

Why Churches Fail To Grow

The Rev Dr Gary Nicolosi

In my experience as a pastor and church consultant, the one question almost every Anglican asks is, “Why isn’t my church growing?” In many cases, even seemingly healthy churches plateau and eventually decline after a period of sustained growth. Here are the most common reasons churches stagnate.

1. Vision Problems: Vision is a picture of a God’s desired future for your church, the direction that propels members forward, instills hope and energizes for ministry. Vision is the picture we can carry around in our heads, what we want to create and make happen. Vision uplifts us, inspires us and gives us a common purpose to face the future with faith rather than fear. What is the vision of your church? Does the congregation “own” it? Is it sufficiently compelling that members are willing to give generously of their time, talent and treasure to make it a reality?

2. No Plan: Without a plan, the vision never becomes a reality. Planning churches move from passive to proactive. They know where they want to go, anticipate the challenges they face, and map out the best strategy to achieve their goals. What is the plan of ministry for your church? If money were not an issue, what would you like your church to be doing in the next three years? How can you make that happen?

3. Spiritual Void: A church’s numerical and financial growth depend on the spiritual growth of its members. Growing churches are learning churches whose members are excited about Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and practicing the spiritual disciplines of prayer, worship, giving, serving and Bible study. What opportunities for spiritual growth exist in your church? How are your ministries transforming lives in Jesus? In what ways are people encountering God and thinking through their faith in your congregation?

4. Competition: The church exists in a highly competitive environment, but the competition is *not* other churches. Anything that sidetracks, hinders, prevents or discourages people from being full and active participants in the church is your competition. Snowbirds wintering in the Sunbelt; families at their cottages from Victoria Day to Thanksgiving; children and youth in Sunday sports; shopping, banking, movies and theater; golfing, curling or exercising at the fitness club; or simply having a leisurely Sunday brunch with friends – these are your competition. What is your church’s competition? How might your church respond to the cultural changes that now impinge on worship, ministries and programs? How can your church alter its programming to fit the lifestyles of the people in your region?

5. Facilities: Growing churches have gotten over their addiction to physical mediocrity. People expect the same comfort, cleanliness and upkeep in churches that they experience in other public and commercial buildings. If churches want to attract young families with children, for example, they need to provide bright, clean and spacious facilities that children will enjoy and make parents feel comfortable. If churches want to be inclusive, especially with seniors, they will need to be handicapped accessible. Signage, lighting, the sound system, adequate parking and restrooms, heating and cooling, and padded seats or pews are all important. What image does your church facilities present to outsiders? What barriers exist in your church that makes it difficult for young families with children, the elderly and the physically challenged to feel welcomed and included? Evaluate your campus by asking: 1) How does this space help or hinder our mission? 2) What is the best thing about this space? 3) How can our space be made more effective in fulfilling our mission?

6. Age: Older churches grow more slowly than newer churches. After the initial energy and spurt of growth from a new start, churches begin to stabilize, plateau and eventually decline unless continued renewal is built into its DNA. What new things in your church presently need doing? What things are your church doing that no longer makes sense? Why do you continue to do them? What would happen if you stopped doing them? Do you “see” a future with a purpose for your church? Identify that future.

7. Relevance: As communities change, the ministry focus of a church may need to change. Growing churches study their communities with as much diligence as they study the Bible. They plan their programs around the lifestyles, values, tastes and beliefs of the people in their area. What is your community like? Has it seen significant changes in the last 10 years? Has your church kept up with those changes in designing ministries and programs to connect with people at their own level of need and understanding?

8. Theology: Many churches have a “theology of the remnant” that acknowledges they may not be successful in attracting new members but they are at least faithful in doing ministry. Remnant theology takes many forms: a bias against membership recruitment (viewing the church as social club), a lack of motivation to share the gospel (everyone is going to heaven, so it doesn’t matter what anyone believes), and a preference to remain a small church for fear of becoming too impersonal (introverted membership). What is the underlying theology in your church? How does theology shape church practice?

9. Message: Some churches try to appeal to everyone, but end up appealing to no one. They offer no clear mission or message, no distinct identity, no statement of core beliefs and values – thus making it exceptionally difficult for seekers to know why they exist, what they stand for, or what they have to offer that will add value to their lives. To articulate your message, ask: What is it about your church that people cannot live without? How does your church add value to people’s lives that cannot be gotten anywhere else? If you had forty seconds to describe your church to a stranger, would you be able to offer a clear and compelling message about your church that would provoke his or her interest to learn more?

10. Pastoral: Many churches have a pastoral orientation, placing a high premium on ministering to members and putting low priority on mission, outreach and evangelism. Pastoral churches have an inward rather than an outward focus, often describing themselves as a “family” and preferring clergy who are chaplains rather than missional leaders. They take pride in being warm and caring to members, but can act oblivious and unwelcoming to non-members. How well does your church balance pastoral care to members with mission, outreach and evangelism to non-members? How difficult is it for newcomers to be fully accepted as part of your church “family”? Is practicing hospitality and being an open and accepting community a central part of your church’s life?

There you have it – 10 reasons churches fail to grow. The presence of even one of these reasons is enough to stunt growth and begin a downward spiral.

The good news is that most churches, unless they are at a point of no return can reverse stagnation or decline and renew and grow. But there is a caveat: churches grow if they are willing to pay the price for growth, which means moving beyond our comfort zone, anticipating the future rather than ignoring it, taking initiative rather than remaining passive, moving from a traditional style of ministry to an entrepreneurial one, and having the unshakable hope that God is by no means through with the Anglican Church of Canada, but that the best is yet to come. By God’s grace, we will prevail.