

What Vision Should Drive our Church?
Or,
4 Commitments of a Thriving Church
 Rev. Langdon Palmer

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

You can get a quick sense of my major points by looking at the charts and reading the indented bold text.

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Colleen DiRaddo has been working with our church leadership over the last couple months and encouraging us to ask tough questions and to research what makes for a healthy growing church. What does a healthy, growing church of Jesus Christ look like? This paper is my personal response to those questions. I did not have time to find the latest figures or perhaps even the best. I whole heartedly embrace the mantra that figures don't lie, but liars figure. If you find yourself disagreeing with my conclusions, let's talk so I can hear your side!

THE GOOD NEWS AND THE BAD NEWS

The following table¹ shows change in church membership from 1990 to 2000 for a number of denominations. The number in parentheses is percentage growth/lost in number of members, and the number in brackets is the percent of the congregation in church each Sunday.

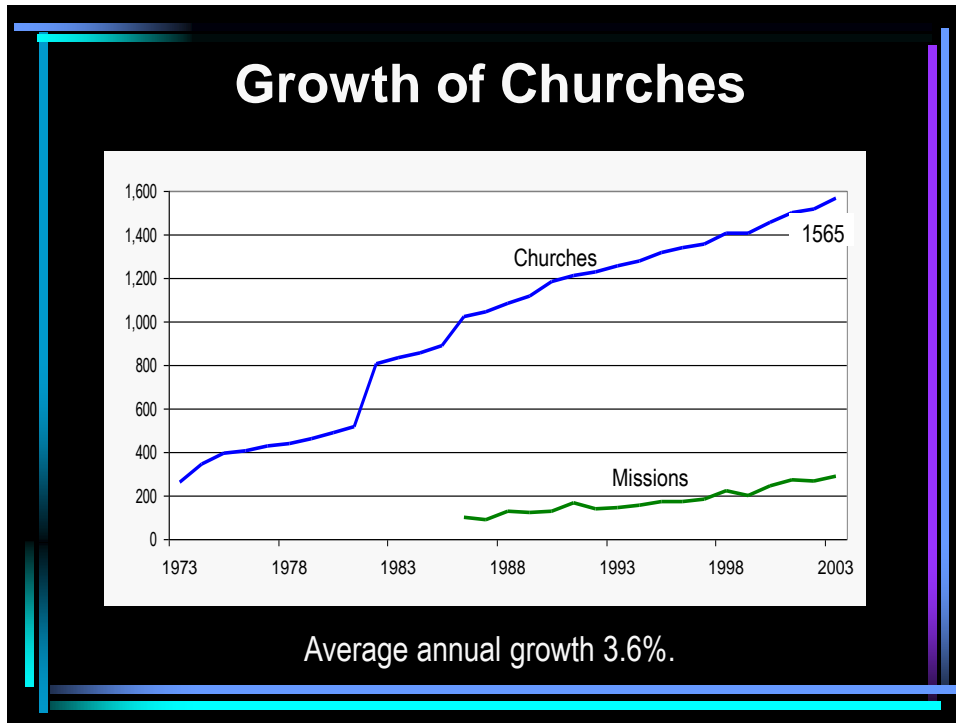
CHURCHES THAT WERE INCREASING

CHURCHES THAT WERE DECLINING

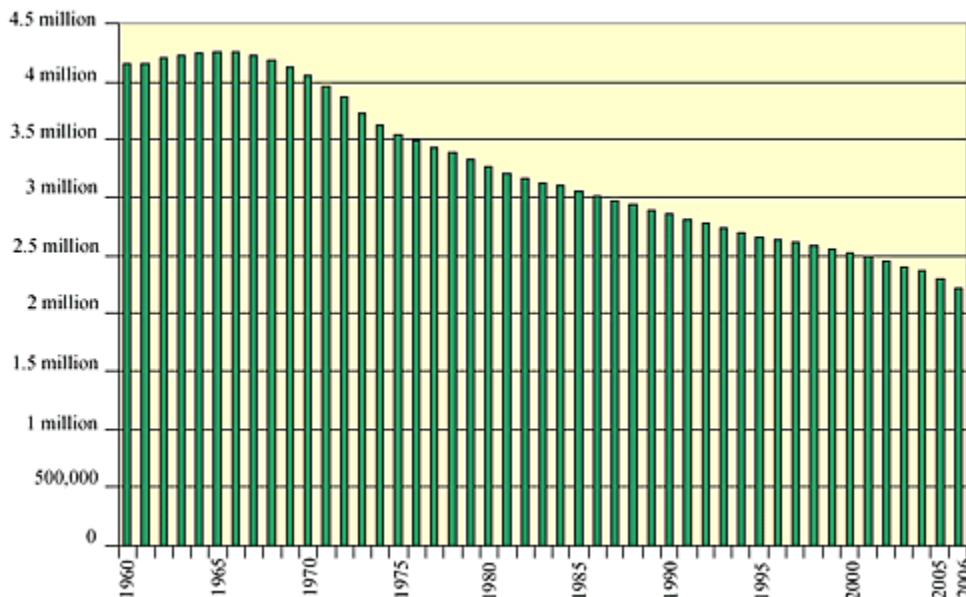
	Growth	Attendance		Growth	Attendance
Assemblies of God	(18%)	[63%]	American Baptist Churches in the USA	(-6%)	[37%]
Baptist General Conference	(42%)	[84%]	Episcopal Church	(-5%)	[36%]
Christian and Missionary Alliance	(22%)	[no data]	Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod	(-3%)	[38%]
Evangelical Free Church of America	(57%)	[99%]	Mennonite Church USA	(-20%)	[68%]
International Church, the Foursquare Gospel	(36%)	[94%]	Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	(-12%)	[41%]
International Pentecostal Holiness	(53%)	[61%]	Unitarian Universalist Congregations	(-4%)	[no data]
Presbyterian Church in America	(42%)	[70%]	United Church of Christ	(-15%)	[33%]
Southern Baptist Convention	(5%)	[28%]	United Methodist Church	(-7%)	[34%]

The study above only included denominations with at least 100,000 members, so some of the fastest growing churches in our area (non-denominational) are not included. Looking at the table, while our denomination, the PC(USA), declined in attendance by 12%, another Presbyterian denomination (PCA) grew by 42%. While the PC (USA) is closing churches, the PCA is planting churches. These trends can be seen in the following graphs PCA Church plants² and PC (USA) Membership³:

PCA Church Plants



PC (USA) Membership



Membership in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) fell by 69,381 in 2008, the Office of the General Assembly (OGA) has announced in its [annual statistical report](#),⁴ continuing a trend that began in the mid-1960s. Total membership of the denomination is now 2,140,165.

While 40% of PC (USA) membership was in church on a given Sunday, 70% of PCA members were. In general, the churches with the most passionate attendance by members were also the fastest growing in size. Passionate people are not drawn to churches that are in maintenance mode. Now, just because something is growing doesn't mean it is good, and it doesn't mean we should run off and try to be just like them. There are some areas where I feel we, the PC (USA), do a much better job than the PCA. But if there are things we can learn from them, we should be humble enough to do so. These statistics show it is possible for churches in the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition to grow and thrive.

THEOLOGY MATTERS

Despite the incredibly different approaches to style, liturgy, etc. across all the different denominations listed in the table we started out with, I see a common factor in those churches that are generally growing and those that are generally declining, it all comes back to theology.

In 1998 prominent sociologist Jeffrey Hadden conducted a poll⁵ that intentionally targeted churches in the declining list above.

The question was:

“What percentage of pastors do not believe in, or doubt, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ?”

and the answer was:

American Baptist: 33%

American Lutherans: 13%

Episcopalians: 35%

Methodists: 51%

Presbyterians: 30%

Do you see a problem here? The entire trajectory of the New Testament and the fundamental motor of the early church was the conviction that Jesus really rose from the dead on the first Easter. It was this blunt, historical fact that changed everything. When people asked the first Christians what they were about, they basically recited to them the Apostles' Creed. Say the words of that ancient statement of belief and see what makes the entire creed stand or fall. It is the resurrection of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, the Word become Flesh. When the leaders

of a church don't actually believe the primary tenet of the faith is it really surprising that the churches they lead are in decline? Where are they leading their churches to, if not to Jesus? In 1st Corinthians 15:14 Paul says:

**“If Christ has not been raised,
our preaching is useless and so is your faith”**

If Jesus really didn't rise from the dead, why would I want to join a church anyway? To do good deeds? To have a sense of community? To enjoy good music? To hear dynamic speakers? Most of you already know that there are other, non-religious organizations that do a far better job at all these things than the church. Today's younger generations do not 'need' church for any of these reasons; they have a thousand much hipper alternatives for each of them. What younger generations do need is what we all need: A personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the Lord of Heaven and Earth who nails our sin and shame to the cross and then says “Come, follow me and you will have life to the full.” It is costly for a young person to be a Christian; it is a radical stance in their sub-culture. Therefore they have no time for vaguely religious activities. They are looking for passionate churches. So part 1 of the answer to the question we started with is this:

Healthy, thriving churches of Jesus Christ have a healthy thriving theology of Jesus Christ, the Shepherd, and that centers on the reality of Easter.

This in turn presupposes a church that believes the scriptures can be trusted to give us an accurate portrait of the teachings, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thriving churches stand unwavering and unapologetic on the basic beliefs common to the world-wide church of Jesus Christ as summarized in the Apostles and Nicene creeds. They have a high view of scripture. But they don't sweat the small stuff. They don't get uptight about minor differences and have no time to fight over minutia. They can be relaxed, warm, and welcoming exactly because they agree upon and are confident in the solid foundation that holds them together. This basic theology reminds them that God always acts first, God loves first, and that everything we do as a church should be viewed as response to the initiative of God. It is the knowledge that God is at work now, that everything is a gift from God, (even our next breath, even our very ability to respond to God), that creates a general sense of thankfulness and excitement in the heart of thriving churches.

The 1996 General Assembly of our Denomination did a study of the motivations of individuals joining congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It found that the fastest growing churches in our denomination had the kind of theology described above. Note also that this survey was taken AFTER many members and churches that leaned towards classic theology had already left our denomination, so this finding is all the more striking. Sincere worship of the

Triune God is always where we must begin.

A HEART FOR OUTREACH MATTERS

But a church can have a good theology of Jesus Christ, the Shepherd, and still be in decline. Part 2 of the answer is that

Healthy, thriving churches also have a healthy thriving theology of reaching the sheep.

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd...” Matthew 9:36

That is the stance we are all to have as well. Do our hearts ache for those who don't know Jesus? Are we passionately intentional about reaching out and welcoming new people so that they might encounter the Shepherd? Are we as a church willing to remove everything necessary and add everything possible in order to help new people become part of our church community? Is that in our DNA? Is everything else negotiable to achieve these two goals on honoring God and welcoming neighbors? Do we welcome people not only into our church but into our homes and into our lives? In my experience, it is only churches with a passionate, creative, entrepreneurial, joy-filled, prayerful stance towards outreach that are growing. Evangelism and Outreach is not one more program tacked on, it is at the core of who they are.

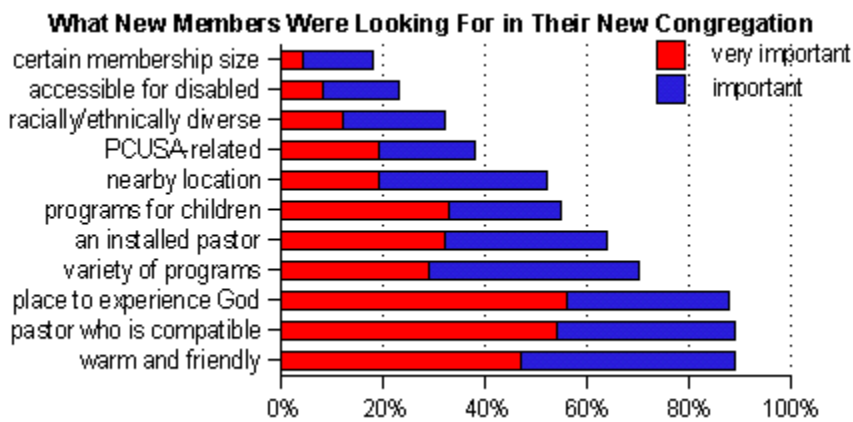
Mission, education, and the life of the churches flourish when these two priorities are the starting point. However, healthy churches know they can't do everything and strive to keep the main thing the main thing – i.e. loving the Shepherd and encouraging other sheep to join us on the journey.

In the study just mentioned,

When new adult members were asked about the factors that were important in their search for a church home, three factors outdistanced the rest:

- 1. A church that is warm and friendly to visitors.**
- 2. A church with a pastor they can relate to.**
- 3. A church where they can experience the presence of God.**

They were also asked what most impressed them on their first visit to their congregation and made them want to return for a second visit. Three factors were mentioned most frequently: **(1) the friendliness of the members; (2) the quality of the pastor's sermon; and (3) the overall worship service experience.**



Combined, these results suggest that people join churches where they find what they are looking for. Again, just because this is what people want doesn't mean it is right. We shouldn't change things just to keep up with the Jones', or the latest hip church down the street. But the fundamental question is "Do I really think my neighbors need and deserve to hear that good news of the gospel?" If so, how well are we doing the three things listed above? The true answers for how we are doing right now come not from those of us long connected to the church, but rather from the perceptions of recent visitors. #1 above is the responsibility of our members and #2 is the responsibility of our leadership.

WORLD-VIEWS

As for #3, many today are seeking to experience the presence of God. Thriving churches seek to uphold not only the truth God has revealed through the scriptures but also the mystery of God's presence here and now. Is that what our services seem to be about to visitors and members? Two of the things that affect if a person experiences the presence of God in a given community are world view and style of worship.

First, a few, oversimplified thoughts on world view, particularly the difference between a modern and a post-modern view. Modernists tend to see scientific rational thought as an important corrective to the superstitions of an earlier age. They believe in progress and building. Large institutions are seen as a sign of success and accomplishment. Modernists are especially annoyed by inaccuracy and falsehood. Post-modernists view tolerance, openness and non-hierarchal community as important correctives to the 'past' views of the modern era. For them, the modern view that presumes it can be a third party observer of phenomena in the world is an inherently arrogant stance which fails to take into account the situatedness and cultural blind spots of the observer. They distrust large institutions because they can be dehumanizing and hierarchal. Post-moderns are especially annoyed by intolerance and arrogance. In Church, people with modernist sensibilities tend to focus on the sermon and be attracted to either practical steps towards better lives or clear, well thought out systematic theology. They like clarity, order, and sequence. People with post-modern sensibilities tend to focus on the experience of worship and be attracted to community, hands on mission and experimental use of the arts. They like mystery and paradox.

While these two extremes are caricatures and we are all some unique mix of these tendencies, many churches tend to attract people that lean more to one of these two sides, and their communal worship and approaches to decision making reflect this. Which way does our church lean? But any church that strives to be multi-generational and thriving will be full of people from the full spectrum and not be too enamored with either modernism or postmodernism. Our unity is in Christ alone, and our allegiance is to Christ alone.

I believe there is a theological stance that can resonate with both Modern and Post-modern world views while remaining faithful to the Shepherd and the sheep. That stance is the conviction that:

True Orthodoxy leads to True Mystery and True Mystery leads to True Orthodoxy

What I mean is this. In any healthy relationship, accurate perception of the person helps you experience who they really are and the more experience you have in their presence the more accurate your perception of them can be. If your rational beliefs about God are accurate, they will help you to better see, understand, and experience the God who is. To be in the presence of God is to be in the presence of overwhelming Mystery. At the same time, it was exactly because the first disciples had real encounters with the mysterious God-Man Jesus that they were able, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to say true things (orthodoxy) about him. Therefore, whatever our style of worship, we need to include both clear doctrine and great space for mystery, contemplation, music, and silence.

STYLES & CULTURE

Differences in how people perceive things explains why we have two very different worship styles at our church. Not only do people differ in world view, they differ in how they do and experience life. Consider how vastly different people can be on a Myers-Briggs scale.⁶ We have different worship styles because many symbolic acts are interpreted in vastly different ways by different people (and sometimes this is based on one's generation.) For example, for one person dressing up for church represents showing respect for God while for another it represents putting on airs. For one person drums and electric guitars usher them in to the throne room of God while for someone else it sounds like so much noise. In our two services the theology shouldn't change (worship the Shepherd, love the other sheep), it is simply translated into a different language – the native tongue of those who attend. We need to be sensitive to and aware of world views, styles, and cultures both so we can reach out to people outside the church and love them in a language they understand, AND, so our faith is not taken captive by the whims or zeitgeist of our own sub-culture.

When we keep the main thing the main thing (worship the shepherd, reach out to the sheep), we

don't sweat the small stuff - we aren't annoyed, we rejoice that we are one body that can worship in different styles. Our unity is found in Christ and nowhere else. Thriving churches make sure there are approaches to worship that resonate with every generation. Are we effectively reaching every generation? If not, what needs to change? Style of worship is not primary, and one of the greatest joys of my ministry at First Presbyterian has been to be part of a church that understands this! What is primary is our mission.

THE BOTTOM LINE

In conclusion, I believe our center as a church should be four commitments:

1. **LET'S BE DRIVEN BY THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST**

(Because of our Love of God)

2. **LET'S BE DRIVEN TO WELCOME THE STRANGER**

(Because of our Love of Neighbor)

3. **LET'S BE HUNGRY TO GROW DEEPER IN LOVE FOR BOTH**

(Because we need to always remember we haven't arrived yet)

4. **EVERYTHING ELSE IS NEGOTIABLE**

(This sets us free to think outside the box, try new things, and most importantly, it frees up time to laugh, sing, and eat together – to be the church instead of 'doing' church)

I could have said we need to be a purpose driven church⁷. But I have listed these four commitments this way to remind us that this is not so much about human plans and efforts as being willing to turn into and be part of what God is already doing – with or without us. The church is God's, not ours. It is the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit that empowers us to be driven in these four ways.

A number of questions have been raised in this article. The answers we give to these questions are, in fact, our vision of what our (God's) church should be. Personally, I believe the four commitments above should drive every discussion about the property, programs and priorities for our church. They give us clarity, focus, and help us not to sweat the small stuff.

In the end, everything comes back to theology and therefore to Easter. Are we placing all our hope, and therefore our lives, on the reality of the first Easter? Can each of us explain how the reality of Easter changes everything about how we live here and now? Are we faithful messengers of that good news to a hurting world? Do we take personal responsibility to help others into the kingdom of God? I cannot think of a more exciting way to live! A church that is passionate about these things is a church I want to be part of! (Remember; don't sweat the small stuff – like noticing I just ended a sentence with a preposition).

¹ Source: The Washington Post - Washington, D.C. Author: David Cho Date: Sep 17, 2002 drawing on a study The study, Religious Congregations & Membership: 2000 from the Glenmary Research Center.
The study, Religious Congregations & Membership: 2000

² Source: www.pcaac.org/StrategicPlan_files/Growth%20Powerpoint.ppt

³ Source: <http://www.layman.org/MajorIssues.aspx?article=18193>

⁴ Source: <http://www.pres-outlook.org/news-and-analysis/1/9005.html>

⁵ Poll by Jeffrey Haddan ("Prayer Net" Newsletter, Nov. 13, 1998) in which he polled over 7,400 Protestant ministers.

⁶ A Myers-Briggs psychological survey describes a person's preferences on four scales: **E**xtraversion - **I**ntroversion, **S**ensing - **I**ntuition, **T**hinking - **F**eeling, and **J**udgment - **P**erception. As a silly example, a **ESFJ** (Extroverted/Sensing/Feeling/Judging) person loves breaking up into small group discussions with strangers at a church conference while an **INTJ** (Introverted/Intuitive/Perceiving) person would probably rather stay listening to the lecturer!

⁷ The Purpose Driven model was designed by Rick Warren of Saddleback church. He says this model "offers leaders in your church a unique, biblically-based approach to help them establish, transform, or maintain a balanced, growing congregation. What is a balanced, growing congregation? It's one that is growing larger in numbers as it grows deeper in carrying out the God-given purposes for churches through worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and missions." Thus this approach says a focus on excellence in these five areas (worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry and missions) is what a thriving church should be all about. This strategic approach is notably modern as opposed to post-modern, and is typically much more attractive to boomers than younger generations.