

Preachers' Pen Points



Coping With Demographic Change

In my last article I mentioned a number of things that cause churches to go into decline. One of them, over which the church has little ultimate control, is the problem of demographic change. Let's face it. We live in mobile society, and large segments of our population move regularly in search of better jobs and/or better neighborhoods in which to raise their families. Churches may either benefit or suffer from this demographic change.

If the meeting place of a church is located near where people are moving, then it may experience rapid "swelling" in membership due to the fact that it is in proximity to the area of population growth. When this occurs there is great excitement as there is the illusion of "success" in ministry. On the other hand, a church may lose members for the same reasons. And in addition, a church that was once "the place to be" may suddenly be "out of the loop" for the newcomers who move into the more suburban areas of a city where new homes are being built and where new church buildings are being constructed. This creates a double challenge since the conditions that cause members to relocate rarely work for the church in bringing in new people. Consequently the loss of members and the inability to gain new members can cause frustration and depression equal to the exhilaration of the time when the numbers were up.

Responding correctly to demographic shift

First it is important to be honest when the church's numbers are going up. It is easy to say, "Look at how we're growing", when in reality we are only swelling. In fact, therein lurks a serious danger that many churches never see coming. That danger is that they can be lulled into a non-evangelistic mindset.

The members may cultivate patterns of interaction with one another, enjoying the crowds and becoming unaccustomed to inviting non-members and to responding effectively to new comers. When this happens the church is setting itself up for disaster down the road, because those crowds can go out the door for the same reasons that they came in! And when it happens it can be as emotionally depressing as it was exciting when they first came in!

What should we do?

- It is important for everyone to see clearly the cultural shifts that are going on. It is not always apparent, and often members may agonize over the declining numbers thinking that losses are due in some way to some defect in the congregation.
- We must always distinguish between "swelling" and evangelism. The only real growth that counts is that which comes through teaching the gospel to others. The NT church did not reach its large numbers merely by demographic shifting; instead it won them one at a time through working hard at teaching their neighbors and friends (Ac. 8:4). And so churches must do today.
- We must prepare ourselves to engage a different community. When demographic shift takes place, the new neighborhood is often very different from the one that previously occupied it. The church must decide whether it will cross cultural boundaries and reach different people who live around us.
- We must consider the possibility of relocation if the church cannot effectively persuade friends and neighbors to drive to our place of worship.

—Johnny Felker