

VOL. 10 • NO.2 SPRING 2019

REACH, ASSIMILATE AND DEVELOP: ESSENTIAL KEYS FOR THE RESURGENCE OF THE CHURCH IN AMERICA

Gordon E. Penfold

Abstract

This article presents a way to understand church growth from the perspective of reaching, assimilating, and developing people in the church. In *Re:Vision: The Key to Transforming Your Church*, Aubrey Malphurs and Penfold researched the characteristics discovered in re-envisioning (turnaround) pastors. The two researchers gathered a great deal of information about the ministry and practices of effective pastors including statistics on worship attendance, conversions, and baptisms. The statistics on conversion and baptism did not find their way into the book.

This article examines worship attendance, conversion, baptism, and assimilation rates of reporting pastors. These rates reveal a great deal about churches. Turnaround and non-turnaround churches are evaluated based on these statistics, not just on worship attendance.

THE POWER OF LIFE TRANSFORMATION

“Then Jesus said to them [Peter and Andrew], ‘Follow me and I will make you *become* fishers of men’” (emphasis mine, Mark 1:17, NKJV). This passage recently captured my attention. I often quote Matthew 4:19 where Jesus said, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (NKJV), with an emphasis that if we follow, we will fish. The subtle difference of the insertion of the infinitive in Mark 1:17 is startling: I will make you “to become” (*genesthai*) fishers of men. The addition of *genesthai* emphasizes the process of transformation. Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker list this usage under the heading 4: “Of pers. and things which change their nature, to indicate their entering a new condition: *become something*.”¹ Jesus called “fishers of fish.” He would mold them to become “fishers of men.” He changed their nature as they entered into a new condition of an entirely different type of fishing. He did so through up-close and personal contact. Professor Howard Hendricks at Dallas Theological Seminary made the following profound statement. “You can impress from a distance, but you can only impact up close.”² The Lord Jesus impacted His disciples “up close.”

A TROUBLING BACK STORY

I grew up regularly attending church functions from the nursery through high school. I remember three of the pastors who served the church during those years. Two were not believers, and one was suspect. In 1962 or 63, our “pastor” engaged the services of a medium to conduct a séance for our junior high youth group on a Sunday evening. I vaguely sensed that this activity did not seem to fit with a church ministry, but I did not know any better. Neither did my classmates.

1 Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. and trans. William F. Arndt, F. Wilber Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker [BAGD], 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. “γινωμαι.”

2 Howard G. Hendricks, cited by Will Mancini, “Epic Quotes on Discipleship from Prof Howard Hendricks,” accessed March 4, 2019, <https://www.visionroom.com/epic-quotes-on-discipleship-from-prof-howard-hendricks/>.

Fast forward to Christmas Eve, 1967, during my senior year of high school. Our new “pastor” who joined us the previous summer told the congregation, “You do not need to believe in the virgin birth if you do not want to. It’s not important.” I was not a Christ-follower at the time even though I was confirmed and joined the church at age twelve. I did not know the truth of the gospel, but I was incensed. I asked myself, “If we do not have to believe anything to belong, then why bother?” I made a vow to God that evening that I would *never* attend church again.

A year and a half later, two students affiliated with the Navigators introduced me to Jesus Christ by way of a cold-call visit in Braiden Hall on the campus of Colorado State University in the spring of 1969. They presented the gospel clearly to my roommate and me on a Sunday evening. They began our conversation with the two famous Evangelism Explosion questions. “Do you know for certain that if you died tonight that you would go to heaven?” My response was “I certainly hope so.” The second question really began to penetrate my spiritual fog. They further queried, “If God were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven,’ what would you say?” My answer was quite typical of those who do not know our Savior. “I’ve tried to live a good life. I try to do more good works than bad, and I want my good works to outweigh my bad works. I view life as a pair of scales, and I want them to tip in my favor when I stand before God.” They responded, “Boy, do we have some good news for you!”

They proceeded to proclaim the gospel to us in clear, unmistakable language. When they concluded, they asked my roommate and me what we thought. I responded, “I’ve been to church for eighteen years and never heard what you just shared. I believe you are crazy!” From my previous “training,” I understood the love of God, but in my childhood church, no one bothered to tell us about the righteousness of God and the necessity of the death of Christ to satisfy God’s wrath toward me because of my sin. The concept of judgment set me back on my heels. After hearing the gospel, I could not get the Name of Jesus Christ out of my mind. The following Friday evening, I prayed these words alone in my room, “Lord Jesus, I recognize that I am a sinner. I want you to forgive my sin, come into my heart, change my life, and make my life worth living.” He answered those four requests and so much more.

On Saturday morning, I walked out of my dorm room to go to breakfast just as these two Navigators walked out of their room. I said, “Hey guys! Guess what? I made a decision for Christ last night.” After they picked themselves up off the carpet, they said, “Great, you need to go to church with us tomorrow morning.”

I rejoined, “No, I made a promise to God that I would never attend church again.” Without hesitation, one of them said, “God won’t mind if you break that promise. Do you have a Bible?”

“Yes.”

“Bring it!”

I asked them, “Why do I need a Bible?”

They said, “We use them at this church.”

I thought to myself, “How novel. We never used the Bible in the church where I grew up.”

These guys took me to a church that was alive. I was immediately hooked on “real church,” not the empty imitation that I saw during my upbringing. The following Sunday evening, they involved me in a “prayer and share” time with a group of other students. And the next week they took me out visiting on the campus with them. I spent a lot of time with them over the next year. We went on a mission trip to a nearby junior college. Soon I was leading my own team out into the dormitories to share Christ. They disciplined me though I didn’t know that was what they were doing. These two men, full-time students with a heavy class load, took time out of their schedules to impact my life. Fundamentally, discipleship requires impact up close. Jesus used that method with the Twelve. These two men practiced Jesus’ method on me.

I share this account by way of introduction because what happened with me demonstrates three key essentials for the resurgence of effective ministry in America: reaching, assimilating and developing individuals into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. These terms describe discipleship.

The men’s first step was the fearless proclamation of the gospel. This essential practice seems largely absent in America today. Second, they introduced me to a vibrant, local fellowship of believers. Third, they moved me in the direction of spiritual maturity and spiritual reproduction. I cannot thank them enough.

This period was the era of the Jesus Movement. I am a product of that movement in the late 1960s. The Navigator methods worked well on the college campus and among service members, but they may not have been as practical for people living in other circumstances. Regardless, we must develop methods that work for us in our present circumstances. We must recapture a passion for our lost world and begin to impact people *up close and personally*.

The church I attended in Fort Collins, Colorado, modeled this practice. In a ten-year span, the Lord used this church to mold and shape 100 individuals who made their way into full-time Christian service. I long to see a multitude of churches providing the example of that church—a church that passionately followed the Lord Jesus with abandon and transmitted its passion to its people.

As a young believer, I caught the evangelism bug. Unfortunately, it took years for me to develop an effective discipleship ministry. I was all about finding people, roping them, placing the brand of Christ on them, and then turning them loose to roam Christ's vast prairie. "Follow up," as we called it, was difficult for me. Making disciples took way too much time. I was more like Whitefield, reaching people with the gospel, not like a Wesley who established a masterful method of discipleship. I am continuing to learn that discipleship takes a great deal of time and relational investment to be effective. However, the long-term fruit is worthwhile.

A TROUBLING TREND

In the late 1990s, I sought to find a good evangelistic Bible study to use in my efforts to reach people for Christ. In those days, Bible studies offered a productive way to reach people. I wrote to a Christian bookseller and asked for a listing of all their Bible studies and specifically requested their two most evangelistic Bible study books. They sent three pages of small font titles and the two Bible studies. None of the studies appeared to be helpful for evangelism, and the two Bible study books I received were useless for evangelism. One was a study of the Gospel of John. When I turned to the section containing John 3, I assumed I would see the gospel presented clearly. The plan of salvation was nowhere to be found.

So, I developed my own Bible Study, *Discovering the Lord*, which I have used extensively and with success. Over the years the demand for the study dried up. Perhaps the study moved beyond its useful shelf life, but I suspect the lack of demand demonstrated a growing apathy toward evangelism.

This concern about apathy is echoed by Gary McIntosh. He used to do several conferences each year on effective evangelism. Currently, he receives few requests for evangelistic training.

It seems today that the “go” part of the Great Commission is missing. If, according to David Olson, 69 percent of all churches are plateaued or declining,³ then one would suspect that churches in need would scramble to find materials useful for evangelism, but that is not happening.

RESEARCH ON THE STATE OF THE CHURCH IN AMERICA

In 2009, I began my research by examining the “Defining Characteristics of Turnaround Pastors among Evangelical Churches in the Rocky Mountain States.”⁴ My doctoral project published in 2011 led to the production of *Re:Vision: The Key to Transforming Your Church* in 2014 by Aubrey Malphurs and me. In our research for the book, we examined 146 pastors who served 285 churches across the United States and Canada.⁵ We collected data (and I continue to do so) on pastors that included the following for each church served: their chronological age at the beginning of each ministry, their tenure at each church, beginning and ending attendance, and total conversions and baptisms. We also collected their DISC Profile scores, MBTI scores, and Pastoral Leadership Assessment Scores. As in any survey of this type, we were unable to collect complete data from every pastor for each church served.

We defined a re-envisioning (turnaround) pastor (REP) as “a leader who has transitioned a church from a plateau or numerical decline in worship

3 David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of over 200,000 Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 132.

4 Gordon Penfold, “Defining Characteristics of Turnaround Pastors among Evangelical Churches in the Rocky Mountain States” (D.Min. diss., Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, 2011).

5 Aubrey Malphurs and Gordon Penfold, *Re:Vision: The Key to Transforming Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 106.

attendance to a positive average annual growth rate (AAGR) of [at least] 2.5 percent for a minimum of 2.5 years regardless of the church's size" in his latest or final ministry assignment.⁶ A non-re-envisioning pastor (NREP) is a pastor whose current church or final ministry's AAGR fell below 2.5 percent for a minimum of 2.5 years regardless of church size. In writing our book, we only examined worship attendance to determine whether a pastor is a REP or an NREP. A worship attendance growth rate of 2.5 percent minimum is only slightly higher than the population growth rate in the US of 1.1 percent,⁷ so the bar is not high, yet many churches fail to meet even this minimum standard. On the other hand, some churches continue to thrive. This growth gives hope to all who engage in ministry. Positive change can take place.

One of my lingering concerns is that we did not examine conversion or baptism rates in our book (primarily because our volume was already statistically weighty). The concern is that some "turnaround churches" may be growing primarily through transfer growth, not through conversion growth. This piece of research examines those churches which provided us with worship attendance figures as well as baptism and conversion statistics. We compare their conversion and baptism growth rates with the growth rates of their church to see what percentage of churches grew significantly through conversion growth and what percentage grew primarily through transfer growth. These results offer an enlightening picture of church ministry as it relates to reaching, assimilating, and developing people for the cause of Christ.

6 Ibid., 102.

7 Ibid., 24.

RESEARCH INTO THE INFLUENCE OF CONVERSION, BAPTISM, AND ASSIMILATION

Definitions

In any work, definitions need to be stated clearly. The following definitions are critical to this discussion.

Outreach: The attempt to reach out to those outside the body of Christ and build relationships with them to reach them for Christ. Through outreach, people will know we genuinely care for them.

Evangelism: The clear proclamation of the gospel that brings people face to face with their need of the Lord Jesus.

Conversion: The event whereby a person places their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and Sin-Bearer.

Baptism: The act whereby a person obediently follows the command of the Lord to be baptized using water. This act reflects the believer's union with Christ's death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6:1-6) as well as union with the Body of Christ, the Church (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). Baptism is the act of declaring allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Assimilation: The process of enfolding a believer into a church fellowship. McIntosh and Martin discuss the levels of inclusion in a church.

The essence of his [Lyle Schaller's] research shows that there are two distinct and separate levels of inclusion. One is the superficial level to which most Christians find themselves belonging. This is a level where they feel comfortable in the worship service, but where Sunday School or small group involvement is avoided, and service and support are not on the agenda.

The second level is much more relational, and far more significant in the life of an assimilated member. It is the level where there is a sense of belonging and even a sense of accountability.⁸

Assimilation at the second level is obviously best. Our statistics did not

⁸ Gary L. McIntosh and Glen Martin, *Finding Them, Keeping Them: Effective Strategies for Evangelism and Assimilation in the Local Church* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1992), 76.

differentiate between the two levels of involvement, but when churches track Sunday School attendance or small-group involvement, the statistics of Level 1 and Level 2 are readily available.

Pertinent Statistics on Conversion and Baptism

The pastors who reported conversions and/or baptisms in our research totaled 115 pastors out of 146 (78.8%). Of these reporting pastors, 105 of 115 (91.3%) gave conversion and baptism statistics on all the churches they served while 10 reported statistics on only a portion of the churches they served.

Overall, 92 pastors provided statistics on conversions, and 108 pastors reported baptisms. Of this group, 24 pastors reported baptisms only and 7 pastors reported conversions only.

The number of churches served by these pastors ranged from one to seven churches. The number of churches served by these 115 pastors totaled 203 churches.

Statistics of Reporting Pastors and Churches

Reporting Pastors	115 of 146
Churches served by the reporting pastors.	203
Churches reporting conversions	159
Churches reporting baptisms	175
Churches reporting conversions only	7
Churches reporting baptisms only	24

Minimum Conversions and Baptism Rates for Churches

What must happen for a church to maintain forward momentum and growth? McIntosh provides some interesting insights into essentials necessary to maintain healthy growth. These statistics reflect annual losses and needed gains:

- Churches lose an average of 1 percent of their membership to death.

[Note: I used attendance figures in this article, not membership, in calculating Average Annual Growth Rates, Conversion Rates, and Baptism Rates.]

- Churches lose an average of about 6 percent to transfer (higher with a college ministry, less in small, rural churches).
- About 3 percent or more people drop out.
- Healthy churches: 5 percent conversion growth + 2.5 percent biological growth for kids + 7.5 percent transfer growth into the fellowship = 15 percent replacement needed annually. These growth numbers will result in a net gain of 5 percent in the church.⁹

Some variation will always exist, depending on location and circumstance, but these parameters provide a good target for church ministry for a church that grows at 5 percent per year. As will be seen, numerous churches far exceeded 5 percent conversion and baptism rates while other churches fell woefully short of that mark.

Examining the Statistics

The following table shows the statistical distribution of the REPs and NREPs in relationship to the percentages of the conversion and baptism rates in the churches. In this breakdown, pastors reported either conversion and/or baptisms or both for 203 churches, a significant statistical sample. To make it possible to compare churches fairly with one another, the conversions and baptism statistics were calculated to reflect conversions per 100 attendees per year (conversion rate) or baptisms per 100 attendees per year (baptism rate). This process placed all the churches on equal footing regardless of church size. The number of churches was divided by either the conversion rate or baptism rate that fell into four different statistical categories. The conversion rate or baptism rate categories are 0.0-2.4, 2.5-4.9, 5.0-7.4, and 7.5 and higher. The churches were also divided as

⁹ McIntosh, personal phone interview by Penfold, October 9, 2018.

REP or NREP pastor-led churches. As I examined the statistical returns from the churches, I calculated both the conversion rate and the baptism rate over the pastor's tenure at the church and divided that number by ending attendance and the number of years of the pastor's service to that congregation and then multiplied that number by 100 to get the rate of conversions and/or the rate of baptisms per 100 attendees per year. The formulas are shown below:

$$\text{Conversion Rate} = \frac{(\text{number of conversions}) * 100}{(\text{ending attendance} * \text{pastoral tenure in years})}$$

$$\text{Baptism Rate} = \frac{(\text{number of baptisms}) * 100}{(\text{ending attendance} * \text{pastoral tenure in years})}$$

When pastors reported both conversions and baptisms, I used baptisms over conversions, as baptism is a better reflection of assimilation in the fulfillment of the Great Commission, while conversions represent community engagement and evangelistic outreach.

Great Commission churches are churches that combine conversions, baptisms, and worship growth. As seen in the chart below, some churches that qualified as turnaround churches did so without a significant number of conversions/baptisms. These churches apparently grew by transfer growth, not by "Great Commission" growth. Conversely, a number of non-turnaround churches had conversion or baptism rates over 5.0/100 attendees, meaning they failed to assimilate these new believers. Both situations demand attention.

Conversions and Baptism Rates for Churches

Conversions/ Baptisms rates in reporting churches	Re-envisioning Pastors (REP)	Percentage of Re-envisioning Pastors	Non-re- envisioning (Maintenance) Pastors (NREP)	Percentage of Non-re- envisioning Pastors
0-2.4 conversions/ baptisms per 100	44	28.8	18	36
2.5-4.9 conversions/ baptisms per 100	42	27.4	18	36
5.0-7.4 conversions/ baptisms per 100	22	14.4	8	16
7.5 and higher conversions/ baptisms per 100	45	29.4	6	12
Total	153	100.0	50	100.0

Some observations are in order.

1. The church group that most frequently reported both conversions and baptisms is the Wesleyan group. The Presbyterians, Methodists, and Bible Churches reported with the least frequency. The Baptist churches generally did a good job of reporting baptisms. Other denominational groups (we used statistics from 26 different denominations or conventions) were inconsistent in reporting these statistics, with some churches in a denomination reporting baptisms and or conversions and others failing to do so.
2. A fairly large number of reporting churches showed a minimum of 2.5% per year growth but had very low conversion/baptism rates. Only 43.8% of the turnaround churches experienced 5.0 conversions/baptisms per one hundred attendees or more. Thus, 56.2% of the “growing” churches fell below the 5% threshold.
3. A large group of maintenance churches, 72%, experienced less

than 5.0 conversion/baptisms per one hundred attendees. This result was not a surprise.

4. A significant number of maintenance churches (28%) experienced conversion/baptism rates above 5.0 per 100 attendees, yet their churches failed to grow at a 2.5% growth rate per year, indicating that these churches did a fair job of evangelism, but they did not do a good job of assimilation. Other mitigating circumstances may have come into play in these churches. See Case Study #5 below for an example of this phenomenon.

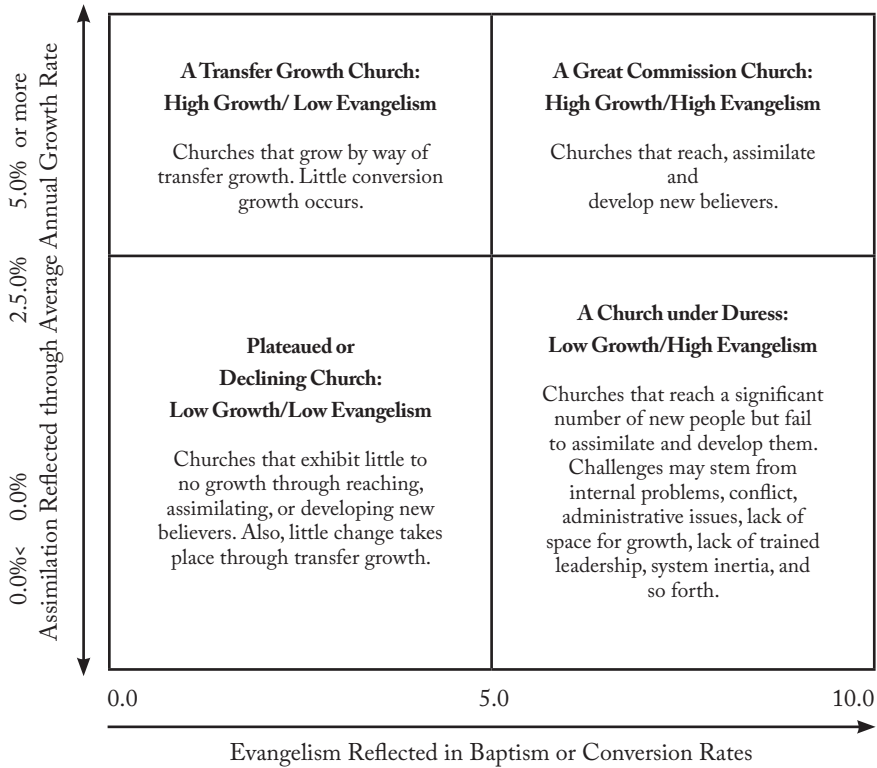
Much can be learned from these statistics as they relate to evangelism and discipleship. First, numerical growth can occur in the absence of conversions and baptisms. However, in terms of evangelistic impact, these churches may be making little eternal difference. In congregations like these, transfers move to the church because of the teaching, a great youth ministry, a strong home school network, the personality of the pastor, or any one of a variety of other reasons. However, the church becomes little more than a holy huddle without effective conversion growth.

The chart below provides a way to measure church effectiveness. The four quadrants label churches as a Transfer Growth Church, a Great Commission Church, A Plateaued or Declining Church, or a Church under Duress.¹⁰ Descriptions are given for each grouping.

Also note that churches that are not involved in the three essentials—to reach, assimilate, and develop new believers—are deficient in their ministry. We must obey our Lord's directives for His body in ministry found in Matthew 28:19-20, John 20:21, and Acts 1:8. We need to be Great Commission churches.

This chart provides a general way of looking at churches. A few churches may not fit well into these categories. There will always be outliers. But this does give a starting point for examining Great Commission church growth.

¹⁰ Thanks to Kelton Hinton, North American Editor of the *Great Commission Research Journal*, for his insightful comments for this section of the chart dealing with churches under duress.



Great Commission Church Assessment Diagram

I've listed below some case studies from the research that will illustrate the four quadrants of the chart. Two churches included in these case studies are churches not found in the original research for *Re:Vision* but are used for illustrative purposes.

CASE STUDIES

Case Study #1—Plateaued or Declining Church: Low Growth, Low Evangelism

This church¹¹ declined from 40 to 33 over an eight-year period. The

¹¹ All the names of the churches and pastors are omitted to protect privacy. These statistics

Average Annual Growth Rate (AAGR) for this congregation stood at -2.4% and a baptismal rate of 1.52 baptisms per hundred per year. According to our reckoning, this church was classified as a plateaued congregation (only slightly above the -2.5% line of demarcation between a plateaued and declining congregation). Without serious change, the church will cease to exist in the near future.

Case Study #2—Transfer Growth Church: High Growth, Low Evangelism

Here is an example of a church classified as a turnaround church in *Re:Vision* but that experienced little evangelistic growth. This church grew from 145 to 210 over fourteen years for a modest AAGR of 2.7%. However, during those years, the church baptized only 20 people for a baptism rate of 0.68 baptisms per 100 people per year. Was it a growing church? Yes. Did it have a large evangelistic impact? No. Possibly the baptisms that were recorded reflect the baptisms of the children of the congregation. Without further information, a definitive determination cannot be made. The impact of outreach and evangelism in this church was minimal.

Case Study #3—Transfer Growth Church: High Growth/ Low Evangelism

This case study is not unlike Case Study 2. In this case, the church grew from 175 to 600 over a sixteen-year period with a robust AAGR of 8.0%. Once again, this church was classified as a turnaround church in *Re:Vision*. That AAGR is a significant growth rate spread out over sixteen years. During this time the church baptized 110. That number sounds impressive. However, that figure translates into a baptismal rate of 1.15 baptisms per 100 people per year. Once again, baptism was not a high priority. Perhaps the church only focused on baptizing their children. When I interviewed church members, I was told that the pastor was a fantastic teacher. By his admission, teaching was his forte, not evangelism/outreach. This church

represent a “point in time” when the pastors provided their church growth or decline statistics. I am grateful for those who gave us the “news,” whether good or bad.

grew through transfer growth. This church would not be classified as a Great Commission church.

Case Study #4—Plateaued or Declining Church: Low Growth/Low Evangelism

This church declined from 260 to 212 over 10 years for an AAGR of -1.8%. During this season, the church baptized 82 for a 3.52 baptism rate. Unfortunately, a growing, vocal minority of the church (15%) became isolationist in their ministry philosophy. This group desired to protect their children from worldly influence. Consequently, they wanted to keep any unsaved children, youth, and their families away from the church. They excluded families that did not look or think like them. Their isolationist stance drove new people away as well as producing a searing schism in the church. As a result, their isolationist stance impacted the entire church. In a sense, this church became a “Fortress Church,” a church that insulates and isolates itself from the world to protect the children and families from the evils of the world. The church’s attitude was an “us four and no more” mentality. Consequently, no growth occurred.

Case Study #5—A Church Under Duress: Low Growth/High Evangelism

An example of a church apparently lacking assimilation and discipleship is seen in the following example. This church declined from 65 to 45 in attendance over an eight-year period. During those years the church reported 80 conversions and 64 baptisms. The baptism rate per 100 per year is 17.8—one of the highest rates out of all 115 reporting pastors. What went wrong here? Lack of assimilation and or discipleship immediately comes to mind. A second possibility is that the church has a controlling family. In his Pastoral Leadership Assessment, the pastor mentioned that the church suffered a church split. I spoke with him by phone to get an accurate account of the situation.¹² This body adopted a missional outlook

12 Personal phone interview by Penfold with the pastor, January 31, 2019. The pastor left the church after serving for 12 years.

and connected readily with people in the community. The church also did a great job of outreach/evangelism/assimilation—so much so that the matriarch’s family caused a great deal of division as they sensed a loss of power. Forty-five people departed during the split. This split was a huge blow to a congregation that started with 65 people. The church body eventually grew back to about 55 people but never fully recovered and recently closed its doors. Evangelism and assimilation aided the church in growth but also led to its untimely death as a significant portion of the church did not welcome the new believers.

Case Study #6—A Great Commission Church: High Growth/High Evangelism

This church grew from 126 to 5,500 in 24 years, all with the same senior pastor. The goal was never to build a large church; it simply happened. The church’s AAGR totaled 17%, a tremendously high growth rate for an extended period. The church baptized about 300 people each year, and the pastor stated that 44% of new members were new believers. Their baptism rate is 5.45 people per 100 attendees per year. I do not know how this church disciplines its members, but it appears that a large percentage of the church is actively engaged in ministry. This church is a Great Commission Church.

Case Study #7—A Great Commission Church: High Growth/High Evangelism

Writers often focus on the large, rapidly growing churches. Smaller churches can also be Great Commission Churches. Here is one example. This church, much smaller than those described in Case Study 6 and 8, grew from 50 to 105 over four years yielding an AAGR of 20.4%. During this time, the church recorded 74 conversions and 57 baptisms. These figures yielded a conversion rate and baptism rate of 17.6 and 13.6 respectively. This church, somewhat rare in our findings, obviously did a great job of evangelism/outreach, as well as assimilation and the development of new believers. Undoubtedly this church experienced some transfer growth,

but the addition of 57 new believers to the original 50 added up to 107, indicating that most of the growth came by way of conversion growth. This church also fits the designation of a Great Commission church.

Case Study #8—Three Churches, One Pastor: Two Differing Church Styles

This series of three churches, all led by the same pastor, shows a great deal of development and growth toward maturity of the pastor.

A Transfer Growth Church: High Growth/Low Evangelism. The first church led by this pastor grew from 70 to 815 in seven years. The AAGR for this church stood at a remarkable 42.0%. The church recorded 500 conversions (conversion rate of 8.76) but only 215 baptisms (baptism rate of 3.77). This church obviously was quite *attractional*, but the baptismal rate was less than half the conversion rate. This church falls in the transfer growth category, though it borders on being a Great Commission Church. A baptismal rate that is less than half the conversion rate raises concerns about assimilation and the development of new believers. Not enough data is available to determine the reason for the disparity between the conversion rate and the baptism rate.

A Transfer Growth Church: High Growth/Low Evangelism. The second church in the series grew from 900 to 1200 in average worship attendance in six years (AAGR of 4.9%). The church recorded 30 conversions and 10 baptisms for a 0.42 conversion rate and a 0.14 baptism rate. Possibly, this church grew primarily through transfer growth. Conversions and baptisms received little attention.

Great Commission Church: High Growth/High Evangelism. The third church, a church plant, showed a remarkable difference from the first two ministries. This church grew from 0 to 750 in nine years with 600+ conversions and 341 baptisms. The conversion and baptism rates were 8.89 and 5.50 respectively. This church appeared to have a great handle on both evangelism, assimilation, and member development. The

pastor grew tremendously in his ability to lead a large church to become a Great Commission Church. The pastor's development provides great encouragement for other pastors in the trenches who currently struggle in ministry. Pastors can grow and develop, allowing them to become more adept in their ability to serve the Savior.

Challenges for This Study

The Challenge of Assessing Information. Each church situation is different. The only way to know for sure the state of a church is through a thorough church assessment. Of necessity, I made assumptions, albeit educated ones, as I examined this mass of data. The trends outlined in this article are clear.

The Challenge of Infant Baptism in Assessing Great Commission Growth. Some traditions do not place any emphasis on believer's baptism. Pedobaptism is difficult to use as a measure of conversion/evangelism, so this is not a fair metric for them. In these traditions, confirmations may be a better measure (though in my case, it was not a measure of regeneration). In these churches, conversion rates are probably the best way to measure progress.

Avoiding Offense. The churches and pastors are real. My intention is not to offend should someone recognize their church or ministry. My objective was to take a realistic look at church ministry and report what I saw. I tried to protect the names of churches and pastors. If you do take issue with me, please contact me. My contact information is found at the end of this article.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the current state of animosity and conflict in the United States and beyond, churches must respond with the soul-saving, life-changing gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ offers not only salvation, but peace to troubled hearts (John 14:24, 16:33, 20:19-21, and Acts 10:36).

Somehow, many churches and pastors lost their way in terms of reaching, assimilating, and developing believers into faithful, reproducing disciples. I challenge churches and pastors to do the following:

1. Ask yourself, “Are we a Great Commission Church?” Do a self-analysis of your baptism and conversion rates. This analysis will be a good exercise to see how close you are to being a Great Commission church. If you can, invite a good church consultant to your church to help you clearly see you and your congregation’s state before God.
2. Pastor, how are you doing as a Great Commission pastor? Be honest with yourself. Are there some areas of your ministry that must change to move you and your church to the upper right-hand quadrant of the chart?
3. Examine your church leadership, both formal and informal, and ask, “Is our current leadership helping or hindering our ability to be a Great Commission church?” Be brutally honest with yourselves. Then make the necessary adjustments.
4. If you have not already done so, ask God to help your church become a Great Commission church. Ask Him to open doors so that your conversion rate or baptismal rate would soar far above the 5 percent level.
5. Ask the Lord to do the same for other churches in your community. If every church in America saw five new people come to faith in Christ each year for five years, that increase would translate into about 10,000,000 new believers in the next five years. Some will see more, but can you ask God for at least five per year in your church?
6. Pastor, if you are a “fisher of fish,” you can grow to become a “fisher of men.” Allow the Lord to change you. If you know of weaknesses in your ministry, seek out and empower others from your congregation to complement your ministry.
7. Find a mentor or coach to help you in areas of need.

Our world is terribly broken and in need of the touch of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Please consider His claim on your life and the life of your church. You will never regret it. Neither will those touched through your

church by the power of the Living Christ.

Now all things *are* of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore *you* on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:18-21, NKJV)

My dear friends, let us be about our Master's business of reaching, assimilating and developing those around us. The fields are white, but the laborers are few (Matthew 9:37-38, John 4:35). Will you pray for harvesters? Will you be one to respond to the call of the Master to make disciples?

Bibliography

Bauer, Walter; Ed. and Trans. William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick Danker. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979.

Malphurs, Aubrey and Gordon E. Penfold. *Re:Vision: The Key to Transforming Your Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014.

McIntosh, Gary L., Personal Phone Interview by Gordon Penfold, October 9, 2018.

McIntosh, Gary L., and Glen Martin. *Finding Them, Keeping Them: Effective Strategies for Evangelism and Assimilation in the Local Church*. Nashville: B & H Publishing, 1992.

Olson, David T. *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of over 200,000 Churches*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.

Penfold, Gordon E. "Defining Characteristics of Turnaround Pastors among Evangelical Churches in the Rocky Mountain States." D.Min. diss., La Mirada, CA: Biola University, 2011.

Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995.

About the Author

Gordon Penfold came to Christ in 1969 while attending Colorado State University. He planned to become a consulting engineer. God had other plans. He began pastoral ministry in 1980, pastoring four churches and four intentional interim ministries. He serves as director of *Fresh Start Ministries*, a ministry to plateaued, declining, and conflicted churches. He is a co-founder of Turnaround Pastors, Inc., a ministry designed to strengthen pastors and churches. He engages in church consulting and leadership development in the U.S., Eastern Europe, Asia, and East Africa. Gordon graduated from Colorado State University (B.S. and M.S. in Civil Engineering), from Dallas Seminary (Th.M), and from Biola (D.Min). He is the co-author of *Re:Vision: The Key to Transforming Your Church* and *Pastor Unique: Becoming a Turnaround Leader*. He is completing a new book, *Restart: New Hope for the Dying Neighborhood Church*. Gordon is currently the President of the Great Commission Research Network. He and his wife, Beth, have three children and four grandchildren. He may be reached at gordonpnfld@gmail.com.