

Pictures

By Bruce Webster

Christian Standard, July 21, 1996 Use with Permission

I'm a visual person. Tell me how to get somewhere in an area I am unfamiliar with and I will have trouble finding it. However, show me a map for a few seconds and I can go right to it without any problem. "A picture is worth a thousand words" is a common saying. Often pictures, even mental pictures, can help us understand a situation much better than just a description. I think some mental pictures can help us better understand how churches work.

The Pictures

First, think of a shallow box about three feet square with four people standing in the box. There appears to be extra room in the box, but what happens if someone tries to join these four people in the box? If they cooperate they can probably get a fifth person in the box. However, it is terribly crowded and soon one of the people (it may not be the new person) steps, falls, or is pushed out of the box.

A second picture is that of platters with one or more cups on each platter. Some platters are saucer size with only one cup on the platter. Other platters are quite large with dozens of cups and even some shallow bowls with cups in the bowls. Water is poured into the cups until they overflow and even the platters overflow. Then even more water is poured into the cups and platters but with the cups and platters already full, it just spills out.

A third picture is of a group of peg boards, some with square or rectangular holes, some with round or elliptical holes, some with triangular holes, etc. Then picture hundreds of pegs of various sizes and shapes. Some pegs have a board where they fit well and other boards where they don't fit. Other pegs don't have any board where they fit well.

Finally picture ten Americans, a group of six and two groups of two.

The Connection

Churches have a lot in common with these pictures. Like the box, they usually look like they have room for more people. However, in most cases they don't have enough physical and/or psychological space for more people to comfortably fit in the church. Consequently, when someone new comes to the church, someone, often a marginal, longer time member, drops out. The net result is no gain.

Again, churches are a lot like the platters. A very small church might only be a saucer size platter with only one cup. A large church would have a large platter with many cups and often shallow bowls with cups in the bowls. The platter represents the church and the cups represent small groups in the church.

These small groups can be formal small groups such as home Bible studies or Bible School classes averaging less than 25¹ or they could be committees or work groups or even a group of people who go out to eat together every Sunday after church. The bowls are larger groups such as large Bible School classes generally averaging 40 to 150.

Water (people) are poured into the cups. When the cups are full (usually less than 25 people) they overflow into the platter. The platter (church) will hold a little more than the cups by themselves

but soon it also overflows. Then, as new people are added to the church someone spills out and the net result is no real growth even though the membership list may continue to grow.

When people are added to a small group the group soon becomes full.² A group usually becomes full in six to eighteen months after it is formed. Then as new people come into the group people begin to flow out of the group and if they are not added to some other group they soon flow out of the church. When all the groups are full, usually less than a year after the last group was added to the church, the church stops growing.

Each platter (church) has a limit to the number of cups (small groups) it can hold and consequently a limit on its size. A church's platter size is largely determined by leadership, particularly staffing, and available facilities.

It is possible for a church to increase its platter size and continue growing. However, It is not easy to do so. There are costs involved that are often more than some of the key people are willing to pay. Paid staff often has to work longer hours, change their style of ministry and give up pet programs to some one else. Volunteer leaders often have to share power or even give it up entirely.

Often additional dollars are needed and people have to give up knowing everyone and everything that is happening. They can no longer be involved in every activity. Often it is unconscious, but a key leader even while saying they want their church to grow, will sabotage a key growth program or someone, perhaps not even with an official position in the church, will make sure visitors feel unwelcome. Consequently, even if most of the people want growth and are willing to pay the price, it may not happen.

These pictures help us see why few churches grow after they are fifteen years old. Humans stop growing by the time they are fifteen or a little older and churches usually are the same. Less than twenty percent of the churches in America are growing and most of these are less than fifteen years old.

If everyone was a very mature Christian the peg board illustration would have less meaning. However, our churches have many immature Christians and even seekers who are considering becoming a Christian. Furthermore, there are millions of non-Christians, most of which will visit a church several times before becoming a Christian.

Especially for these non-Christians we need to eliminate as many artificial barriers to the Gospel as possible. For instance, whatever style of music your church uses, some people will find it very attractive and other people will find it very repulsive. The people who find your music repulsive should not have to sing or listen to it in order to become a Christian or even to have fellowship with other Christians.

Music is only one factor. Topics of conversation, styles of dress, the food served at church dinners, and a whole host of other things can cause a visitor to your church to feel uncomfortable. Anytime we can eliminate these as barriers to the Gospel we can reach additional people. Every church has its own personality. Some people are attracted by that personality and others are not.

This does not negate the need for Christian unity. We must recognize that other churches are not the enemy. They are also part of God's family and we need to treat them as such. It is good to work cooperatively and to have times when we come together to celebrate our unity in Christ.

In the picture of ten Americans the six are people who don't even claim to have been in religious services during the past week. Two were either in a non-Christian religious service (Jewish, Muslim, etc.) or are stretching the truth. The other two were in some kind of Christian religious service but only one of these is sufficiently committed to be there every week.

In other words, about ten percent of Americans attend Christian services every week. Another twenty percent attend fairly often but not every week and seventy percent seldom if ever attend.

The Solution

The fact that most of the people in some small population groups are active Christians leads me to believe that most people are reachable if properly approached by the right kind of church.

When we look at America we see one or more churches in every small town and a church every few blocks in our metropolitan areas.

It looks like we have plenty of churches. However, many of our metropolitan areas have more than a thousand people (population) for each church and even most rural areas have hundreds of people per church. At the same time Protestant Churches average less than 100 in attendance per church.

When you consider the pictures above and that most churches are full and unlikely to grow, it becomes obvious that hundreds of thousands of new churches are needed across the country. Any metropolitan area needs hundreds if not thousands of new churches and even most rural areas have need of several new churches. To reach every reachable person we probably need at least one church for every 100 people. *We must multiply the number of churches we have.*

We are finding that the best way to multiply churches is for each local church to take responsibility for regularly planting new churches. Often the best way to do this is for a small group of churches to work together. Each church takes responsibility for planting new churches but they share information, experience, encouragement, prayer support, etc. and hold one another accountable.

¹Ideal small group size is no more than ten to twelve people.

²A full group varies from six or eight people to about twenty or a little more.