and anywhere. Life Church launched YouVersion with the desire to get the Word of God into people’s hands. Since most people do not carry a Bible with them throughout the day but do carry their phones or have access to their computers, YouVersion equips believers with the priceless resource of God’s Word. Other features on YouVersion allow for churches to upload their sermon notes and take instant surveys during sermons, as well as provide a link for online giving to the local church. Amazingly, Life Church offers this to the body of Christ at no cost.

The spirit of technological advancement and generosity continues at Life Church with OPEN, a resource of magnanimous proportions for the church today. The OPEN Website is available to all denominations of churches and all pastors and Christian ministries worldwide. The site gives access to and usage of an entire library of LifeChurch.tv creative materials at absolutely no charge. Sermons, videos, banners, and creative marketing materials are available for free download. This resource is priceless for the church that has no creative team or graphics department. Churches with no video department can leverage these materials to communicate the message of Christ more effectively.

Life Church's Digerati team also created the Web tool ChurchMetrics.com. ChurchMetrics.com is a free Web-based application that helps churches monitor growth in attendance and giving. The structure is set up for churches with multiple campuses as well, allowing leaders to make wiser decisions based upon accurate information. Again, by taking what they have created technically for their own church, Life Church advances the Kingdom of God by giving their technology away free of charge.

BabelWith.me is one of Life Church's latest technological feats. BabelWith.me is an online chat tool that allows users to communicate with anyone, anywhere, in up to forty-five different languages. BabelWith.me allows the user to type in their own language and read the responses from the group chat in that same language by instantly translating what is entered. This application is extremely important in the world of church online as the Internet knows no geographical boundaries. Services being streamed online end up in countries that do not speak English. Since the desire is not only to show the service, but to connect with people at their point of need, BabelWith.me provides online pastors and chat hosts to facilitate connection.

All of Life Church's technological initiatives are used to empower the church to connect with God and with one another through the Internet. They see the future growth of ministry online and have positioned their church and resources to advance this opportunity. Life Church even has as one of their key mission's areas "Digital Missions." Their Website claims, "By leveraging technology, we can 'go and make disciples' in new ways. It's not about the tools we use, but about bringing Christ into people's everyday lives, both near and far."¹⁴ There is no church that even comes close to the intentionality of leveraging technology the way Life Church does. But shouldn't more churches follow their lead? Shouldn't we all adapt whatever technology available to reach the world and build God's kingdom, ever-expanding the global church?

EMBRACING NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR EVANGELISM

Why should the church always be the late adopters? Why should the church allow the world to lead the way when it comes to using technology wisely for its cause? Usually the church world is limited by vision or resource. Yet when the vision is clearly and convincingly communicated, the resources usually follow. It is time for more churches to get ahead of the curve, to read the culture, and be able to meet culture where it is with the message of Christ.

For too long the church has expected the world to come to them. So we host “friend days” or hold seasonal concerts or programs hoping the world will walk through our doors. It is time for the church to take a new perspective on missions and reaching the lost. Remember, the message doesn’t change, but our methods must.

The church understands this reality and has embraced it in the past. With the advancement of radio and television in the 1900s, churches and evangelists put their programs on the air reaching the masses. Televangelists such as Rex Hubbard and Oral Roberts were among the first to place their services on television in the 1950s. Even today, the Trinity Broadcasting Network is the third largest over-the-air station group in the United States. CBS, FOX, and NBC hold the fourth, fifth, and sixth places, according to TV News Check’s annual listing of the Top 30 Station Groups.¹⁵

Still what worked for the church in the 1960s and even the 1990s will not work as effectively today. As more and more people go online for their daily activities, the church needs to meet them where they are. Church Online and other online community-building platforms are critical for the church to stay connected with their congregations and the world it is trying to reach. As Church Online moves forward in its development, the lines between the digital and tangible church will continue to dissipate.

As Church Online improves its discipleship and mentorship capabilities, more discipleship will take place, virtually opening up broader access and resources to more and more people. As Church Online continues to develop community-building resources, more barriers will be removed, giving people easier access to connect with God and one another. Greater community and deeper discipleship will result in stronger followers of Christ evangelizing their world. Church Online will meet people where they are and strengthen their walk with Christ.

The first step for many churches will simply be the process of placing their resources online. Many churches have discipleship and connection resources available. Putting these resources online will meet people where they spend their time and much of their life. Sermons, classes, and books in an online format will bring the resources to them.

For most churches, the challenge will not be convincing their congregation to use online technology, but preparing their materials for a digital format. My online church is behind in shifting their materials for online use, much less mobile use. For the church to get on the front side of this opportunity, we must change our perspective. Communication of new classes and materials must be built for online and mobile consumption first and then retrofitted for more traditional forms of communication. As the church makes this technological shift, we will position ourselves to meet culture where it is heading.

Church Online has the potential to be the greatest evangelical and discipleship tool that the church has ever seen. With millions of people living their lives connected to the Internet, an Online Church can meet them there. People searching for God and spiritual connection can find trained e-vangelists ready to talk and pray with them, guiding the seeker to truth in Jesus Christ. The ease with which people can connect via video conferencing and instant messaging allows for a personal touch in the process. The ability to move quickly through online resources also aids in

the communication of materials. Overall, the Church Online is a powerful tool to reach people for Christ.

That being said, Church Online may not be the “ideal church.” With the limitations discussed, there are still several obstacles to overcome. A virtual hug or a “smiley face” icon cannot replace a physical embrace or looking someone directly in the eye. Just as a phone conversation cannot replace being there in person, so the connection online has its limitations.

Community care is somewhat limited online. Yes, friends in an online small group can send an e-mail note or video chat to pray together when someone faces a loss or a tragedy. But unless they live in close proximity, they cannot gather together physically to offer a hug, attend a funeral service, or watch the children.

Many of us have friendships with people who live thousands of miles away. As wonderful as those friendships may be, they may not be as vibrant as those with friends that we come in contact with daily. The Christian brothers and sisters that we encounter on a daily basis more than likely are the ones we can count on in times of great need or trouble. An Online Church may not be able to provide the same level of care and community that one can receive from being connected to a physical group of believers.

Therefore Online Churches might encourage people to connect with vibrant evangelical churches within their community. Perhaps until some of the current limitations are improved, Online Church leaders can help members understand the benefits of becoming active in a physical evangelical church in their area. This does not minimize the validity and equality of the Online Church. It simply further serves the mission of the church as people are growing in healthy spiritual relationships with others, discovering their gifts and serving in the mission of the church.

My Online Church has offered this suggestion on several occasions. As those attending make their identity and location known, the online pastor has encouraged them to also attend churches in their area if and when possible.

That being said, there are millions of people who cannot connect to a physical church in a local community. As stated, many people live in remote locations where no evangelical church exists. Some live in countries where the gospel is not preached. Others live where it is illegal to worship Christ. For these people, the Church Online is a lifeline to biblical community and discipleship. Their spiritual growth and encouragement would not be nearly as enriched without the ministry of Church Online.

Additionally, there are millions of people who are physically unable to leave their homes due to age or physical handicaps. Their conditions and illnesses prevent them from joining other believers in the local church. The Online Church is a needed source of encouragement and Christian community.

Simply because theologians or church leaders cannot agree about the distribution of the sacraments does not disqualify the validity of Church Online. Simply because online care or community may not be as rewarding as physical care or community does not mean it has no place within the church today. Perhaps those whose only connection with church is through the Internet should be the ones to answer the question, “Is Church Online really the church?”

When Jesus would teach his followers, He often used symbols and images of everyday life to build a virtual picture in the minds of His listeners. Sometimes He would use images that were “other worldly” to captivate the listeners’ attention and teach them about a great reality, such as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. The world that Jesus illustrated for us in Scripture is actually more real and significant than the reality we experience here in our

own lives. Jesus explained this world as the Kingdom of God. It is the reality for which we as followers of Christ strive and fervently seek to experience.

Today, many people spend time in both the virtual and physical worlds, treating the connections and relationships equally. Although some prefer one over the other, a combination of both has become the norm for most. Yet both the physical and virtual realities pale in comparison to the reality of God's Kingdom. His Kingdom, His reality, surpasses all other realities and all other worlds.

WRAP-UP

Survey results and years of conversations reveal that there are passionate and varied perspectives regarding the validity of Church Online. However, we must remember that Church Online is still in its infancy. Online Churches are just beginning to grapple with the difficult issues they face. It is my position, along with Elmer's, that the Online Church will continue to grow and mature just as a physical church grows and develops through the years.

Rather than attacking the validity of Church Online, the church at large needs to embrace and encourage its mission. It is through this new medium that millions will be reached for Christ that would never be reached through traditional means. Countless millions will grow spiritually and become students of the Word that may not have otherwise. As the physical church partners with Church Online, greater accomplishments for the cause of Christ will be realized. Together, the physical and virtual church can truly fulfill the Great Commission and go into all the world and make disciples. What will emerge will not look like the church as we know it today. It will not perfectly align with the church we can see and touch at this moment in history. It will defy traditionalist views. But through the anointing of the Holy Spirit, it will be used by God to reach millions around the world with the message of the gospel.

Church Online is here to stay. Its presence and impact is ever-increasing. It will continue to grow and influence more people as more of life takes place online. As technology advances, new opportunities will emerge for the Online Church that will only expand its ability to meet the spiritual needs of the people it reaches. Technology that is commonplace today was not even in the realm of possibility just a few years ago.¹⁶ What new technology is currently being created that will revolutionize the future? What technology is yet to be dreamed into existence?

In 1800, who would have thought that flying a plane on a transatlantic flight would ever be a possibility, much less a daily occurrence? In 1900, who would have dreamed of sending man into outer space and landing on the moon? In 2020, who fully knows what technological advances we will be using in our everyday life? These advances are coming. The question is, “Will the church be on the back side of this progress?” Instead of being a late adopter, Church Online positions the church to seize these future developments to reach millions and advance the Kingdom of Heaven.

Still the question remains, “Is Church Online biblical church?” Absolutely. The Church Online addresses each of the five purposes of the church. Does it still have areas to develop and expand? Absolutely. But those underdeveloped areas are not justifications to eliminate or invalidate Church Online. The Bible does not impose only one type of format or approach for doing church. Even though most Christians believe that their expression of church is the best or most biblically accurate, the Bible doesn’t say that a traditional church is better than a contemporary church, a contemporary church better than one being held on the Internet. The Bible communicates what must take place within a body of believers, which includes worship, spiritual discipleship, service, evangelism, and fellowship. Fellowship or *koinonia* can take place within an online biblical community. It currently takes place online in biblical communities every day. Care and support are given and received. Prayers are prayed. Tears are shed.

To argue that face-to-face connection is the only valid form of spiritual relationship is to argue that our spiritual connection with God, not yet face-to-face, is lacking or somehow “less real.” The Spirit of God transcends space and distance. He is able to usher His presence into the lives of those who earnestly seek Him. One day in heaven our connection with our Creator will be greatly enhanced. We will see Him face-to-face. But until then, our connection with God is every bit as real and profound, or He would change the way we interact with Him because He wants to connect intimately with His children.

The same is true with the body of believers. There is a spiritual connection that comes through the bonds of Christ. His shed blood unites His family throughout the earth. The Church Online is bound together as well. Yes, there are benefits of face-to-face care and connection that cannot occur in a virtual setting, but the same Spirit of God can unite the hearts and lives of individuals that are bound together in Christ through an Online Church.

The Church Online is the church. The Internet is a tool just like our church facilities. The church is a body of believers united under the Lordship of Christ, living out the purposes of God together. As Church Online takes its place within the greater context of the global church, its reach will forever expand. We truly believe that the Online Church will build a million-member church that will have unparalleled impact for the kingdom of God.

NOTES

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² Estes.

³ Estes.

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- ¹⁰ Facebook.com, [web page], <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics> (accessed January 20, 2011).
- ¹¹ Surratt, Lion, and Bird, 147.
- ¹² Estes.
- ¹³ *The Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*; available from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/digerati>, s.v. “digerati,” (accessed March 11, 2011).
- ¹⁴ Life Church, Digital Missions [web page]; available from <http://www.lifechurch.tv/causes> (accessed February 2, 2011).
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- ¹⁶ Estes.

APPENDIX A

THE JOURNEY OF ELMER TOWNS TO THINK OF AN ONLINE CHURCH

When I wrote the *Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow*, I was not sure any church would ever reach 10,000 in attendance. Ten years later I met Yonggi Cho, pastor of The Full Gospel Church, Yoido, South Korea, when attendance was running 72,000 and he had a dream of 100,000. I felt he could do it because of his use of cells in homes. Then he had a vision of 250,000, 500,000, and then 750,000. He never completed his vision of one million. He retired in 2008 when reaching 70 years of age. I preached for the church in 2011 and I told him about the possibilities of a million member-church online. He told me, “If I had known about the online church before I retired, I would have reached one million in my church.”