

Inside: A Survey of Growing Churches in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

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In the summer of 2012, I conducted a study on behalf of my church, Chippawa Presbyterian Church, on growing churches in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. My goal was to discover what common characteristics were shared by healthy congregations across our denomination, in order that we might learn from their experience.

The Survey

Using data from the *Acts and Proceedings*, congregations whose attendance grew consistently between 2007 and 2011 by an average of 5% or more per year were contacted. To be statistically meaningful, only churches with an attendance of 50 or more were included. Out of the 36 churches contacted, 17 churches were able to participate fully in the study. The growth rates in these churches ranged from 5% to 25% annually, and the average attendance ranged from 59 to 455.

The survey was divided into two portions: the quantitative portion, where participants identified the specific ministries that they believed were most important to church growth; and the narrative portion, where churches discussed which characteristics and traits they believed were most relevant to church health and growth. In most cases the surveys were completed by the minister, sometimes in consultation with the church session.

Primary and Secondary Ministries

The quantitative portion of this study revealed six ministries that were identified as “very important” or “vital” by a majority of participants. These primary six areas of church life were

- relevant preaching
- inspiring music in worship
- Sunday morning children’s programming
- local mission
- corporate prayer (outside of worship)
- pastoral care

Out of the remaining 18 categories, a further nine ministries were identified as “very important” or “vital” in some combination by a majority of the churches surveyed. These secondary ministries were

- global mission partnering
- Vacation Bible School
- intentional leadership development
- adult spiritual education
- adult small groups
- new members’ classes



- educating the congregation on stewardship
- teaching and encouraging personal evangelism
- inspiring worship elements (dramas, videos, etc.)

Of the remaining nine categories, seven were identified by at least one participant as very important or vital to their own growth.

Thus, growing churches tend to be strong in most or all of the six primary ministries, as well as being strong in a unique mixture of other ministries. This suggests that health and strength in these primary categories is critical to church growth; but once these core pieces are in place, growing churches look to their unique context and strengths to determine their own secondary ministries.

Implications for Churches Seeking Growth

A church seeking growth might be encouraged to begin by working to establish and strengthen each of the primary ministries, recognizing that each of these areas will have positive implications on the wider church life. From the narrative study, we learned the following:

- *Relevant preaching* means preaching biblically-based, Christ-centred messages that make the text equally relevant and meaningful to long-time believers and first-time worshippers.
- *Inspiring music in worship* generally means a blend of diverse music, including traditional hymns, contemporary praise music, world music, gospel, etc., done with excellence and with a sensitivity to community context.
- *Sunday morning children's programming* refers to making the church friendly and accessible to parents with children, with fun, engaging and purposeful teaching.
- *Local mission* includes a wide range of community outreach opportunities, including volunteering in food banks, running support groups out of the church, prayer shawl ministries, etc.
- *Corporate prayer outside of worship* indicates the importance of trusting the guidance and leadership of the Holy Spirit by including prayer in all areas of church life (small groups, prayer teams, church meetings, mission events, etc).
- *Pastoral Care* refers to the ability for a congregation to offer tangible care and support to those people connected with the church.

Once all or most of these ministries are firmly

established, the church might be encouraged to discover their own secondary ministries, based on

- the gifts, passions, skills and abilities of their congregation;
- the demographic makeup of their community;
- and most importantly, the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit.

Characteristics of Growing Churches

Although ministries and programs are important to numeric church growth, no ministry will have a kingdom impact unless the church is also growing in faith, in health and in their relationship with Jesus Christ. Therefore, churches seeking to grow and reach out are also encouraged to work simultaneously to develop the characteristics of growing churches.

Based on the results of the narrative survey, these characteristics include

- visionary leadership
- credibility and integrity of the leadership
- willingness to deal frankly and directly with church conflict
- willingness to change in order to reach the local community
- open and friendly people who simply, naturally invite others to church
- intentional hospitality to new and old alike
- including long-time and first-time worshippers in every part of church life
- joy, laughter and celebration
- relevant, engaging preaching
- inspiring music (vital, engaging and diverse)
- excellence in worship
- patience and momentum-building
- outreach, local mission, and serving tangible community needs
- compassion, mutual support and pastoral care
- trusting in God's guidance through the Holy Spirit
- deep trust in scripture and the life-changing good news of Jesus Christ

To see the full study online, please visit equippingfor.ca/???. For additional information about this survey, or to discuss the results and conclusions, please contact The Rev. David Moody by email at david@chippawapc.ca.

God bless you in your ministry!