



## DR. LAMAR E. SMITH CENTER FOR EVANGELISM & CHURCH GROWTH

A small church that I served back in the 80s had become stagnate and unhealthy and God blessed us with new members right away. One member volunteered as our Choir Director, another volunteered as our Education Director, and another led the Finance Committee. They and their families changed the culture of the church far more than anything I could have made happen. Growth changed the church and helped create a growth culture that I enjoyed for nine years. Our first Sunday, four kids came for the children's sermon and two were ours. The last year we were there almost 100 children came for the Easter children's message where I gave them *ARISE* balloons as a celebration of the resurrection.

The question is sometimes asked in church circles, "Is it only about the numbers?" I think almost all of us automatically say no, like numbers are somehow bad. Yet numbers are basically neutral unless they represent a value, as in a child being baptized, someone connecting with a hope-giving, life-enriching, soul-saving church family, or even those three members back in the 80s who partnered with me for years in ministry. In a church, each number represents someone in worship, someone professing their faith, or someone uniting officially with the church family which represents the highest of value, someone who God loves and Jesus gave His life for. It's why the church exists. Every number represents someone. Each number has a narrative behind it that God, church pastors, and leaders should highly value. I value numbers because they reflect people, and everyone matters to God.

- Healthy churches grow.
- Growth creates positive culture-change for churches.
- Declining churches eventually become unhealthy.

In my experience, new people in a church constantly changed the conversation from inward to outward. The people created positive momentum, added energy, brought excitement and motivated me and all our pastors. New people needed to be discipled so discipleship becomes central. New people come because they have expectations, needs, hopes, and dreams that might be different than the existing congregations, and this requires change for the church. New people bring fresh gifts and ideas to the church. New people

change the dynamic of stagnating classes, static worship services, dried up missions and ministries, and the traditions that long-term members often get comfortable with. New people want to be involved, do ministry, connect with missions so their presence causes all of this to become more vital with a greater impact. New people connected with parts of the community where existing members did not, and this increased the reach of Christ into places we had not yet reached. New people are the life blood of a healthy church.

It's not just that we must change the culture to create growth but that growth changes the culture. When growth stops long term, stable decline will ensue and all that goes with it. Churches that decline in attendance for too long will eventually become unhealthy. They will focus on money, the building, the traditions that they love, each other, resist change, and blame the pastor.

Tweaking things very seldom grows a church; it's the new that does.