

“How can I grow my congregation?”

This is a perennial question which arises in congregations around the world. The answer is simple and yet lifelong. This is an article that I promised to our dear friends in Scotland in May 2014. In the last 2 years, the question has arisen in each congregation that I have visited, churches of various denominations in various nations.

Growing a congregation accomplishes a religious mandate of outreach. I have yet to meet a congregation which did not want to reach out to people, bring in new members, keep old members, and have a hope for future ministry in the place where they are located. The question that perplexes is neither why or what but how?

What we want is to get the people through the doors....

We want to do this because at our depth, regardless of how we may look to the outside, world our churches are made up of people who desire to grow in their own faith. We want to share what God has to offer and we like the ideas and ideals of faith.

However, just as employees of a corporation, soldiers in an Army, or even servants of a ruler, the execution of principles and commands can get tangled up, misunderstood, and even ignored.

How can I grow my congregation? Even for the curmudgeons who really do not like people, we still recognize that church growth makes for good press, great soundbites.

Most chapels start the process of church growth with advertising and programs to bring “them in.” While these are good activities, this is not the correct place to start. We must start, instead, with more foundational understandings of ourselves and our God.

First, we need to recognize that, while we might doubt the level of welcome that “they” will give to us, “they” are generally interested in knowing more about God and about the curiosities of religion. In 2016, there are fewer and fewer people in Europe and North America who have ever entered the doors of any worship space. The chapel itself is a mysterious place – perhaps even more foreign and frightening than another country. 20 years ago, about 5% of Europe attended church – EVER. In 2016, in Germany of a class of 120 students, only 4 attend church – ever. That is 3%!!

In America, 60 years ago, about 80% attended church at least once a year. Today, the numbers are closer to 50%, and might be less. Because of the church decline since 1950, when church going was the norm there are significant numbers of people whose families have not attended in 3 generations.

Even so, studies show that people are interested in knowing more about religion and God. There is a remarkable amount of our society which is interested in spirituality and identifies some sort of being beyond the created and visible. (Pew Research Center)

So, our first principle is that people are interested and desire to hear what it is that we do when we are “at the chapel.”

We will look at congregational growth as the 5 fingers of a hand. Our first principle is simply, that we can be received and influential in the lives of people. This is a simple but much overlooked thought, just as the pinky finger is an under recognized part of our hands.



The second principle lines up with the ring finger, the place where we put our

wedding bands, symbols of trust. It is critical to know that to get people to come and keep people coming, we need to appear trustworthy and develop that trust worthiness.

Go and see the work of Rodney Stark on religiosity who explores the facets of religion which include an ethic that includes trustworthiness. Also go see James Fowler's faith development theories; the basis of faith development is in the ability to trust.

These first 2 principles of congregational growth have nothing to do with our activities to increase attendance, to advertise, nor to do with really what we do to people. They have everything to do with who we are.

And now we move to the middle finger, and yes I am amused by this as our analogy, because it is the finger that sticks out the most and is most used rudely. Even as I am laughing, I realize that this middle finger is most used in typing and is critical in holding and making life possible. It is only at the center of parts of chapel outreach that we find the "to do list" of getting people in and keeping people coming. Give list of things to do. This is the place of tangible actions.

- Please be VERY careful!! The middle finger can ... give off the wrong impression. So also, acting just from the to-do list without the previous 2 principles and ignoring the last 2 principles will... give off the wrong impression and push people away faster than NOT doing anything at all.

- **Intentionality is important.**
- **Intention is in the Congregational Plans.**
- **Pastor and Curriculum Reflect the Intention.**
- **Consistency Connects with Intention.**
- **Intentionality is in Persistence.**
 - **Expressions of Care Show Intent.**
 - Eye to Eye Contact
 - Positions of Responsibility
 - Food
 - Visits
 - Calls, Notes & Emails

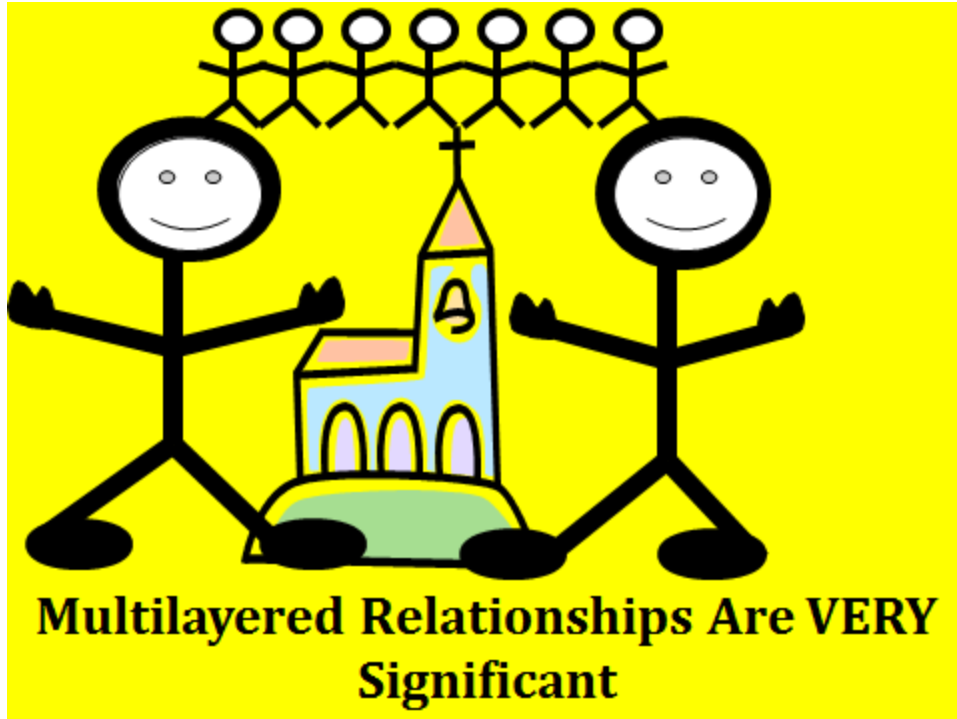
Do not stop on your congregational growth efforts at the “to do list.” I have seen it happen, and this is part of why I struggle to share these principles. Making chapel outreach into a “to do list” is a huge turnoff.

No one wants to be a project.

The fourth finger of congregational growth is in self-development. If you are humble enough to be willing to see help, then you are willing to invite others to grow with you. This is congregational growth for mutual benefit not to fix THOSE people.

- Self-Development is important.**
- **Going to chapel is a priority for yourself.**
- **Private devotional practices are daily.**
- **Have mutually supportive relationships.**
- **Learn about the people you want to reach.**
- **Learn from the people you want to reach.**
- **Encourage others to and grow.**

Last part of congregational growth is in wider connections. There are times when we cannot provide all the help that someone needs. The chapel community is a critical reality as well as a theological basis for the existence of religious groups. My influence in your life is greatest when I share our relationship with other trustworthy individuals. The fingers of a hand can grasp best when they do not grasp alone.



We might have started this conversation thinking about how we want more people sitting in our chapels. But we end this conversation with the realization that we want more FOR the people who are already in our chapels.

What we want for the people who are here and what we want for the people who are NOT here is really 1 Goal.