

# Chapter 7

## Church Life Beyond “the work”

(2)

—Dispelling misunderstandings  
about numbers

A short while ago I received a phone call from a Midwest local church. An LSM worker had visited the saints there, house by house, bringing “the whole story” of Titus Chu’s quarantine, the Uganda work, and the Columbus and Mansfield debacles. He, of course, had a lot of explaining to do before he could get to the punchline—that the church ought to follow “the ministry of the age” and disavow everyone else. The couple who called me about this encounter was far from shaken by the worker’s spiel. “We feel so sorry for that man,” they said. “You could tell that something was wrong with him. The things he was saying were so extreme and yet he believed them.”

The couple went on to relate how that the subject of a non-LSM local church had come up and how the Lord seemed to have blessed it with an impressive growth rate. “Oh, that’s just numbers; that’s a weak Christ,” the worker sneered.

When I heard that remark, it reminded me of the many times I have bumped into such sentiments, repackaged and solemnly distributed among members of narrow or dying groups. It all comes down to the central premise that “Numbers are bad, spirituality is

good” (as if there were no possible way for them to coexist). Somehow the prospect of hundreds and hundreds of people giving their lives to Christ, developing a spiritual life and receiving one another in the Christian faith doesn’t move these folks. The heavens are rejoicing, as Jesus said, but not them. What is the preferable alternative that they have in mind? It is a dozen or so people hunkered over ministry materials, telling each other things that they all already know but act as if they’ve never heard. Thus we hear that “It is not the quantity, but the quality that counts,” and “Numbers are not life,” and many other slogans which I will debunk later in this chapter.

A most curious paradox, however, occurs when these same stunted, peculiar little groups are somehow temporarily able to experience a surge in headcount. Suddenly, in a stunning reversal of attitudes, they begin to trumpet their larger numbers as proof of the Lord’s blessing. For instance, during the eighties, the LC Movement scrupulously focused on numbers. Strategies were adopted which were specifically designed to yield the highest number of positive responses to LC door-to-door volunteers. Charts and records were posted keeping track of numerical success. In some places, those who achieved the greatest quantity of bathtub baptisms were literally saluted (as in the military) by less productive church members. Numbers were triumphantly read in public settings to responsive cries of “Amen!”

In the nineties there were various moves to different countries (Russia and the former eastern block countries), all of course reported with more than ample attention to numbers. And then there were the distribution figures: how many thousands of Recovery Version Bibles, and other pieces of literature were given out—all reported, again, to impress the listener with the fact that the Lord was blessing the work. The double standard has now become clear: as long as the LC

Movement has numbers or popularity it will boast that “the Lord has given His Recovery an open door.” But if other groups flourish to the point of eclipsing Local Churches (which currently is the case in nearly every city on earth), the Movement maintains that numbers and popular appeal are fleshly, shallow and unwanted anyway.

### Unturned Cakes—A Disdain for Numbers

In its earlier history in North America, the LC Movement rode the wave of the 1960s “Jesus Movement.” Like other groups (such as Calvary Chapel), that were spawned in that era, it gained a swift influx of idealistic youth. Following that initial surge, the LC Movement settled upon a single-minded quest for “truth” and “enjoyment.” Then in the eighties through Witness Lee, it experienced an epiphany of sorts, realizing that the numbers of new members had bottomed out and slow attrition had begun to set in even among seasoned folk. This led to a shift of seismic proportions, where numerical growth, statistics, and methods claimed center stage. This unfortunately resulted in members being caught up in the suction trail of activities that were sometimes bizarrely ill-fitted to their communities. Reading booklets to people through screen doors, bathtub baptisms, “turning left,” and Mormon-like attire were void of inner registration with many LC members and ultimately dry.

As was typical of the Movement, good things—gospel preaching, baptisms, and teaching—quickly became enmeshed with legalistic sentiments. For a brief but intense time, promotion and enforcement of this “New Way” seemed to reach every corner of the Movement, eventually triggering a general hemorrhage in its membership. Although the Midwest was far from the center of the drama, I recall contemplating a departure at that time, myself. Almost imperceptibly I

had slipped out of a simple life of truth and service and into what was beginning to feel like a world of empty religious sales and marketing. Without the kind intervention of one brother who reintroduced me to the Bible, the Holy Spirit, and a more sane exercise in the gospel, I certainly would have disappeared (perhaps completely from the Christian life).

Such religious experiences have lingering after-effects. Chief among them is a soured attitude toward church growth. This causes ill-affected believers to become like the unturned cake of Hosea 7:8. Having been wounded on one side, they compensate by flipping over and exclusively cooking on the other side. That's why individuals and even whole churches can sometimes be heard vowing never to care about numbers again. But that extreme is just as damaging as the one that provoked it. A church with little or no increase will eventually be saddled with a membership that is aging into oblivion. Extinction will be right around the corner.

Undeniably, issues related to inner life and spiritual vitality are critical in the Christian experience. But should spirituality lead us to disdain numbers? Is quantity inconsequential? Shouldn't we care about how many people are being saved, being shepherded, being disciplined, and attending church meetings? These are incendiary questions among Christians today. On one side of the extreme lies serious compromises and rampant consumerism, while on the other are stalled-out, irrelevant and unproductive churches.

Addressing the issue will necessarily involve cooking both sides of the "cake." And so we start with those who look with suspicion upon numbers. Small groups of hyper-spiritual Christians tend to be this way. They frequently denounce strategies to carry out the Lord's work as being the work of the flesh or efforts of the natural man. When the book of Acts says that "the Lord added daily those who were being saved," they

wholeheartedly agree that only the Lord did it. So to them, 'Christian work' is a contradiction in terms, any oxymoron. Such things as salvation, discipleship and church growth they maintain, should be effortless. No one needs to plan or do, let alone be exhausted. The final judgment on the matter is that it is better to be small in number than to engage in the work of religious flesh. So, diminutive attendance rates do not bother them in the slightest. The group believes it is small because the Lord prefers it that way.

However, such groups are usually small only because they want it that way. Overly narrow attitudes make them peculiar and unattractive to outsiders. Nor does alienating mainstream society necessarily trouble them. They do not see themselves as existing for redemptive purposes in the community anyway, but as special repositories of higher revelations, mysteries, hidden knowledge. Such "deeper" Christian groups almost never have a significant impact on the world. Their religious beliefs typically prevent them from having an effective witness in communities, as they do not want to become polluted with regular Christians or the unsaved. There is no need to think of their smallness of size as though it were a matter of sovereign design or a mystery of divine selection. It is the natural product of being strange.

Now it would seem that the best way to jar these groups back to reality would be objective inquiry. For instance, a simple soul could ask why the group was so small, given its claim to be God's preferred place of operation on the earth. The logic of the question falls into the same category as asking why, if Joes' Pizza parlor makes the best pizza in the world (like the window sign says), there are never more than two or three people in the parlor. That seems like an easy way to defuse grandiose claims and it might work with Joe's Pizza, but it won't fare so well with the devout. Never underestimate the power of religion to set aside common

sense. Christians will quickly resort to a tickle file of verses to defend indefensible positions. In this case, the passages they typically cite are used not only to justify their tiny membership, but also to apply a negative slant against numbers in general.

A very popular citation is “Many are called but few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14). The verse seems to suggest that sparseness of quantity is according to God’s design. According to that logic, attempts to have more than a “few” people would be an attempt to supersede the will of God. However, when we return this verse to its original context, we find it referring to the Lord’s wedding feast at the end of this age, and not to the size of church membership. Some will predictably retort that those in a special little group are the chosen ones who are being prepared for the wedding feast in the next age and that is why they are so few. This thinking, though, is little more than the group’s own propaganda. There is simply no evidence supporting the thought that belonging to a particular Christians guarantees a reward at the end of the age.

John chapter 11 contains a description of the little house in Bethany, yet another favorite touch point for those seeking to impugn numbers. It is a portrayal, some say, of an intimate church life whose reality is not feasible in a large group. This passage, however, makes no prescriptive statements about anything. It is a part of the gospel narrative, the ongoing story of Jesus, and not a doctrinal treatise on how to practice the New Testament church. While it is fine to read John 11 as an illustration of principles like intimate fellowship, resurrection (in Lazarus), service (in Martha), and love (in Mary), it makes no statements about external features like the desired size of a congregation. Many larger churches have an equally proficient handle on resurrection, service, love, and fellowship as their smaller counterparts. Their mega-numbers are not a problem, as many of them manage to sub-structure

themselves into dynamic small groups where they have preserved “the little house” principle. A dwarfish membership then, is not the only possible way for spiritual advantages to be conferred upon a Christian group.

“The great tree” (Mt. 13:31-32) is a parable typically used to depict numbers in a negative way. It has been thought that a small group of believers should not grow into anything large or else it will become corrupt in the process. The point of the parable, however, is that instead of being a food producer, the tree becomes a roosting place for birds. Even small churches can fall into this description. A few saints in a tiny hall can easily become a “hang-out” for cliques, gossip, and back-biting, a place no longer conducive for spiritual life. A group of forty can develop as unhealthy a church culture as one of four thousand. The question is not one of size, but of what is roosting there.

“Little flock” (Luke 12:32) was a designator that the Lord Jesus applied to His followers. It is also another popular talking point for bias against numbers. But was the adjective “little” meant to be a prohibition against large numbers or was it meant to describe the diminutive status of the church in this world? In terms of politics and natural greatness, the church ought to be small. However when super-spiritual people try to use “little flock” to mean little in number, more issues are raised. For instance, how little is “little”? When does a group of people increase in size until they cross the line and cease being the “little flock?” Of course it is impossible to figure out. The Bible never gives us any such numbers, because when the Lord said “little flock” He more than likely did not have a literal head count in mind.

In order to justify non-existent growth rates, appeals have also been made to principles in the Old Testament. For instance, those who returned to the Holy Land in the Old Testament recovery books were a small number,

only about 42,000. The majority remained in Babylon. Therefore to some commentators, large numbers signify religious Babylon. This kind of Bible study is problematic. Did the recovery number forever stay small? When Jesus came four hundred years later, were there still just 42,000 in the Holy Land? Of course not. By that time there may have been millions. If we take two million as the estimated population of Israel during the time of Christ, that means the original 42,000 would have had to increase approximately forty eight times. Evening out the percentages over four hundred years would show the remnant numbering 500,000 after their first century in Israel and then gaining 500,000 every century after that. The recovery picture, therefore, is not one of a small group that stayed small, but of a group starting small and then growing at a steady, upward pace.

### Cooking the Other Side of the Cake— When Numbers Are Bad

Having addressed some of the bias against numerical strength, we now turn our attention to attitudes that give a zealous “thumbs-up” to church growth. Size is not always a good thing. First of all, numbers are not positive when they result in complacency towards people. Luke chapter 15 describes the shepherd leaving the “ninety-nine” and seeking the “one.” But sometimes, large numbers of people lull us into feeling that the “one” is no longer important because the “ninety-nine” are still there. This is the complaint of many people who have left the megachurch movement. Over time they came to feel like non-persons who were only good for headcount and financial support. Lost in a sea of others, no one noticed who

they were or what they were going through in their personal lives. Eventually when they left, no one noticed or cared. This de-personalization is probably the number one reason why most people dislike large groups.

Furthermore, numbers are not good when they exist to gratify the ego. David numbered Israel (1 Chron. 21:1-4) and it was a sin that angered God, not because numbers were wrong, but because pride drove him to order the count. The size of Israel had become a trophy for him, an occasion for fleshly glorying. Servants of the Lord today can also cultivate a lust for success in spiritual work similar to the way entrepreneurs do in secular work. They can be lured into becoming climbers, self-promoters, celebrities, and flavor-of-the-month trendsetters. And such religious attainments seem almost certain if the minister in question can gather large numbers of people once a week in church services. The price of numerical advancement, however, can be high. Desperation to succeed often involves cutting ethical corners or using people as tools. When the members of a church sense that blind ambition steers the congregation, and not God-given burden, they end up feeling like pawns utilized to build someone's personal empire. In the case of David, a plague struck the people after he numbered them (1 Chron. 21:14). In the case of a mishandled church, spiritual devastation can also occur as disillusioned members depart.

Neither are numbers good when they are utilized to prove orthodoxy. Size of membership should never be seen as conclusive proof that a group is right. In fact, too many times in scripture it was the majority that got it wrong. Eleven tribes of Israel committed idolatry leaving one, Levi, which sided with Moses and God (Ex. 32:25-26). Much later, ten tribes broke away from the twelve, leaving only two, Benjamin and Judah, still faithful to the Lord. Then there is the account of four hundred false prophets of Baal standing against one

authentic prophet, Elijah (1 Kings 18:17-39). In the New Testament, the Lord Himself said that many will go in by the broad gate which leads to destruction, while few find the narrow gate which leads to life (Matt. 7:13-14). We are also reminded of the thousands that were in the church in Jerusalem, although that certainly did not mean God was happy with its later mix of Judaism and the Christian faith (Acts 21:20). So, there is a real danger of being deceived if we look for proof of legitimacy in numbers. Even cult groups like the Mormons have impressive growth rates. If we want to establish the orthodoxy of a Christian group and the real blessing of the Lord upon it, we must not only look at its numbers but the doctrine that it holds and the fruit of its living.

Finally, numbers are not good when we sacrifice core beliefs for them. It is unfortunate that these are all too often up for trade in contemporary Christian circles. Some church growth gurus skirt the possibility of offending people and thus suffering a reduced headcount, by shelving key truths like the supremacy of Christ, sin, judgment, blood atonement or biblical morality. But if we eliminate these things, “the good news” is eviscerated of anything good. Where is the contrast? Why is forgiveness of sins so wonderful if there is no awful alternative? Biblical fidelity is never a good swap for numbers. A crowd of quasi-Christians who “kind of” hold the Christian faith will never satisfy God’s heart or ours.

### Numbers According to God

Having cooked both sides of the polemical numbers cake, it’s time to consider the issue from the divine viewpoint. Concern for quantity does not originate in misguided ambition. Genesis 1:26 records God telling Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. The word “multiply” obviously has to do with numerical

increase. It is an even stronger word than addition. The Creator intended for His image to be exponentially duplicated. He never meant for Adam to produce a few children and then relax with the assurance that they were high quality human beings. There was to be no such thing as a preference or even a tension between quality and quantity. Adam's fruit was to have both. The command of multiplying the image of God was related to his mission, not his greed.

Later, part of God's "gospel" to Abraham was that He would multiply Abraham's descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand on the seashore (Gen. 22:17). The metaphor God selected—stars and grains of sand—was, among other things, meant to communicate the idea of vast numbers. Right there woven into the divine promise was an emphasis on plenitude. Without apology, God valued abundance and sought to encourage Abraham with the promise of it.

In addition to the forgoing points, the Holy writ contains an entire book called Numbers. Inside of it, many figures are given—numbers of tribes and families, of armies, of people—so many in fact, that the average reader will get tired and want to skip over them. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Moses penned these numbers to record the scope of God's testimony in the Old Testament. God's testimony is a great matter in the universe. It has to do with a group's movement together with Him, its consecration, its willingness to fight spiritual battles, and its worship of Him. The larger the testimony, the better. With this in view, it is easier to detect a certain divine enthusiasm behind the otherwise "dry" numerical accounts in Numbers.

Coming to the Gospel of John, the Lord Jesus said, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit..." (15:8). Ultra-spiritual groups find this kind of thought suspect. Sequestered in tiny places and hidden from view, they typically do not bear much fruit and they look upon those who are effective in doing so as

merely being “workers.” But as the Lord stated, the Father’s glory depends on quantity. In an effort to escape that fact, Christian groups further try to redefine “fruit” as only being the virtues of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians chapter 5, and not people. However, the Bible interchangeably portrays fruit as both converts to the faith and spiritual character. “Fruit” does not uniquely mean one apart from the other. In fact, the true fruit of spiritual virtue eventually branches out and reproduces itself as true fruit in other people.

The Lord revealed His expectation of healthy fruit-bearing Christians when He spoke of thirty, sixty, and one hundred fold quantities (Matt.13:23). Since some narrow religious folk have no desire to reach such productivity, they try to adjust the interpretation of the parable from the number of souls to spiritual growth. “We are small in number,” they say, “But we have grown thirty-fold in Christ!” Actually, if a thirty-fold increase in authentic spirituality had occurred, then it would certainly produce an increase of new people. Just think of it—with Christ increasing so much in a Christian group, i.e. “kindness, goodness, meekness, love, faithfulness, self-control (Gal. 5:22-23), the outside world couldn’t help but respond to Him!

The parable of the fig tree in Luke 13:6-9, further reminds us about the level of importance God attaches to fruitfulness—“For three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down, why does it use up the ground?” Although the Bible speaks a lot about spiritual life and the need for us to have it and enjoy it, a “living” fruit tree without fruit is useless. We could feel the life sap within and find many creative and profound ways to describe it, study it, and preach it, but the orchard owner is not going to say, “Well, there aren’t many apples around, but at least the trees themselves are high quality!” If we could enter a fruitful life, our churches would be the most happy, comforting, wonderful places in the world. Imagine a cycle of Christ

growing in us with all His glorious virtues, attracting more people from the outside, who then begin growing Christ in them. After a while, we would be surrounded with a community of glory and virtue expressing God. What could be better?

Another parable in the Gospel of Luke was about a man who prepared a great feast, symbolizing the finished work of Christ (Luke 14:16-24). Very few guests showed up to enjoy it, so the man told His servants to go out and compel them to come in and fill the house. By telling this story, Christ was making clear that God is dissatisfied as long as His house is not packed to capacity. Groups that have gotten lazy and self-satisfied would reply to the Master of the feast, "Maybe others will hear about our enjoyment or see us through a window enjoying the feast and they will come in on their own. Besides, we might spoil our appetite if we try to round them up. We are here to feast, not work!" God won't be persuaded by such sentiments. Besides, while people progressively enter our church life, steadily trickling in from neighborhoods and offices, from friendships and families, God's feast of salvation becomes more expansive and therefore more rich and celebratory.

The Gospel of John is traditionally known as the gospel of eternal life, a book very appealing to those of more mystical, inner life leanings. It is all the more interesting, then, that in this gospel, we find the feeding of the five thousand. Why is a number mentioned? And when the scraps were taken up in baskets, why do we need to know that the number of them was twelve? The emphasis in each case is to impress the reader with quantity—the ability of Christ to satisfy many. After this simple understanding, the reader can certainly hunt for spiritual significance in the numbers themselves, but the most immediate message has been delivered—a lot of people were fed and a lot was left over. Quantity is important, even in the gospel of life.

At the end of John, there is a net full of fish and we are told exactly how many—153 (John 21:11). Again, the direct meaning of the number in that verse is “many.” In a hyper-spiritual environment, church leaders can easily fall into the extreme of never really knowing how many fish are in the net. As a result, they are rarely bothered when saints are missing. It is almost considered vulgar to count the saints, but if fish are numbered and the very hairs of our head are also (Matt. 10), surely the saints must be numbered as well. Life respects numbers!

In the book of Acts, numbers are consistently given in relation to the success of the gospel. Three thousand, five thousand, and then myriads are mentioned. The deliberate intention is to connect quantity to effectiveness. If the gospel of Jesus Christ, the power of God unto salvation, had managed to influence only forty people after the first few years of being preached, then that would not have been much of a testimony. It is the same idea in the Book of Revelation. There, John seeks to impress us with numbers of incredible size: a company of angels “ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands” (5:11) who celebrate the Lord’s redemption. There, the emphasis on size is in accordance with God’s wish to exhibit the greatness of His Son’s accomplishments. We are also shown a “great multitude which no one could number” (Rev. 7:9). The super-spiritual shake their heads in dismay. “Why mention ‘great multitude’? It’s not about size!” But the Spirit finds special joy in the fact that large numbers have been affected by the salvation in Christ (Also see Rev. 19:1). Revelation 14 records a group of 144,000 firstfruits faithfully following the Lamb. This highly spiritual company is numbered. They are not an amorphous “blob” of life. Again, I am aware of the deeper interpretations of that number, stemming from the composite numbers involved—twelve times twelve

times one thousand (or we could say three times four times twelve times one thousand or maybe two times six times twelve times one hundred times one hundred). But I believe the primary impression and one less likely to vary from one expositor to the next is the simple idea of a large quantity. There are a lot of firstfruits. God likes that.

### A Mind for the Future

During the three years of the Lord's earthly ministry, His closest followers numbered twelve for a while, then seventy, and at the end, a mere one hundred and twenty. It was a rather underwhelming quantity, especially since the incarnate Son of God Himself was directly involved in the labor. However, His work with these small numbers, while apparently modest for a time, prepared them for a future of great fruitfulness. Having learned from their Master during those years they later ministered to thousands, astronomically increasing the number of disciples. As with the model of the Lord's work, there is a time for core growth and infancy in any Christian group. Small groups and little churches should understand that in essence, they should be doing the same thing. While in smaller numbers, we anticipate a greater capacity and thus prepare for greater ministerial effectiveness. We do not meet in a living room because we like the comfort of it. We do not gather in a school or a hall in order to have our favorite kind of church life. We do it ultimately because we are preparing for a future of service toward a world of perishing people and Christians who have not been properly taught, shepherded, or disciplined. Therefore, we should beware of a philosophy that emphasizes inner life and enjoyment with no stress on service unto fruitfulness. As individual believers and as churches we are not directed to choose between

spiritual life and numerical increase. The Lord wants both.

### The Blessings, Troubles, and Challenges of Numbers

Ideally speaking, an increase in the size of the church means an increase in Christ. Inner life purists will no doubt have a problem with this statement (yes, I read “The Knowledge of Life” too). But my simple logic is that if twenty new believers join your church, then they will bring with them twenty extra individual dimensions of experience. Novice Christians have an invigorating effect on a church much like new children do in a family that has grown stale. They have a way of contributing fresh discoveries and bittersweet struggles to the overall household of the faith. In this sense, enriching a group has more to do with numerical growth than dousing it with teachings until its members reach a fatigued super-saturation point.

Realistically speaking, though, increased numbers mean increased problems as well. Twenty more people will guarantee twenty more problematic situations thrown into the mix. Personalities will collide. Offenses will inevitably surface. There will be misunderstandings. Someone will complain about not being cared for enough. Another will say that she is feeling burned out, bored, or lonely. Actually, these problems and more—blind ambition, marital frictions, kid problems, weaknesses, pride, sinful things—all pre-exist as a microcosm within small Christian groups. A law of group dynamics holds that increasing the size of a group unavoidably means increasing the scope of trouble as well.

With such drawbacks, we might very well find ourselves asking if it is worth it. Perhaps it is better to simply maintain a tiny home fellowship that has a stationary but safe membership. Once a week we could

enjoy snacks and some revelations from the Word. Admittedly, the extra encouragement of new faces would be nice, but we can survive without it.

What most of us do not take into account, is that there is more at stake here than a morale boost and some heightened enjoyment. New Testament principles that might otherwise remain in the realm of theory are literally forced into reality among the believers in a growing congregation. For one thing with increasing size, issues related to perfecting believers unto the work of ministry (Eph. 4) must be ironed out. This activity produces people who are the heart, brains, hands and feet of the church. Only a steady local perfecting work can provide the elasticity that the church needs to make room for newcomers. Otherwise a growing headcount will leave the few who always cook, make phone calls, visit, plan, teach and shepherd, to struggle under an ever-increasing burden. Regardless of how capable they are, this gifted core has time and energy limitations. When those limits are breached, like a rubber band, either the entire group will snap, or it will rebound back to its original size. A congregation can only grow as large as its core membership can directly manage or reasonably delegate. And that core can only grow as people are equipped to be in it. Even if the number of newcomers suddenly becomes freakishly large for some unknown reason, without a supportive, functioning core, they will disappear before long. Hence there is the absolute necessity of gifted members developing others.

This should not be confused with what has popularly been called “training” or “perfecting” among the Local Churches. Probably no one has dissected the contents of Ephesians 4 with more gnat-straining precision than the LC Movement. Yet even after the patenting of slogans like “Everyone has a portion!” and decades of ministry training, effective Local Churches are still non-existent. Efforts to “perfect” did not stimulate diverse teamwork-oriented local ministries.

Instead, they produced groups of highly indoctrinated loyalists and folks addicted to more and more training. When it comes to imparting true ministerial skills into people minus video monitors, outlines, and performances at microphones, Movement “perfecting” has flopped.

The principles Paul laid down in Ephesians 4 are supposed to be more than smug truisms about the right way to “do church.” They are instructions for the trenches, the front lines of daily congregational living. However they do not translate into reality until the church honestly decides to get busy and grow.

The gradual swell of numbers in a congregation also changes the hearts and minds of its members. Here the Apostle Paul’s exhortation to “be enlarged” takes on new meanings. No one particularly needs stretching in the comfort of a smaller setting that is dominated by decade-long friendships, cozy Bible studies, and beloved banana bread recipes. Yet, as the second and third rows in your meeting and then all the spare chairs that you have stacked in the garage fill up with people, new challenges emerge. Saints must now decide whether they prefer a cliquish church life over one that makes room for new people.

If the preference is distinctly pro-clique, every concession in the church for the sake of newcomers will provoke complaints from established members. Anything from message content to musical style to meeting times can easily become a hotly debated topic. Smallness of heart is precisely where all such “concerns” come from. Is our schedule and way of doing things adjustable, even for the sake of souls that might not be otherwise reached? It seems that only Christians must seriously ponder this question. Ask an expectant couple if they are willing to make adjustments in their schedule and in their way of doing things for the sake of the new baby. Only the most clueless parent-to-be hasn’t come to terms with that. Everyone knows that

new life always arrives, upsetting the routine and forcing us to live differently. Only hearts that are willing to be broadened will survive the experience.

As part of its heart enlargement, a church must also be ready to venture outside the comfortable familiarity of its own “buddy” network. Most small, established congregations enjoy tightly knit companionships and find it difficult to assimilate outsiders. Although no one is overtly hostile to them, visitors will quickly detect this shortcoming. It is apparent when members huddle only with friends after meetings, constantly and casually refer to things only an in-house audience would know, and avoid greeting newcomers. Those are just a few of the signs that the church is not yet large-hearted enough to provide an entrance for others.

From about 1999 the Columbus church took steps that purposely addressed its aversion to visitors. After meetings we made a point of deliberately seeking out new faces and shaking hands with them, even if that meant standing in line to do it. This was treated with the same degree of importance as spiritual exercises in the earlier meeting. Of course I realize that this can also be seen as strange to first time visitors, but it was our way of overdoing to offset our previous extreme. We have since leveled out. Additionally, in order to facilitate a welcoming atmosphere, we ceased mentioning events or the names of people only known in our fellowship. We stopped taking for granted that everyone in our meetings were long-timers. And of course, as soon as they were ready, we invited new friends into our homes and offered them places of service in the church. This was our early experience of being enlarged and yet, there was so much more to come.

The eldership here was stretched to almost agonizing limits. We had to learn new things like how to plant a youth congregation and allow it to operate

with relative autonomy. We also had to realize that the talents of new members overall were not natural rubbish that needed to be “crossed out,” but gifts from God that would maximize our mission to reach the world and build up the church. Those gifts needed support and assistance for their development, not warped spiritual teachings that demanded they should be buried. Today new projects are on the horizon and, yes, further seasons of broadening will accompany them. We expect that as the church increases in size so will the hearts of all the saints involved.

### Starting Points

Honesty doesn't sound like a terribly practical way to commence church growth. Yet, this is exactly where leaders need to begin. How many people are in your church? If you can't answer this with certainty or without a fudge factor inserted to cushion your pride, then you may never get around to realizing that you have a problem. Questions about church size are harder to answer than they sound. Most leaders keep a round estimate in their heads and report it as their attendance, even if the number has reduced over the last years. Seventeen people continue to be reported as thirty-some. Thirty-seven are sixty-some. No one is necessarily lying (okay, maybe some are); it's just that numbers are a particularly painful subject for Local Churches to address. Though conferences and trainings might pump up the appearance of the Movement's size, the situation in local congregations has been steadily eroding for decades. The best that can be said for most is that they have shakily maintained a semblance of their earlier memberships.

The first order of business, then, is to establish the exact size of your congregation. This does not mean retreating to a theoretical count where you figure that all the Christians in the city are in the church in that

city. Nor should you base your calculations on a spike count—a few meetings that were unexpectedly large due to visitors, their kids, and the guy who wandered in thinking you were a coffee shop. Nor do we want a legacy count, which includes longstanding members who are around so little that they are a novelty when they appear. Neither are we looking for a care count that keeps track of every troubled soul somehow slightly connected to the congregation.

These numbering methods, which are favorites of Local Church leaders, cloud accurate ideas of the true strength of the church. I suggest starting off by numbering those who attend weekly meetings. This will give an immediate idea of who is reliably with you. Of course we're not eliminating from the church those who can't attend every Sunday. That's not the point. This numbering exercise is only for trying to get an idea of the church's strength whenever it comes together.

Even with an accurate count, though, your current congregational size may not tell the whole story of how it has been doing, growth-wise. Yes, thirty-five saints may not be a bad number, unless of course, it has been thirty-five for the last thirty-five years. Your church has a history that can tell you a lot more than its current statistics. This includes giving you an idea of where it will probably head in the future. If past attendance figures can be supplied and then graphed, the data will plainly reveal whether your congregation has mushroomed, plateaued, declined, or stalled over the years. The results might be shocking, but a stiff dose of truth may save you from continuing to live in a dead end situation.

Armed with this preliminary information, you can go on to ask further questions. Have you grown or shrunk over the last five years? If you have grown, then how did it happen? Was it through people being saved or Christians joining you or other Local Church people moving in? If you have shrunk, then why? Did people

move away or get offended or simply have needs that you couldn't meet? This will involve more honesty. Don't let yourself come up with the same old stock excuses as Movement folk, who cannot accept even the suggestion that they might need to adjust their program.

As another practical point, try setting some numerical goals, but be realistic. Don't repeat what was done in the eighties, when Local Churches expected to double in one year and then every year after that. Youth were assured that if they got into Propagation Groups, an exponential growth rate would occur, culminating in the return of Christ thirteen years later. These ridiculous forecasts many years ago made me begin to question the maturity of Movement leaders. Even as a young man, I knew that human souls would never act so predictably as to conform to the schemes of number-crunching.

So, select a growth-goal that seems reasonable to the size and make-up of your congregation. One year our campus work tried, "Every one bring one" as a motto. It wasn't very realistic because not everyone was in a condition to bring someone into the church. We might have been better off saying, "Everyone invite one." That would have been a more reachable goal and by carrying it out we might well have gotten a few people to continue fellowshiping with us. As a more pragmatic exercise, recently "The 590 Program" began. The Ohio State University has about 59,000 students and our campus organization set a goal of reaching one percent of them with the gospel. The effort was deemed realistic by taking into account how many students meet with us, plus their level of consecration. Expectations were also reasonably set. The program does not state that 590 must be saved, only that 590 must hear the gospel and either reject it or accept it. Ultimate results like salvation are in the Lord's hands,

but the effort to preach can certainly be in ours. So far this seems to be working.

Don't be afraid of numbers-oriented goals. Many years we did not think in terms of numbers and so made no goals. Without goals we did not bother with strategy. With no strategy we had no expectation. Where there was no expectation there was no prayer. And of course where there is no prayerful asking, there is no receiving. Don't let your annual experience be this way—getting no growth because you think it's unspiritual to want it.

Despite what the critics say, church growth need not be the domain of cheap religious consumerism. It does not have to involve the de-personalization of people or a compromise of the faith. The entire burden of numbers originated with God Himself and continues today as both a divine command and a promise. This fact was not lost upon deeply spiritual people like Andrew Murray, A. B. Simpson, and Hudson Taylor who were occupied with gaining many people for Christ. Nor should we think of ourselves as being above the matter of numbers, no matter how spiritual we purport to be. As servants we have been told to fill the house. In this, the Master of the feast will be happy.

And so will you.