

A Harvest Parable

Over the last few years Jack had turned over more and more of the responsibility of running the family farm to his son, John. Soon after his wife's passing, he had completed the process and now was headed west to spend an extended period of time with his daughter and her family. As he headed across Iowa, Jack began to notice something unusual. He saw many fine farms with good barns and grain storage facilities. He also saw field after field of corn and soybeans ready for harvest. It was what he didn't see that surprised him. Even though the weather was ideal for harvesting, he didn't see anyone doing any harvesting.

It was nearing lunch time so he stopped at a restaurant in the next town. There he saw several farmers and began talking to them about what he had seen. He learned that every bit of storage space was completely full. There was no harvesting because there was no place to store the harvest.

I am convinced that a major reason Christianity in North America is in decline is because nearly all our storage facilities (churches) are full and we are not opening new facilities as fast as old ones are being closed. Let me explain.

I have been a church growth student/consultant for over thirty years. I have learned that just as grain storage facilities have a maximum amount of grain they can hold, every church has a maximum number of people it can "hold." While it is easy to tell when a grain storage facility is full, it is not easy to tell when a church is full. However, the limit is just as real. For one thing a church that is physically full may have as many as a quarter of its seats empty. That is because normally most Americans want a little space between themselves and the next person, especially if that person is not a family member¹. Furthermore, sociological factors also limit the size of a church. Consequently a church averaging fifty or a hundred can be full even though it has the physical space for several hundred.

Today over eighty percent of the churches in America are full², unable to hold any more harvest. Furthermore, every year a lot more churches are closed than are started.³ The total "storage capacity" of the churches in America is in decline.

What Can We Do?

Someone has said concerning churches that it is easier to have babies than to raise the dead. For many churches I think it would be better to say that it is easier to have babies than to grow adults. Adult churches, while not everything they could or should be, are normally doing a reasonably good job of 1) shepherding their members into heaven, 2) adding enough "sheep" to replace losses due to death and transfers, and 3) outreach thru their mission program. But just as people reach their maximum height during their teen years, most churches reach their maximum size by their teen years.

While it is possible to increase the capacity of existing churches, it is often very difficult to do so. (See "Can your church grow" below.) Smaller and older churches find increasing their sociological capacity⁴ particularly hard to do. It is not easy even for larger churches to increase

their sociological capacity. If the sociological capacity can't be increased, increasing the physical capacity will usually have little if any positive effect.

Nearly always a better alternative is to start new churches. Frequently we fail to see the need for new churches because we look at all the existing churches and see little or no growth and assume that there is little or no harvest. Instead we need to look at the harvest. When we look at the harvest and recognize that more than four out of five existing churches are full, we can begin to see that there is a huge need for new churches.⁵

Almost any church can have a daughter church if they will determine, with God's help, to do so and will select a strategy that is appropriate to their church. A church also needs the same determination a couple has when they are trying to have a baby. A couple may experience several failures before being successful but that doesn't stop them from trying. In the same way a church should keep trying, learning from their experience, if they have a failure.

A church's involvement in church planting can range from providing a substantial number of people and dollars to merely blessing and praying for a church planter (usually one of their own members). However, the more involvement, the better it usually is for both the mother church and the daughter church. Of course, a large church can normally provide more resources than a small church but often a small church will provide more (and gain more) per member than the larger church.

Churches can also partner together for church planting. This can either be a partnership to plant a church or a partnership to each plant a church. If they partner to plant a single church the new church should have more resources to work with resulting in a stronger beginning for the church. However, this kind of partnership sometimes results in a clash of vision and/or a weaker commitment from the partner churches. When churches partner together to each plant a church dollar and people resources for the new churches are seldom shared. The advantage of the partnership is found in mutual encouragement and accountability, in praying for one another and in sharing ideas and expertise, including outside expertise. Initially churches planted by this kind of partnership are usually weaker but often will have an overall greater impact because more churches are planted⁶.

Moving Forward

While it is never easy to plant a church, here are some things your church can do to make it easier and to improve your chance of success. First, begin developing a prayer team specifically for your church planting. Their prayer list should include 1) commitment to church planting by the leaders and congregation; 2) where to plant the church; 3) who should be involved, especially who should lead; 4) which strategy to use; 5) for God to prepare the harvest; 6) for workers for the harvest; and 7) for God to provide the growth.

At the same time develop commitment for church planting in the congregation, especially among the leaders. Develop commitment thru preaching, teaching, discussion groups, outside speakers and other resources.

Next, develop a church planting ministry team/committee. This team should include some of your best people. While some of the people on this team may become part of the new church, their primary responsibility will be to provide the day to day and week to week leadership for the church planting process. It is definitely best to give this responsibility to a new team rather than giving it to an existing team such as the mission committee where it may not get the necessary attention because of the press of other responsibilities.

In some parts of the world today the Kingdom of God is rapidly expanding. When you look at what is happening in these areas you see churches and even individuals rapidly planting new churches any and every way they can. To be part of this expansion, whatever your current position and situation, commit right now to church planting and communicate that commitment to someone who will hold you accountable to follow through. If you are not in a formal leadership position, that commitment may be to educate yourself and do everything you can to influence your church leaders to commit to becoming a church planting church. If you're in a position of leadership, commit to leading your church to become a church planting church. It is also possible God wants you to become a church planter. While formal training is certainly helpful, it is not necessary for church planting. Where the Kingdom is growing fastest, most of the church planters have little or no formal training. *What does God want you to do?*

1. A church's physical capacity will vary from culture to culture and over time within a culture. While it may be changing, for most of the last half of the twentieth century a church with individual seats (chairs or theater style seating) would normally not average more than seventy-five percent of its worship seating capacity. (Children and workers not in the worship facility don't count.) A church with pews would normally average no more than one person for each twenty-four inches of pew space. However, since church seating capacity is normally figured at eighteen or twenty-one inches of pew space per person, a church would normally not average over seventy-five percent (eighteen inches) or eighty-five percent (twenty-one inches) of its seating capacity.

2. Eighty percent of the churches in America are plateaued or declining. Very close to if not one hundred percent of these churches are full. (I have never seen a church that had both physical and sociological room that wasn't growing.) Also, growing churches are usually close to full and at times are full, but they regularly add both physical and sociological space.

3. During the latter part of the twentieth century there were more churches closed than new churches started. Recently there has been a slight net gain in the number of churches in America but not nearly enough to keep up with population growth.

4. Sociological capacity relates primarily to leadership and the number of small groups in a church. Small groups can range from traditional classes to "house churches."

5. For example, a rough study of Marion County (Indianapolis, Indiana) found that it would take the equivalent of a church every other block in the residential areas averaging nearly 270 (three times the size of the average protestant church according to George Barna) to reach all the people in Marion County.

6. A weak start doesn't necessarily result in a weak church. Most of the world's largest churches started with less than 50 people and most of the rest started with less than 100.

Can Your Church Grow

While it is never easy for a church to grow, most churches can grow. However, the history and situation of some churches make it much more difficult for them to grow than for others to grow. The following quiz will help you determine how relatively hard or easy it will be for your church to grow.

- 1 Average worship attendance under 200 0 points
Average worship attendance 200 to 250 2 points
Average worship attendance 250 to 500 5 points
Average worship attendance 500 to 1000 8 points
Average worship attendance over 1000 10 points Points _____

- 2 Church less than 3 years old 10 points
Church 3 to 7 years old 8 points
Church 7 to 12 years old 5 points
Church 12 to 15 years old 2 points
Church over 15 years old 0 points Points _____

- 3 Divide last year's average attendance by the average attendance three years ago _____
If answer is less than 1.1 0 points
If answer is 1.1 to 1.2 2 points
If answer is 1.2 to 1.3 4 points
If answer is 1.3 to 1.4 6 points
If answer is 1.4 to 1.5 8 points
If answer is 1.5 to 1.6 10 points
If answer is 1.6 to 1.7 12 points
If answer is 1.7 to 1.8 14 points
If answer is 1.8 to 1.9 16 points
If answer is 1.9 to 2.0 18 points
If answer is over 2.0 20 points Points _____

- 4 If you church is located in either a rapidly growing area or is primarily reaching a minority group that is rapidly growing in your area, add 5 points. Points _____

Total Points _____

Churches scoring less than 5 total points will find it extremely difficult to grow.
Churches scoring over 25 points will find it relatively easy to continue growing.
The more points churches scoring between 5 and 25 points score, the easier they will find it to grow.