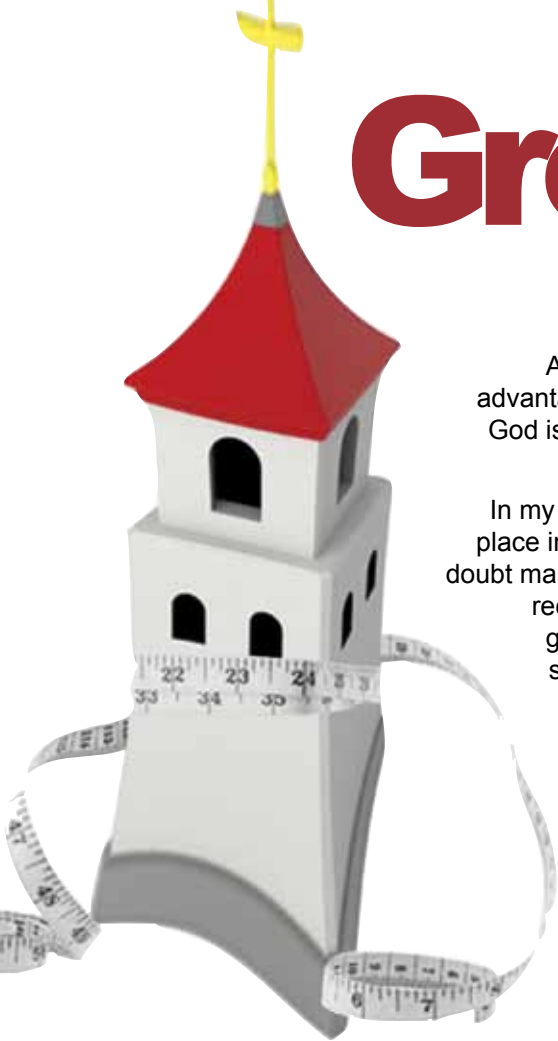


Growing Pains

An Update on Four Different Churches and their Growing Pains



As Publisher of LIVING Christian Magazine, one of the great blessings I have is the advantage of seeing God working throughout our community. It is always a joy to see how God is moving, working, and shaping His kingdom all around us. He is doing great things and He's doing it in a wide variety of ways and through a diverse group of people.

In my experience, every church has growing pains. Some of them from the growth taking place in the life of the church, while others suffer pains from the lack of growth. There's no doubt many churches in our area are facing some very difficult times. The economy is slowly recovering but many financial concerns still exist. Tolerance is the new buzzword, our government is continually being pressured to remove God from all public areas, and studies show our most recent generations are growing up without any connection to Christianity whatsoever. All of these factors, and many more, have contributed to declining number is church attendance. However, where some churches see only problems, others are seeing opportunities.

Recently I visited with the pastors of four different churches who are each seizing opportunities to grow not only their own respective churches but more importantly, God's kingdom. Each one has their own approach and certainly each one faces unique challenges, but they all have one thing in common - a passion to follow God's calling.

"Anytime you experience change, whether it's building, remodeling, or adding services, it's the best of times and it's the worst of times," says Pastor Wray Offermann of St. Paul's Lutheran. "It is very exciting to see how God does work through a lot of trials and struggles. And it never happens as fast as you want it to happen. He stretches us to the max at moments.

We come up against these obstacles and we ask 'How is God going to do this' and 'How are we going to press through this?' And yet, God has been really faithful to help refine the vision and bring the resources together and to raise up people who sometimes have to carry you when you can't quite see the next step yourself."

For some time, St. Paul's explored the purchase of the former Bachrach corporate offices and warehouse on East Mound as a possible site of a new location for the 150+ year-old church. For several years St. Paul's has

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struggled with space issues in their current location. While the sanctuary is certainly among the most beautiful in the area, its seating capacity of about 300 has proven to be a challenge. Like many churches, they began adding services in order accommodate their growing numbers. In addition, a satellite service was started at Shilling Auditorium on the campus of Richland Community College a few years back. Currently attendance averages about 800 per weekend.



Pastor Wray Offermann

But other challenges soon came to light. A lack of classroom space, divided resources, and other obstacles, soon saw a decline in their average attendance. Studies by many leading research organizations have shown that once a church reaches about 80% capacity, most congregations will begin to decline unless certain measures are taken.

Approximately four years ago a team from St. Paul's was assigned the task of determining exactly what those measures might look like. The team explored possible options including what could be done with their present location, partnering with the Lutheran School Association property, renovating their current facilities, repurposing an existing building, and even building a whole new church.

During their research, the Bachrach site kept emerging as one of the top solutions in terms of efficiency and cost effectiveness. Once the Bachrach solution was agreed upon, it took nearly two and a half years to close on the property.

Pastor Wray beamed as he shared, "We now own the property. We are blessed to be able to mow the lawn! We have work crews that are taking down some of the shelving that still remains. We even have a preliminary set of build-out plans."

St. Paul's plans to start the build-out process by first focusing on the worship space. "Plans are to have a worship space for just under 900 people. We will have a large, open fellowship space, and then we will develop the existing finished areas for Sunday School, adult Bible studies, and our administrative area. The next step in the process will be, as God raises up someone to be blessed

by this property (the Wood Street location), then we'll move the daycare out there and we'll build out the space for the daycare.

Then it will be the youth and the gymnasium areas, the kitchen, and other areas. It's all happening and we want it to all happen right away, but it has to happen in a step by step fashion. God has been there every step of the way to say, 'Just walk with Me and we'll get there.' It has been truly amazing."

According to the Aspen Group, the design group retained by St. Paul's, plans are to start construction in June and actually be worshipping in the new location by the end of this year. Having said that, Pastor Wray's experience tells him that is probably the most optimistic estimate of the project. But he also knows it could happen because they are working very aggressively. As of this writing, the actual contractors have yet to be determined but that should be finalized very shortly.

First Christian Church has seen a rapid growth in its congregation the past few years. "For us, a key to our growth is a willingness to examine what it means to change," shares Pastor Wayne Kent. "The only way you can grow is by change. That's the case with nature, our marriages, our kids, and as individuals. In order to grow you have to have some sort of dissatisfaction with the past,



Pastor Wayne Kent

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even if it's good. If you think about a child growing to an adult, they have to change. Otherwise they're not growing and if they're not growing, if they're not changing, we take them to the doctor and ask 'What's wrong, what's going on?'" says Pastor Wayne. "Think about when a child goes through their teenage years. That's a painful time for lots of people."

One of First Christian's core values is to embrace change. That core value is printed in their weekly bulletins to remind each other of their need to be willing to change. The average church goes through a "life cycle" about every forty years. Churches who don't recognize that cycle, and do something about it, face an uphill struggle.

"We're going through some changes now in the life of our church, even though we're 177 years old. Our church had been in decline for many, many years. In the late 80s, early 90s, the leaders of the church made some intentional decisions to grow. And here it is 25 years later and we've had to make some intentional decisions about the new life cycle. And I have to tell you, it's hard. It's challenging work, it's challenging for staff, it's very challenging for the lay leaders." But with the current economy and other concerns, Pastor Wayne Kent and his team have decided to opt for adding a fourth service to their weekend worship schedule to be held on Saturday nights. "For us, adding Saturday nights is a significant key. What drives that decision is not just the economics, but from a prayerful review of our facilities and structure. If we were to add another three to four hundred

people to the life of our church on Sunday mornings alone, we know that our kids' ministries would be over the top, we know our parking lot would be in trouble, the facility as a whole would be in trouble. So it made sense to add that additional service to Saturday night." First Christian's Saturday night services begin July 9th at 5:00 p.m.

"Even when you say you embrace change, that doesn't mean you like it," remarks Pastor Wayne. "I think the larger the church is, the less and less models there are to go and look at and see how to do it. If you grow ten percent a year in a church of two hundred: that's twenty people. But when you're a church of 1,000 and grow ten percent, that's a lot of people. It means you're adding a hundred people to the life of your church."

That of course poses a whole new set of challenges and opportunities. Pastor Wayne explains, "That's like bringing a whole new church into the congregation. And you have to ask, 'What does that mean staff-wise? What does that mean facility-wise? And what does that mean education wise?' just to name a few. The larger you become, the larger the stakes become. For the sake of the Kingdom of God, the stakes are higher because if you mess up, more people are going to be injured."



Pastor Danny Cox

Pastor Danny Cox at Grace United Methodist has growing pains of a different sort. Because of a myriad of circumstances, South Shores United Methodist has voted to close its doors and Pastor Cox soon found himself as the lead person for ministering to a whole new area of our community in addition to his responsibilities at their downtown location. "According to

statistics at least half of the people in any given area are un-churched. The question becomes how can we reach the un-churched particularly in that area and still maintain, if not grow, the congregation downtown," says Pastor Cox. Currently Grace ministers to about 350 people each weekend.

"Part of our motto is, 'We're in the city for good.' And good means three things to us: it means we're not going to go anywhere, we're not going to abandon downtown, we going to continue ministering to downtown. Good also means In the Methodist tradition what John Wesley said. He said, 'Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.' The other definition of "good" for us are the letters G.O.O.D. which stands for Get Out Of Doors. We really want to get out into the community and into the neighborhood and into the world more and see ourselves not so much as a church that's defined by its walls, or its location, or its building, but by its mission."

In regards to South Shores, Pastor Cox shares the South Shores congregation plans to gift all of their property and assets to Grace United effective June 30th. The same morning that takes place, the two congregations will gather

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at Grace United where the congregation of Grace United will accept the gifts followed by a time of celebration for both congregations.

As of this writing a timetable for Grace's efforts has not been established but plans are certainly in the works. There are still some groups that utilize the facilities at South Shores and Pastor Cox assures them they can continue to meet there. Grace United's staff seems to be primed for such an undertaking. Associate Pastor Brad Watkins brings a passion for inner city ministry and Ron Rector, Minister of Evangelism and Outreach, is the likely candidate to lead the South Shores project.

"We have a lot of work to do, but it seems God is lining these things up for us to do," says Pastor Cox. "We have the staff and we have the place. That's the opposite of a lot of church starts. I tell all our people, it's not going to be South Shores resuscitated and it's not going to be Grace Jr. It's going to be whatever it needs to be to attract people to Christ."

Yet another approach to winning more people to Christ can be found at New Beginnings Church of God on Decatur's northwest side. Pastor Mark Smith and his church have shown remarkable growth over the past few years. What started out as two families meeting in Mark's garage is now a church of about 900.

Pastor Mark reflects, "Looking back at New Beginnings and multiple services, you get to the point where ask yourself, 'where do you go from here? Do you add services, do add on, do you continue getting bigger, what do you do?' And for me, I just got to the point where I literally laid down every book I had except God's Word for several months. I needed a fresh vision from God. I just got completely away and focused on hearing what God wanted us to do."

After several months of prayer and times of fasting, Pastor Mark came to realize there were people in this community he would never be able to reach, but perhaps someone else could. "I came to understand New Beginnings, and the way we do church, isn't going to appeal to everyone," confessed Mark. "To reach more people for Christ, we needed to plant more churches rather than just see how big we could get.

And I didn't want to have any of the answers. I wanted nothing on the table other than God's vision because if we already have it figured out then we don't really need God. You need to know it's God's vision and not yours. You have to be prepared to hear His vision before God will give it to you. You have to want what is best for the Kingdom and not New Beginnings, not Mark Smith. I just want people to come to know Christ and whatever that takes, that's what we'll do."



Pastor Mark Smith

To that end, New Beginnings plans to plant five new churches in the next ten years. Some will be local, but others may well be in other countries. "I think multiplication is the name of the game. If my math is right, 65% of our population have no, or very little faith involvement whatsoever," states Pastor Mark. "People have personalities and churches have personalities. Let's see if we can't find something that will match up with them. If people wanted to come to our church, they know the doors are open, they know we're here, but they're not coming. There are some phenomenal churches in our community, but for some reason, we're not meeting their (the unchurched) need."

New Beginnings first new plant will be in the Mt. Zion area. To help get that new plant started, Pastor Mark will be asking members of his own congregation to commit to being a missionary in the new church for a period of one year. "If you're not willing to give up something, then you have no right to stand up in front of the congregation and say, 'We need to do this.' It's the right thing to do," states Pastor Mark. "We need to invest in the lives of people who don't yet know Christ."

Every church experiences growing pains of one sort or another. But that's okay, in fact, that's good. We shouldn't be comfortable. We should always be seeking new a different ways to grow God's Kingdom. As Pastor Mark told me, "In the end, all of us need to remember we're either in this for the Kingdom or we're not." Here's to growing pains.



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