

# Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

Volume 24 Issue 5

PO Box 892589, Temecula, CA 92589-2589

May 2012

## Worship Attendance Growth Rates

A church is a living organism. It's natural for an organism to grow. And it's natural for a church to grow. When a church is not growing it is quite likely that something is wrong. In the United States a healthy church will see between 5 - 12% growth in worship attendance each year.

There are a number of indicators that could be used to evaluate whether or not a church is healthy. One could analyze the budget. The number of

visitors, and visitors who stay, in a church might be a good indicator. How many members read the Bible and have regular devotions could qualify. Perhaps the dollars and hours spent in local community service projects. Or the number of corporate hours in prayer could be measured. Healthy churches usually have a network of small groups with a large percentage of members involved. They have adequate and qualified staff. The number of conversions per year in a church could (and should) be measured. And there are more. So, what is the key indicator of a healthy church?

After years of study, it is my contention that the *primary* indicator of a church's health is its worship attendance growth rate. A negative rate normally means the church has one or more problems. A positive growth rate indicates that, for the moment, ministry and mission are likely going well. Of course, there will be exceptions in either case. But rules are generalizations of what is the case far more often than not. In

general, I suggest the following table of growth rates to be an indicator of health in a local church, a regional, and a national denomination body.

Poor Growth: 2% per year  
Fair Growth: 3 - 5% per year  
Good Growth: 6 - 8% per year  
Excellent Growth: 9 - 11% per year  
Outstanding Growth: 12 - 15% per year  
Incredible Growth: 16 - 20% per year

It is not uncommon for pastors to be distressed over a discussion that suggests worship attendance is the key reflector of church health. They may respond with something like: "We are not an old-fashioned 'attractional' church, and don't

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— Gary L. McIntosh

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# Churches in the USA can grow 4% a year.

## Worship attendance is the heartbeat of a healthy church.

define success on how many people come to us. We are a 'missional' church, and define our success on how many people we go to." While there is certainly nothing wrong with going *to* people in the community, it is often a smoke screen to create a dichotomy between "attractional" and "missional," and this contrived dichotomy is typically raised by those in churches that are not growing. Pastors of growing churches know quite well that a church can be missional as defined by their focus, and attractive as shown by their growth.

Worship attendance is the heartbeat of a healthy church. Like a human body, there are indicators of health other than a heartbeat. But in the absence of this critical measure, the others are rather meaningless. I believe that most churches in America have the potential to grow by at least 4% per year in worship attendance. A church of 100 would need a net of only five worshippers each year for five years to average a 4% annual growth rate! If a church of 100 worshippers added just 10 new people per year for ten years, it would average 7% growth per year.

Congregations that wish to be healthy should "check their pulse" at least once a year. Here is how to get started. First, look thorough your church's records and calculate the average weekly worship attendance for each of the last ten years.

Once you have the yearly averages, calculate the average percentage of growth or decline from the first year to the second year, the second year to the third year, and so on. [Note that your calculation may result in a negative number.]

Next, plot your ten yearly averages on a piece

of graph paper and add the growth rates for the ten year period and then divide by ten to get an average decadal growth rate.

Once you have determined your average annual growth rate for the last ten years, think deeply about what the information is telling you about the health of your church. Based on the scale I suggest, is your growth rate poor, fair, good, excellent, outstanding, or incredible? What are your thoughts on this situation? What do you think God's thoughts are?

Developing a 10-year chart for your church gives a helpful perspective on your situation. It will stimulate a productive conversation among your church leaders about where you are, where you have come, and where you are going.

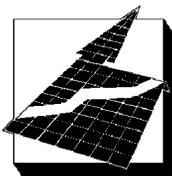
Keep this chart current from one year to the next. In so doing you will be better able to track your pulse rate and monitor the results of your intervention strategy

So, what is your church's growth rate?



Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D. is  
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*Growth Points* is published twelve times a year. The subscription price is \$16 (Bank or World Money Order) per year. Permission is granted for use in a local church. For other reprint usage, advance permission must be obtained. Formerly published under the title *Church Growth Network*.  
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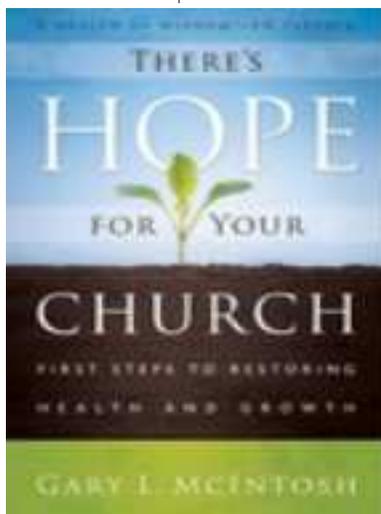
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