

WHAT COMES NEXT? IS THERE LIFE AFTER GROWTH?

By Geoffrey Mitchell



For many years I prayed daily that God would fill the congregations I served with unreached people. Unchurched people, lost people, hard living people; people who thought they had it all and people who literally had nothing. Then God answered that prayer. Now I pray a new prayer: Lord, what in the world do I do now? What do I do after I reach them? How do I grow them?

Spiritual growth is the intentional process of seeking God, loving people, and becoming like Jesus. Yet this seemingly simple issue cannot be explored in a three hour seminar, a seminary class, or a polished blog. Spiritual growth is messy. And tackling this issue in the context of a congregation only multiplies the mess! What follows are the real life discoveries of what it has taken to create an environment of spiritual growth for new and re-newed believers at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Keokuk, Iowa. The congregation has doubled in the last two years through both a building relocation and the launching of a new service. We have prayed, planned, and thrown plans out the window over the last two years in an effort to create an environment of intentional spiritual growth. What follows is not theory, but reflections from our failures and victories.

People are Hungry for God

As the church first began to multiply, I began to direct new believers and new people to a “Church Identity” class. My first attempt centered on our denominational identity, church governance, and the history of each building we had ever occupied. While I am sure someone enjoyed it, even I had a hard time staying awake. It

turns out, new and re-newed Christians did not want to be informed of our church history; they wanted to be transformed. My wife asked if I was ever again going to teach a class about “buildings and the dead guys?” And the answer is no. From these two experiences we have created a home grown, in-house process of equipping people to know God personally and live for God daily.

We currently offer four five-week sessions during each school year. Led by the pastor, these sessions create a trajectory of spiritual formation for each person new to our church, especially new believers. *Faith 101* covers the basic teachings of the Christian faith, the vision and mission of our congregation, and the values of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). *Mission 101* addresses how to live for God the other six days – at work, at home or wherever God may place us. *Prayer 101* teaches the practices of prayer, meditation, and fasting, borrowing heavily from *The Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster. Originally titled “Spiritual Cross-Training: Getting your Heart in Shape” we take a survey approach to the practices of faith. In its first five-week sessions, this group swelled to forty people, with mostly new people to the faith who were enthused to learn. Teaching one of these disciplines each week and practicing them together embedded into our new and re-newed believers the importance of practicing the presence of God. And finally *Bible 101* takes the bogymen out of Bible reading and teaches how to use the Bible for personal spiritual growth. Originally titled “Bible for Beginners” this gives manageable weekly readings through large and general sections of the Bible. People responded positively to simple Bible starting points.

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People are hungry for God. But what we often offer is church history, polity, and organizational charts. I have come to believe that what we communicate as “essential” in the first year will be instrumental in the faith relationship a person lives in connection to their church. Will it be another stodgy church history or will it be a passion for knowing Christ and making Christ known?

The Difference Between Content and Community

For years I preached that small groups create authentic community. Small groups are where you find people who will pray for you, walk with you through a crisis, take you to the airport, and help you move a couch. I preached this, I read about it, and I longed for it in the churches I served. But what I learned is what others have learned as well: small groups do not equal supportive community. They can assist in creating community. Groups that last for years will create this supportive community, yes even Sunday School classes. But the emotional and relational

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My own experience has proven this to be true. One of the many groups the church has started, my wife and I launched a new Sunday School class nearly two years

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ago. Designed to be a landing place for newcomers desiring more of a learning environment than the coffee bar conversations, we had a great and enthusiastic launch. After the initial surge, we leveled off at twenty people each week. Despite having great private feedback and engaging lessons, Marissa and I struggled to create questions or address topics that would finally “get them to talk.” Each week the class stared at us, wanting to hear

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A promotional graphic for Church-Talk radio. The background is a stylized cityscape with yellow and orange rays emanating from a sun. On the left, a radio tower is shown with signal waves. In the center, a vintage-style silver microphone is prominent. On the right, there is a cartoon church character with a face and arms, and a photograph of a man and a woman. The text 'Church-Talk' is written in large, bold, red letters. Below it, the text 'Church Transformational Radio' and 'Upcoming Episodes' are listed. At the bottom, the text 'Live Call-In Talk Radio. Tuesdays at 10 AM Central' and 'Listen On-Demand at Church-Talk.com' is displayed.

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more biblical insight, having no interest in weighing in. Slowly, they have agreed to engage – some – after two years of encouragement. And slowly we observe that they are relating to each other at a deeper level of support than mere pleasantries. But we have learned that content and not community is what the group we lead chooses to center around.

Yet, as we all know, the development of strong community is a key ingredient to a growing congregation – a

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spiritually growing congregation. We have witnessed the greatest relational gatherings naturally develop at our church through food and flexibility. After-worship meals or cookies, Sunday morning coffee bar, and the simple concept of a building created to facilitate gathering in community, allow regular, joyful connections to occur. These relationship rub off on the entire church, even spilling over into small groups that center on spiritual formation and Bible application. Frequent and intentional community events create an environment for relating – especially when you are attempting to assimilate on the fly as we have had to with such rapid growth. What we have witnessed is that community is an environment and a process, not a program.

Worship

We can't talk about spiritual growth without at least mentioning worship. Worship is the single biggest opportunity to teach, lead, and inspire spiritual growth. We have tremendous participation in our small group ministry, but the numbers come in at a little less than 50 percent. Though


that is a high percentage, what this means is that over half of the church is only mentored, lead, taught, and guided through weekly worship time. And while we see people often funnel from worship into group life and church community, it seldom goes the other direction. Worship is simply the primary function of the church and must be a deeply intentional expression of and inspiration towards spiritual growth. Worship is also indicative of the state of a church's relationship with God, and that can be a tough thing to face. Is worship energetic? Is it steeped in love? Is it pointing to the awe and truth that Christ inspires? If you come away from worship without inspiration, if it does not focus your whole church on God's leading, then you have some roll-up your sleeves

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type work to do! Evaluate your worship and strive to honor God better and more thoroughly through it.

Seeking God as a Leader

All the planning, reading and programming we attempt will not replace this irrefutable fact: you can only teach your congregation spiritual growth if you are growing spiritually. Leaders that love God, listen to God, and obey God model for the congregation how to do the same. Perhaps the greatest barrier to spiritual growth in your congregation is not a lack of polished programs, user friendly curriculum, or biblical scholarship. It might be that you (me!) have not cultivated our own life of faith. We love doing church more than we love knowing God.

Are you listening to God daily? Are you casting a God-inspired vision? Are the habits of the heart central to who you are? Or is the lack of spiritual formation in your church a direct response to the lack of spiritual formation in your soul? As Bill Tenny-Brittian has said, "If you are not growing and your church is not growing, you are a better leader than you thought!" We dare not ask our congregation to do what we are not doing – whether it be prayer, Bible reading, tithing, or witnessing. Begin with your personal relationship with God and ask God how to best grow people, both new and old, in the faith. There is no better place to begin. Indeed, there is no *other* place to begin. 





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