



## Church Growth: More or Less

Do you really want your church to grow?

Seems like a dumb question. With increased numbers there is presumably more money, more potential volunteers, more energy, and more activities, more of everything. Right?

Yes, when you increase numbers, what you may get is more. But is *more* what we really want? Could there be something other than the *more* underlying the *less* for which the *more* has such an attraction? Maybe the *more* is really about *less* worry or concern over finances. Maybe it's about less stress, or less frustration. Maybe wanting more is really about the lack of help needed to get the job done or the less than enough follow through that makes for a successful program. The issue of growing our churches is more complicated than it may seem and less understood by many Unity leaders.

At my Integral Leadership and Church Growth seminars I ask my audience of ministers, boards, and lay leaders this question: Imagine that you are a church of 100 Sunday adult participants...would you rather have your attendance double or your income double? After people have a chance to reflect deeply on the question, they realize that their interest in growing their congregation is about easing the stresses associated with finances. This, coupled with the fact that a doubling of attendance only produces a 20% overall increase in financial support, helps them glean a new perspective in the real issue underlying church growth. ***Integral church growth is about increasing ownership not increasing numbers.*** Increasing ownership equates to more financial support and meaningful involvement. This insight dramatically transforms the conversation about strategies for church growth.

## Development vs. Growth

Since our concept of church growth has the tendency to be superimposed upon the anticipation of increasing numbers and financial support, it may be advantageous to reframe the issue of increasing ownership and growing energy within the community as an effect of church development. Like growth, the word *develop* implies a process. A photographic plate is developed into a picture. The caterpillar does not grow to become a butterfly. It develops its potential to become what it has been created to be.

Development produces growth. Growth does not necessarily produce development or transformation. Growth is external and usually measurable. Development is internal, evolutionary, sequential, holonic, and integral. Development is inherently linked to the unfolding of potentiality and is focused on what is and what can be. Growth moves from small to large, simple to complex, less to more. Development moves from inside to outside, from principle to demonstration.

So then, what shifts in leadership and organization are needed to cultivate more ownership of the church's future? How can the church create authentic pathways for people who are already participating in the church to take up more meaningful roles in the life of the church? What programs engage an individual's innate desire to make a positive difference in their church and community? These questions underlie the integral approach to church development.

In previous articles I have shared an Integral Map of Ministry that portrays ministry as a living system comprised of four energetic fields: organization, social systems, culture, and consciousness. These four interconnecting domains govern how a ministry behaves when it is subjected to forces of transition and change. Increasing numbers of individuals within a church create transition and change, and necessitate a reconfiguration of the entire living system before stability is achieved. Imagine your church of 100 adult participants. What would be some of the transitions and

changes necessary to accommodate a doubling of your congregation's size?

Going from 100 to 200 might not happen overnight, but imagine if such a growth spurt took place in less than a year. What changes would need to happen in order to deal with twice as many people? Let's look at this question from each of the four quadrants. Keep in mind that we are examining the difference between increasing numbers and increasing ownership of the church's future as an integral approach to church growth and development.

### The Organizational Field

You may have a sanctuary that can handle the additional traffic, but there would likely be the need for additional staff, more volunteers, upgraded technologies, extra parking, and greater leadership competence in order to manage a congregation twice its former size. While more people would bring more energy and presumably, more financial support, how will existing structures need to be reconfigured in order deal with an organization that is also twice as busy?

Doubling the size of a church (moving from Pastoral to Program ministry) involves making enhancements to an organization's infrastructure. These upgrades require money. The church growth myth is: With increasing numbers there will be more financial support. The reality is that doubling a congregation's size without a corresponding doubling of ownership only increases the church's income by 20%. Remember the 20/80 rule. Twenty percent of the congregation provides 80% of the resources necessary to fund the organization. Newcomers rarely enter the community as tithers. It takes time and the resources of the ministry for them to take up meaningful roles in the life of the church and authentically take on the responsibility of supporting the organization. When the growth strategy is set on increasing numbers, the organizational field becomes stressed as a disproportionate number of congregants are in actuality *receivers* in comparison to those present as *givers* to the vitality of the living system. The 20/80 rule can actually

degrade if growth is too rapid, exposing structural defects and organizational deficits.

The integral strategy is to increase ownership within the present community—to elevate the core percentage from 20% to 50% of the congregation providing the 90% or more of the resources needed. A doubling of a church's income is possible when the focus of church growth and development is on creating thriving, coherent, and integral church organizational structures prior to direct efforts to increase numbers. When the organizational field is integrally aligned, it is not diminished by an influx of increasing numbers of participants.

### **The Social System Field**

Ministry is about relationships. In a church of 100, people naturally desire a relationship with the minister as their primary connection to the larger community. When numbers increase, this inclination must change. People must be willing to form authentic connections within affinity groups instead of placing that burden of intimacy solely on their relationship to the minister.

There are two challenges related to the social field when the numbers increase and the system is dominated by family dynamics. First, there is the tendency for the minister to gravitate toward cultivating new relationships with first-timers. In a small church, this may inadvertently displace or alter how established members feel connected to their minister. They sometimes feel abandoned or neglected when the minister is preoccupied with a growing church. The second issue is that, as more and more people enter the social system, *how* people are in relationship must change in order for new people are to find authentic intimacy bonds within the larger community. The minister can no longer function as the primary care-giver within the system.

The integral remedy works to reconfigure how intimacy bonds are created. Whereas in a family dynamic the basis of intimacy and care-giving is inherent in the minister / congregation relationship, this must evolve if increasing numbers are on the horizon. In an egalitarian system, however, the intimacy and care-giving function

is structured as a dynamic of the entire community. No one person bears the role, burden, or responsibility for providing an authentic connection to the larger community. In this way, increasing numbers do not threaten the established population. Elderberries and Newberries can make WeCanberry sauce.

## **The Cultural Field**

A defining characteristic of a church is its culture. The cultural field is an energetic medium within which the community's story, traditions, and values form a distinct communal selfhood that is projected into the landscape of present experiences and future possibilities. As a church grows, it must both accommodate newcomers into its established culture as well as awaken to an emerging cultural identity consistent with the shifting landscape that increasing numbers create.

When there are unresolved issues, past hurts, unspoken rules, attachments to traditions, or the inability to reexamine and redefine values, increasing numbers will inadvertently threaten the status quo. Without the capacity to embrace the tensions and stresses of growth as a means to authentically transform a community's cultural identity and purpose, it will be difficult for an established culture to welcome changes. If all you know of yourself is being a caterpillar, the prospects of becoming a butterfly may seem daunting or even scary. Ministry is a living system and for newcomers to find authentic and meaningful connections to the ministry there must be an organic mechanism whereby a newcomer's presence eventually contributes to an evolving cultural identity. They must contribute to the gene pool of the church's DNA in order to move from receivership to ownership of the organization.

The integral approach emphasizes a focus on growing ownership (shared identity and shared future) as a strategy for church development. This can happen by cultivating a culture of appreciative inquiry where the ministry takes on the practice of regularly examining its stories, positive strengths, traditions, and values in the context of unfolding imperatives. In this way, as numbers increase new participants have the capacity to contribute

authentically to the church's cultural distinctiveness. A culture of appreciative inquiry means that the church asks and continues to ask every year or so: Who are we? Why do we exist? What do we stand for? What do we want to create together? In this way, the entire community is engaged in a collaborative process of co-creation where the community's strengths are so exploited that its weaknesses become irrelevant.

### The Consciousness Field (Intentionality)

Church growth is an effect of consciousness and the processes that link intention with creativity. The factors that govern the out picturing and demonstration of a desired future are rooted in Principle. Therefore, the quintessential issue related to a church's capacity to grow is "what's the intention underlying the desire to grow?" If it is to actualize and expand the capacity to give, serve, and to make the difference, then the intention to grow is integrally linked to the principle that supports expansion. However, if it is tainted with the expectation that growth will resolve worries and ease stresses, then it is likely that increasing numbers will only create more tension and less cohesiveness.

The conundrum facing small churches today is that they, by their very nature, struggle to survive and need to grow in order to break orbit of a subsistent lifestyle. They look to their ministers and to our Association for support in managing the challenge of creating vital and healthy ministries. However, we need to understand that this issue is not remedied by creating strategies to increase numbers. What's more, we place an impossible burden on our ministers who sometimes mistake their purpose as one of growing churches instead of developing spirituality.

We do not lack in our ability to bring first-timers into our churches. We lack the capacity to create ownership among the majority of those who are already present and sitting in the pews. Churches must be thriving, coherent and integral organizations *before* there is a focus on increasing numbers. For this reason, we must shift our perspective from strategies of church growth to methods of increasing ownership and integral development. The *Integral Leadership and Church Growth* program maps a

trajectory for how thriving, coherent, and integral organizations can be created. It creates a high tolerance for transition and change. It opens the door for a new development model to emerge that emphasizes programs that engage the entire living system that ministry is.