

Church Growth Discussion

(Summary Version)

Presented to the Church Board March 2009

Over the past seven years, the church has declined in average worship attendance (AWA) by close to 100 worshipers a Sunday. The table below charts our trend.

Year	Average Worship Attendance
2003	351
2004	348
2005	318
2006	312
2007	301
2008	260

Factors Contributing to Decreasing AWA.

- ❖ Death and members entering long-term care. (*we conducted over 25 funerals in 2005).
- ❖ Retirement related moves
- ❖ Families leaving wanting other types of churches

Existing Resources

- ❖ Pastoral stability for the past seven years.
- ❖ Relative staff stability
- ❖ Solid Christian Education program,
- ❖ Quality worship services,
- ❖ Fellowship opportunities and additional programs.

The biggest barrier to church growth is the absence of any intentional plan for church growth.

Strategies for church growth need broad support within the congregation. However, the strategies probably need to be drawn from intentionally looking at effective strategies. Brainstorming within the congregation is not likely to be effective as existing members are content with the status quo.

At the March 10, 2009 board meeting, the board may want to consider action on three items:

- (1) Expressing how high a priority the board feels church growth should be.
- (2) Specifically name the party responsible developing recommendations.
 - Task force
 - Staff
 - Action-bias exploration by various groups
- (3) Determine the timeline for the board to receive and act on recommendations.

Past and Present Efforts at Church Growth Included

- ❖ Programs—athletics, arts, Parent Day Out, counseling ministries
- ❖ New worship services
- ❖ Christian Education—Welcome Classes, Immersion Program
- ❖ Visitor Follow
- ❖ Increasing traffic

Possible means of church growth

- ❖ Media Marketing
- ❖ Interpersonal Marketing
- ❖ Worship Redesign
- ❖ New Attractive Programs
- ❖ Education
- ❖ Staffing
- ❖ New Location

GROWTH TASK FORCE

Report to the Board – September 16, 2009

Introduction:

Good evening ladies and gentlemen of the board. We are the growth task force. We were charged with creating broadly accepted, widely embraced, well understood plans and goals for growth. As you see, this committee was chosen carefully to represent a diverse cross section of our church population so that the ideas we generated would be diverse and applicable to the church as a whole. In our first meeting, we took some time to understand what our purpose was and to reflect on why growth was an important thing to our church. None of us want to become a “numbers church,” but we believe that the gifts we give this community are important and we want to keep this church alive and well so that we can continue to share those gifts that God has given us with our neighbors as we are commissioned to in the Great Commission.

We met with Dr. Bryan Feille of Brite Divinity School for a Church Growth 101 Session in which we studied the growth successes of other churches, then we launched into learning about our fellow workforce teammates and how they had come to this church and grown through it, possible directions we could go in doing our work, and the history of the church. In particular, we analyzed how and when growth has occurred in the past, when we have suffered attrition, and moments when we have acted decisively and boldly. A great deal of time was spent in prayer for each other, the church, and for direction. We did both formal and informal research including interviews with members and guests to determine our strengths and weaknesses as a church and how we can use those to help our body grow.

We have heard concerns addressed among some in the church, that there is an immediate imperative for this church to increase its membership or risk becoming dead on the vine; this is not the case. As those in leadership contemplate handing off their responsibilities to a new generation, it is normal and natural to have anxiety over the transfer of leadership and stewardship. Our task force has looked long and hard, and as objectively as possible, at the current state of affairs at First Christian Church and concluded that there are solid concrete steps we can and should take that will result in more people entering this building. That is not, however, the crux of why we will grow. We will grow because we decide to grow and make genuine connections in the name of God.

CLOSING THE BACK DOOR

What is “Closing the Back Door”?

Early on in our studies, Andy presented us with several books that dealt with the issue of church growth. In one of them, entitled *Sticky Church*, we encountered two catch phrases that have become central concepts in our work: Closing the Back Door and Opening the Front Door. A "sticky" church, one that is attractive to those searching for a new church home, pays attention to both of these aspects of church growth.

While many might think that we would begin this report on church growth with Opening the Front Door, we believe that Closing the Back Door comes first. Much like the futility one would experience if he/she was trying to fill a huge clay pot with water, yet had neglected to cork the drainage hole in the bottom...so any church will experience similar frustration when concentrating only on bringing in new members while giving only cursory attention to retaining those they have already welcomed.

Membership loss through the back door is a very insidious and easily overlooked problem for all churches. Who pays attention to the Sunday School class member, CAF attendee, CYF or Chi Rhoer who has not been present the past 2 or 3 Sundays? What do we do about discovering where they have been, if there is a problem or an illness of which no one is aware, or most importantly, simply letting that missing member of the church family know that they were missed?

If the contact reveals a potential problem or concern, who do you contact in the church office to inform them of this member's need or concern? And what of the members of our church who have not found their way to any small group which welcomes and shepherds their participation, those who simply attend our worship services...or those who attend but have yet to join? Who continues to make them aware that they are important parts of our church family? Who notices when they are not here?

Closing the Back Door begins with a renewing of our minds, and an increased awareness of all those we call our church family. It gives intentional attention to the entire church family's participation in worship, study and service....and it is a function of every member of First Christian Church. This is not something we leave up to others to do. When the entire membership of the church begins to really pay attention to those around us, not because we are focusing on growth, but because we really care about all those who

worship with us and the experience doesn't feel complete when one of us is missing, then Closing the Back Door becomes possible.

Finally, we strongly believe that this effort will require a significant portion of the time given to one of the church staff members.

As this minister works with the many small groups and SS classes, becomes the central contact for any issues that need to be shared with the ministerial staff, and encourages a spirit of attentive concern within the entire church family, we believe our church as a whole will be strengthened because the problem of the back door will be intentionally and consistently addressed.

Why Growth?

Every church experiences attrition to one degree or another. People die, people move, people backslide, and people get upset. It's the natural reality of ministry. The national average is 15% that you would lose in a year. If you are losing this number of folks you need to gain this number to stay even. Do you just want to stay even?

There is so much good about First Christian Church in Arlington-but like a marriage to remain vital and exciting it must be worked at in order to become better. Every vital church prays about, discusses, acts on the following questions.

What is our story?

What is our purpose?

What is our witness?

What is our impact?

We need to reflect on our church so we may have more vitality within our congregation.

The Great Commission is one of the most significant passages in the Holy Bible. It is the last instruction Jesus gave to his disciples. And Jesus said,

"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you, and lo I am with you always even to the end of the age." Amen Matt. 28: 18-20

This commandment is for us also. Jesus calls his followers to act and share the Good News throughout the world.

Why not growth?

One family of faith

Ours is one church, one congregation, one family of faith, assembling here to spread God's word. Like a growing tree, we have sent off sturdy shoots in different directions, each branching again and again.

We may find now that we work away on our own branch and remember how we got here, but forget the seed and the single trunk that is our beginning. Our church will thrive as we remember the needs of each other. We must concern ourselves with how childcare is being handled for the children who are not our own. We must worry about the quality of the music in the service we do not attend. We must see that Sunday School is available to those who don't attend our class. We must embrace each other's needs and each other's dreams for the church, or risk ending up dead ended on our own small branches.

A significant part of making this tree healthy is being certain that our resources are being used in the best possible way. We have to ask ourselves if the things we expect of our ministers and staff are the best use of their time and ability. We must assess whether the precious resources of lay time and talent and treasure are used effectively.

Finally, we must remember the seed that started it all. We must know the thing that gives us purpose, our "future story" as Andy has referred to it. It is important that we share this vision of where we are going, and that we agree to use it as our map and compass.

Does our church look different with a clear story and careful consideration about our resources?

OPENING THE FRONT DOOR

Our Public Face

Something that is a source of pride and tranquility for church members, a transition from our hectic daily lives to the peace and joy of worship, cuts us off and makes us almost invisible to neighbors and passersby. Our beautiful and wooded great lawn hides us. Our trees have grown taller than our steeple. As we questioned friends and acquaintances about their knowledge of FCC, many had no idea where we were located, when told, they often thought we were part of the First Presbyterian or Carter Jr. High campus. We love our great lawn. We are not going to fell our beautiful trees to be more visible, (although nature may be helping to thin the forest some). Because of our location and our value for our natural setting, we must work harder to create the best public face we can get.

Our sign on South Collins is very subtle and much of the summer, small trash trees, shrubs and large weeds blocked the wording. Some immediate maintenance, gardening and flower beds full of bright, eye catching flowers could be a first step to attracting the eyes of passersby. The committee discussed signage with moving LED lights to announce times of worship, activities, time and temperature, pithy, but not trite sayings, etc. A significant number of Arlington residents travel Collins daily, we must be seen, before we can be considered for a church home.

Since our commissioning in March, the board has voted monies to create a total new website and that process is underway. We were excited to discover that the company hired to make our site is the company that created several that we had admired. We really came to understand that most people check out a website before visiting a church.

The people of FCC are engaged in many community activities. In some, it is very clear that the church is the sponsor, but in others, we act more as individuals. We need to look for ways to act together in ways that support our sense of mission as a church. Possible examples: a neighborhood garden on our back forty", ESL lessons, a walking trail rambling through our front lawn, a meeting place for neighborhood groups like the East Arlington Renewal, etc. Our compact with Blanton and the neighborhood meal are good examples of community involvement.

Growth and Focus

“We take the bible to seriously to take it literally.” We are a thoughtful people. We do not identify with the branch of Christianity that seeks to push our ideals on to others, yet we affirm the validity of their path toward God just as much as our own. We are not showy in our faith, yet we feel the truths of our convictions no less than our evangelical brothers and sisters in Christ. We do not overestimate our importance in the world. We, each in our own way, find personal meaning and satisfaction from placing the, “stubborn ounces” of our life-long efforts as an offering to God.

How then do we remain true to our quiet faith, and seek to grow? It almost feels like vanity, almost as if our desire for the continuation of this body of believers is motivating our actions. In a city with thousands of churches that believe in the same God we do, how can we say someone should worship with us?

Folks, church growth is not about us.

Just like a Christian who holds on to guilt even after God's forgiveness, has forgotten their focus should be on the grace of God, not the sin of man; at some point humility becomes an excuse, for ignoring God's will. The Bible is full of people who were nothing extraordinary. Remember, God uses the lowly and the humble, so that the glory of God's works are God's and God's alone.

We need to change our focus. We will grow, but only when we take the focus off of ourselves, and on to God's will. We will grow because this church actively seeks God's will, and actively involves itself in God's work. We will grow, because contributing to, “week of compassion” does not fulfill our contribution to the Great Commission.

We will grow, not with showy neon signs, or loud fiery revivals. We will grow when each one of you thoughtfully, intentionally, applies the, “stubborn ounces” of your heartfelt faith, into reaching out to make genuine connections in the name of God.

Connectedness and small groups

One of the most important aspects of becoming a “sticky” church that continued to come up in our meetings was the need for connectedness. Especially with multiple services taking place to accommodate the diverse needs of our church family, it is crucial for

everyone who wants to have the opportunity to feel plugged into a group to be able to do so. We need to be constantly refreshing our small groups. We can celebrate existing groups, start new long term groups (like Sunday Schools and prayer groups) and also start new short term groups (like Suppers for Seven and mission opportunities). We must have good places for new people to get involved, specifically these ever refreshing small groups. This way, regardless of the size of the church or the service attended, everyone will feel like they have real friends in the church body that they can talk to at and outside of Sunday services.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

When we were commissioned by this board a little over 6 months ago, we were given very specific instructions: the task force was to create broadly accepted, widely embraced, well understood plans and goals for growth. This report has implications for every member of this church, every small group and SS Class, all departments and working sections, as well as for the ministerial staff and other employees. FCC-Arlington is already a great church. We believe that the suggestions we bring to you tonight have the capability to take us from great to extraordinary once they are fully implemented. To that end we now bring you the following suggestions for your consideration:

TO ALL MEMBERS OF FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH ARLINGTON

In recognition of The Great Commission, God's call to each of us to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth, we will be satisfied with nothing less than a growing, healthy, and vibrant church and to that end we will:

- pray continually, always seeking to discern God's call
- devote personal and corporate time and effort to the nurturing, growth and retention of all our members.
- actively seek and welcome visitors and new members, celebrating their addition, and aiding them in making meaningful connections within the church family

To this end, we agree that we are church for each other and for our community, and we will make 2010 a year of renewal for First Christian Church of Arlington. These commitments we make will be evidenced in our actions and our programs by real and visible growth.

TO THE BOARD OF FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH ARLINGTON

The following are the recommended actions that we see as necessary steps to implement the plans for growth you have requested:

1. A census of the entire membership of First Christian Church to determine small group membership will be conducted by the end of 2009.
2. In every gathering of church members, beginning and ending with prayer will be the norm.
3. Existing prayer groups will be nurtured and publicized, and new groups will be formed as interest is expressed.
4. We will act according to our discernment of God's call, being responsible in the use of all our resources.
4. All small groups and Sunday School classes will determine their active membership, attempt to re-connect with those who have fallen away, and produce an accurate record of their group every October.
5. Constant attention will be given to small groups, their health and vitality, including the formation of new groups as new interest is shown.
6. The church will dedicate specific staff resources to the support of small groups, the retention of members, and the fostering of a spirit of attentive concern among the membership.
7. Any new visitor will receive direct personal contact by the end of that day.
8. Follow up with visitors will be organized, systematic, and personal, but free from any sense of undo pressure to join.
9. We will be intentional about how we present our public face, the ease of access to our church, and making people comfortable in approaching us.
10. We will celebrate the addition of every new member by publishing and posting their picture. We will also have an annual new member dinner.
11. We will be intentional in integrating new members into the church family, making sure that the door is open to Sunday School classes and small groups.
12. We will give serious consideration to securing Rev. Bill McConnell, a specialist in church renewal and growth, for an all church workshop within the next 12 months.