

FIVE MARKS OF GROWING

Session 4 – Numbers

LEADER'S NOTES

The order of the Five Marks of Growing is.....

*Christ-likeness
Commitment
Partnership
Influence
Numbers*

However, in this course I have chosen to change the order to so that the course ends with Commitment session. I think it is appropriate to have as a climax to the course the opportunity for everyone to be invited to recommit themselves to Christ and to serving him. I have also put Influence before Partnership. So my revised order is.....

*Christ-likeness
Influence
Partnership
Numbers
Commitment*

However, you are clearly free to use the order you prefer.

This session took 1 hour 30 minutes including serving refreshments between the two halves.

Participants being seated around tables works very well.

On the pages that follow are.....

- The Session Notes (pages 2-7) which include the input and discussion questions.*
- Bible passages texts that are referred to in the notes (page 8). It would be good to draw people's attention to these when giving the input.*
- The Opening & Closing Worship (page 9): print back to back and cut in half.*

Some opening and closing worship is included, or you can devise your own.

You will need to make copyright arrangements when printing the songs and some hymns. Many churches will have a CCL licence.

PREPARATION

You will need.....

- A flipchart (or give out questions on paper)*
- After Eights (enough for everyone to have one)*
- The course material and participants notes for the first session of either Alpha, Start, Christianity Explored, Emmaus or another course.*

GROUP ACTIVITY 1 (5 minutes)

Write the following question on a flip chart.....

“Why do you go to church - for what reason?”

Ask everyone to discuss the question in groups for 5 minutes. Make it clear that you want them to answer the question as set out on the flipchart, and not to answer the question, “Why do you think you should go to church?” In other words they should not give the answer they think you want to hear!

Get responses and write them up on the flip chart.

Comment on the answers you receive and make the point that while many of the reasons might be good and right (eg: out of habit, to meet with my friends, to get some peace and quiet, etc), the fundamental reason why we should go to church presumably should be, “To worship God”!

Introduce the theme of tonight’s session if you have not already done so.

PART 1

Some people would say that they can worship God at home on their own, or in the country, or wherever. So a better answer than, “To worship God” (which is individualistic) would be, “To worship God with my fellow Christians.” After all Jesus did say he would be specially present where two or three gather together in his name. The New Testament knows nothing of a solitary Christian!

So if the basic reason for going to church is to worship God, it is fundamentally to do with our life of faith in Christ.

GROUP ACTIVITY 2 (5 minutes)

Invite people to complete the following sentence.....

“In 5 years we would like our church to....”

Write up the responses on a flipchart.

The responses nearly always include, “to be full”, “to have more people”, as well as others.

Then ask the question, “Would you like your church to grow in numbers?” (The answers will presumably be, “Yes”!)

Then around the tables invite everyone to discuss for 5 minutes the question, “Why do you want to have more people in your church?” Write the question on a flip chart before the session and reveal it at this point.

Write down the responses to the question.

Some people might respond saying, “So that the church will not have to close ten years from now”, or “So we can pay our way more easily”. However, hopefully some responses will be along the lines of, “Because we want people to experience the joy of knowing Christ and will want to worship and serve him”.

Point out that our commission as Christians is to save the world, not to save the church! We so often act as though our main job is to save the church!

PART 2

So if the fundamental reason for going to church is all to do with our relationship with God, to worship him and to grow in our faith, does it not follow that the primary way of attracting people to our churches is by seeking to lead them to faith in Christ?

It is true that as part of that overall objective we might want to encourage people to **belong** to our churches as part of their journey to faith. One discovery that has been made in the last few years is that belonging so often precedes believing rather than the other way around.

From a purely rational and logical point of view we would think that people would come to believe first and then want to belong to a company of fellow-believers. However, experience shows us that the process of belonging is a very important part of a person's journey to faith. I will touch on this again later.

However, our primary aim should be to lead people to a living faith in Christ. Our primary task is to make disciples (Matthew 28) not to add numbers to the church, though the latter will follow when we do the former. We're here to save the world not the church.

In thinking about our desire to get more people to "go to church", it is interesting that if we comb the pages of the New Testament we will not find a verse anywhere which says, "*Go to church!*"

This might seem surprising, since you would imagine that the writers of the New Testament would have wanted to encourage church attendance. Yet Christians in New Testament times never thought in terms of "going to church". Why is this?

Was it because there were no church buildings to go to? We know that the early Christians met in people's homes, or other public places so this may partly explain it. However, I believe the main reason why the first Christians never talked about "going to church" was because they were so aware that they **were** the church! If you **are** the church, you can't go **to** it!

So instead of talking about going to church, the New Testament writers talk about gathering together **as** the church. This might seem a subtle difference, yet it is an important one.

One example of this in the New Testament is where the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says.....

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (10.25 NIV)

So we want our churches to grow in numbers because we want people to become disciples of Christ and to experience the life in all its fullness that only he can give.

And we as the church - God's people - are meant to be the means through which people are drawn to Christ and are saved.

It is highly likely that everyone in all the 198 churches in our archdeaconry would say they want their churches to grow in numbers.

However, even though we speak unashamedly of how we would like more people to come to church, there can be a real diffidence about facing up to how this might be done.

This diffidence, this reticence, can be seen in how when we talk about the need for our churches to grow in numbers, some people immediately interject.....

"But there are other ways in which we need to grow as well."

There can be a real reluctance to face up to it. It's as though growth in numbers is the elephant in the room that we must not talk about!

I've heard some people say.....

"It's not just about bums on pews you know, it's about more than that"

True! But it's not less than that!

And with reference to “bums on pews” Robin Gamble has said, “Those bums on pews are people. And a pew is a great place for people to be.”¹

What is interesting, is that when we turn to the Book of Acts that tells the story of the life of the church in its early years, Luke, who wrote Acts, shows no reticence about talking about numbers.²

Here’s a list of some of the things he says.....

On the Day of Pentecost he writes.....

*Those who accepted Peter’s message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their **number**. (2.41 NRSV)*

A little later on he writes.....

*And the Lord added to their **number** daily those who were being saved. (2.47 NIV)*

In **chapter four**, as a result of the preaching of Peter and John, we read.....

*Many who heard the message believed, and the **number** of men grew to about five thousand. (4.4 NIV)*

In Acts 6, he starts the chapter by saying.....

*In those days when the **number** of disciples was increasing.... (NIV)*

In chapter 9 he tells us.....

*Then the church.....was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in **numbers**. (9.31 NIV)*

Then, as we heard in **our first reading**, as a result of Paul’s ministry in Derbe and Lystra.....

*The churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in **numbers**. (16.5 NIV)*

And there are many other references too.³

So it would seem that growth in numbers was a normal part of church life in the Book of Acts.

There is a book called “The Normal Christian Life” by a Chinese man called Watchman Nee. How do you imagine he describes what a “normal” Christian life is?

What would you describe as a “normal Christian life”?

Would you describe your own life as a Christian is “normal”?

Do you think your Vicar lives a “normal” Christian life?

Or would you point to a Mother Teresa or a Billy Graham or Archbishop Sentamu as living “normal” Christian lives?

In the opening pages of this book the author said that the only person who lived a “normal” Christian was Jesus!⁴

We could apply the same principle to growth in numbers in our churches.

In the last ten years, church attendance in the East Riding Archdeaconry has on average declined by one per cent per year.

And it’s easy to assume that that must be “normal”?

However, I don’t think it is normal! Elsewhere in the world the church is growing.

And I would suggest that, in the same way that the life of Jesus is the example of what is a normal Christian life.....

.....so the life of the early church is the example of what is a normal church life, and that one aspect of this “normal” church life is growth.

So growth is normal. Decline is abnormal!

So how might we set about it?

At a workshop at a recent Archdeacons' Conference, Robin Gamble said.....

“The parish church needs to be intentional in its mission, not just hanging around.”

What did he mean by “intentional”?

If you wanted to watch Mastermind on television, what would you do? You would find out when it's on and then switch the television on at 8.00pm on a Friday night and select BBC2.

You wouldn't watch television every night for a week flipping through the channels, hoping that you might by chance stumble on a programme of Mastermind.

In the same way we need to take definite steps if we want our churches to grow. People will not usually stumble upon us by chance and join us.

So we need to be intentional.

And to be intentional means.....

- To have a clear objective
- To find out what needs to be done
- To plan how to go about it
- To put the plan into action.

So how can we do it?

Jesus likened the task of making disciples to fishing. He said to Peter and Andrew.....

“Come with me, and I will teach you to catch people” (Matthew 4.19 GNB)

There are two things that fishermen do when they want to catch fish. First, they throw ground bait into the water to attract the fish. Then they get a hook and line with which they actually catch the fish.

I think that we in the Church of England are very good at the ground bait. Churches often hold events to which many people in the wider community are attracted.

However, we are not very good at the “hook and line” bit, of actually leading people to a living encounter with Jesus Christ – of making disciples.

So let's think about how this might be done. And a good question to ask is.....

How were people added to the church in the Book of Acts?

The answer is that it was mainly through their hearing “the message”, “the Word of God” the “Gospel”, the “Good News”.

In the Book of Acts we often read phrases like this one.....

“Many of them believed the message” (Acts 2.41 – on sheet)

So it's all about conveying the message of the Gospel to people in a way that is relevant to them today?

How might we do this?

In 1996 a book was published called *Finding Faith Today*. It was the result of research into discovering how people came to faith.

It revealed two very important things.

First, the vast majority of people who come to faith would best describe the process in terms of a journey - a journey of faith.

So coming to faith is a process, not a one-off event.

And while it is true that many people can identify particular occasions, particular events that were significant in coming to faith, such events or milestones are usually part of a longer process - a longer journey.

Secondly, the research revealed the importance of relationships in a person's journey of faith. Those who had come to faith pointed to the importance of relationships that they had with Christians. One way that people come to feel they belong to the church is through relationships that they develop with Christians. And as I said earlier, belonging often comes before believing.

It was around the time of this discovery about faith being a journey that is shared with others, that there emerged a number of courses on Basic Christianity.

Perhaps the best know of these are *Emmaus, Start, Alpha, Christianity Explored*.

Many churches now run such a course once or twice a year.

In 2005, about two-thirds of people newly added to the church came through courses like these.⁵

So if I were asked the question, "How can a church grow in numbers?", courses like these must be an important tool that we can use.

Running such a course is a way of providing a spiritual maternity ward in our churches.

And it's through such courses that people can come to understand what "The Good News of Jesus Christ" really is.

So if in 2005, about two-thirds of people newly added to the church really did come through courses like these, I believe there is a great need for us to learn how to run such courses.

It is important to consider how to get people to come on such a course. This is something we won't address this evening, but I would be very happy to talk about that on another occasion.

What I want to do next is to give you a taste of what it feels like to attend the first session of these courses. I'll explain what we will do after we have had a break for refreshments.

PART 3

These notes and the Group Activity are written with reference to the first session of the Alpha Course. You will need to change them as appropriate if you wish to use the first session of a different course.

What I would like to do for the rest of the time tonight is to give you a taste of what the first session of *Alpha* is like.

I want you to imagine that you are either a fringe member of a church, or you might be an atheist or agnostic, and a friend has invited you to go along with him/her to the first session of *Alpha*. You received a warm welcome when you came. You were offered a glass of wine or a fruit juice when you walked in. After a little while someone - possibly the Vicar or possibly not - welcomed everyone and invited you to sit at a table. You noticed that there were name places on the tables. You also noticed that there were some attractive table cloths on the tables and some flower arrangements. It was a cut above what you expected to find at a church event!

You took your seat and you realised that there were a couple of people from the church who were taking the lead, engaging everyone in conversation and making you feel welcome.

A really good meal was then served, along with wine. During the meal you got talking to other people around the table. It was all very leisurely and relaxed and from walking into the building until the end of the meal took about an hour.

Now you're enjoying your coffee and After Eights. The coffee having been served. The person who initially welcomed everyone has stood up and started to talk. He or she explains that this is the first session of the *Alpha Course*. Everyone is given an *Alpha* booklet at no cost and the speaker explains that the topic of this first session is, "Christianity, Boring, Untrue, Irrelevant", and s/he then gives a short talk about this, which is what I am now going to do. So imagine that is the context.

Present the first session (or part of) of one of the courses (Alpha, START, Christianity Explored, Emmaus, etc).

GROUP ACTIVITY 3

Follow the input with discussion in small groups for as long as seems appropriate.

If you use *Alpha* you could write a couple of the discussion questions⁶ that might be used at a first *Alpha* session on the flipchart or on a sheet of paper to get them going.....

- Why do you think people today tend to regard Christianity as boring, untrue and irrelevant?
- To what extent do you share this general consensus and why?
- What might make you change your mind?

If it were for real you would not invite feedback from the groups at the end on the subject matter.

However, you might like to invite them to give some brief comments about what it felt like.

Would they feel comfortable to be part of such a discussion group in a real course?

Might they consider running one?

Conclude with worship.

FIVE MARKS OF GROWING

Session 3 – Numbers

Bible Passages

Acts 15.36-16.5

³⁶Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." ³⁷Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. ³⁹They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, ⁴⁰but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

¹He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. ²The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. ³Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴As they travelled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. ⁵So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Matthew 28.16-20

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Hebrews 10.25

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Acts 2.41: Those who accepted Peter's message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number.

Acts 2.47: And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 4.4: Many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.

Acts 6.1: In those days when the number of disciples was increasing....

Acts 9.31: Then the church.....was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers.

Acts 16.5: The churches (in Derbe and Lystra) were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Matthew 4.18-20:

As Jesus walked along the shore of Lake Galilee, he saw two brothers who were fishermen, Simon (called Peter) and his brother Andrew, catching fish in the lake with a net. Jesus said to them, "Come with me, and I will teach you to catch people." At once they left their nets and went with him.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth:
Worship the LORD with gladness.

Come into his presence with singing:
Enter his gates with thanksgiving.

Enter and his courts with praise:
Give thanks to him and bless his name.

SONG

Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise,
the city of our God, the holy place,
the joy of the whole earth.
Great is the Lord in whom we have the victory,
he aids us against the enemy,
we bow down on our knees.

*And Lord, we want to lift your name on high,
and Lord, we want to thank you,
for the works you've done in our lives;
and Lord, we trust in your unfailing love,
for you alone are God eternal,
throughout earth and heaven above.*

Steve McEwan.
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BIBLE READING: Acts 15.36-6.5

HYMN

We have a gospel to proclaim,
good news for all throughout the earth;
The gospel of a saviour's name:
We sing his glory, tell his worth.

Tell of his birth at Bethlehem,
not in a royal house or hall
but in a stable dark and dim:
The Word made flesh, a light for all.

Tell of his death at Calvary,
hated by those he came to save;
in lonely suffering on the cross
for all he loved, his life he gave.

Tell of that glorious Easter morn:
empty the tomb, for he was free;
he broke the power of death and hell
that we might share his victory.

Now we rejoice to name him king:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth;
this gospel message we proclaim:
we sing his glory, tell his worth.

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CONCLUSION

Lord Jesus, as we gather in your name:
Inspire us and guide us by your Spirit.

May all that we think and do and say:
Bring glory to your holy name.

May blessing and honour and glory and power:
Be yours for ever and ever.
Amen.

CLOSING WORSHIP

Colours of day dawn into the mind,
the sun has come up, the night is behind.
Go down in the city, into the street,
and let's give the message to the people we meet.

*So light up the fire and let the flame burn,
open the door, let Jesus return.*

*Take seeds of his Spirit, let the fruit grow,
tell the people of Jesus, let his love show.*

Go through the park, on into the town,
the sun still shines on, it never goes down.
The light of the world is risen again,
the people of darkness are needing our friend.

So light up the fire.....

Open your eyes, look into the sky,
the darkness has come, the sun came to die.
The evening draws on, the sun disappears,
but Jesus is living, his Spirit is near.

So light up the fire.....

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Jesus said to the apostles: "You will receive power
when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be
my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and
Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria
enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and
encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers.

**Heavenly Father,
you sent the gift of the Holy Spirit
to the apostle of old
to empower them to be your witnesses.**

**Pour the Holy Spirit on us today
that we may also receive power
to tell others the Good News of Jesus Christ.**

**We pray for those who live in our parishes:
open their hearts and minds to the Gospel,
may it be to them the power of God for salvation
through faith in Jesus Christ our saviour.
Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord
In the name of Christ.
Amen.

¹ Robin Gamble at the 2013 National Archdeacons' Conference

² See also John Proctor, *Acts of God* page 3 (Grove Booklet)

³ eg in Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Ephesus.

⁴ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* page 9

⁵ Source: *21 Concerns for 21st Century Christians, Section 13*

⁶ These are the first two of eight questions that are included in the *Alpha* Course. See the book *Questions of Life*, page 255