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THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

Traits of growing churches

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Why is your church growing?

After a yearlong review of growth among Churches of Christ in the U.S., *The Christian Chronicle* put the question to leaders of congregations that have experienced membership gains in recent years. There's no single reason for growth, the ministers told the *Chronicle*. But growing churches have some common traits:

- **Adaptability:** The demographics of America's cities are changing, and most congregations face a choice — stay and make your church look like the community you serve or move to a community that looks like your current membership.

Either approach can yield growth, ministers said. The Saturn Road church in Garland, Texas, has taken steps to make its congregation resemble its increasingly diverse neighborhood, senior minister John Scott said.

The Heritage church in Keller, Texas, has grown in attendance from 400 to nearly 900 in the six years since it moved from midtown Fort Worth, minister Jim Hackney said. The church moved after a study revealed that only 9 percent of its community resembled the demographics of its members, Hackney said.

- **Moderation:** Most church leaders interviewed by the *Chronicle* described their growing congregations as “middle of the road” theologically.

“We have successfully avoided a lot of extremes over the years and continue to do so because of the loving spirit of our people,” said Steve Reeves, minister for the Goodman Oaks church in Southaven, Miss.

- **Evangelism:** Growing churches have leaders who stress evangelism, and members who participate. The Roebuck Parkway church in Birmingham, Ala., has averaged one baptism per week for more than 40 years, pulpit minister Jerry Jenkins said. A group of church members meets every Monday night to train in evangelism, and the church sponsors regular campaigns. Locally, the church tries to knock on 10,000 doors each year.

“The gospel will work if we'll just teach it,” Jenkins said.

Following are eight examples of growing churches. Included are congregations in states with the largest membership increases among Churches of Christ from 1980 to 2006 — Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Mississippi, Texas and South Carolina.

EAST BALTIMORE CHURCH OF CHRIST

BALTIMORE — In 1995, Keven Bethea and a group of 35 church members planted the East Baltimore congregation. In the dozen years that followed, the church grew to more than 375. In addition, the urban congregation has planted two other churches in the Baltimore area — with a third planned for October, Bethea said.

The church preaches “everybody bring somebody” evangelism, Bethea said. The congregation has a special class for new converts and focuses the first six months after baptism on relationship building. Bethea estimated that about 75 percent of new converts stay in the church. “Saving Souls and Keeping Souls Saved” is the congregation's motto.

The church developed an urban evangelism plan that has resulted in more than 100 baptisms, Bethea said. The plan “has the potential to be the right answer to the question, ‘Are we growing?’” he said.

BUFORD CHURCH OF CHRIST

BUFORD, Ga. — Five years ago, this church, about 30 miles northeast of Atlanta, had an attendance of about 300. In recent months, that number has reached 540, minister Scott Harp said.

“We are in our third auditorium in 10 or 11 years and have maxed out on room on the present campus,” the minister said. “Good problems to have!”

Atlanta’s booming growth has helped. The church’s facility is about six miles from the Mall of Georgia, the largest shopping center in the Southeast.

Development has brought jobs and people to the area, but little of the church’s recent growth comes from transfers, Harp said. The church’s outreach, including an effective follow-up ministry and a Monday Night for the Master program, has resulted in 10 to 15 baptisms per year.

“People who visit are made to feel very welcome when they come,” Harp said. “Add to this solid, Bible-based preaching and the reputation of a vibrant, goals-oriented eldership and you have what we believe to be a good handle on the reasons for our growth.”

UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF CHRIST

TAMPA, Fla. — While many churches are adding programs and sponsoring activities to encourage growth, the University church is taking a “back to the basics” approach that is proving to be successful, said Steve Patton, one of the church’s evangelists.

The non-institutional church, which opposes church support for institutions and the sponsoring church concept for missions and benevolence, has nearly doubled in size from 155 members in 2003 to 300 in 2006. The church averages 30 baptisms per year.

The people who are coming to the church have “a deep spiritual need that is only met by them making a commitment to changing their lives,” Patton said. “That’s our emphasis.”

The church’s worship format and strong relationships among members attract non-Christians to the church, he said. “Our work centers around worship, Bible study and our personal commitment to one another and to the lost,” Patton said. “Our worship is not designed for entertainment.”

GOODMAN OAKS CHURCH OF CHRIST

SOUTHAVEN, Miss. — In the early 1980s, members of the nearly 40-year-old Whitehaven church in Memphis, Tenn., were moving away from the neighborhoods near the church’s facility. The church relocated to nearby DeSoto County in Mississippi 20 years ago.

The new church, Goodman Oaks, started with about 250 members and has since grown to more than 1,100, minister Steve Reeves said. With an average attendance of 800, Goodman Oaks is the largest Church of Christ in Mississippi.

The church has benefited from high visibility in its booming suburb. Located on the second-busiest thoroughfare in the Memphis metro area, about 55,000 vehicles pass the church’s building — and its newly installed electronic marquee — each day, Reeves said. Scout troops, recovery groups and blood banks use the building. The community uses the church’s 10-acre park for Little League ball games and picnics.

While visibility helps, “the church will not grow if it is not doing things in a healthy way,” Reeves said. The minister credited the church’s ministries for children, teens, college students, young adults and seniors with helping to create a balanced congregation in terms of age.

The church also emphasizes community service. When a flash flood devastated a nearby neighborhood in 2005,

Goodman Oaks members led an effort to rebuild 40 homes. The same year, the church provided housing for 165 refugees from Hurricane Katrina, earning a visit from First Lady Laura Bush.

"Programs have their place, but they cannot replace the genuine, loving acts of service by individual Christians," Reeves said. "We strive to emphasize the little things that make a big difference in people's lives."

GREAT FALLS CHURCH OF CHRIST

GREAT FALLS, Mont. — In 2000, leaders of this small church, just east of the Rocky Mountains, prayerfully examined their congregation and found six weaknesses, minister Scott Laird said. The church lacked a clear mission statement, a guest follow-up program, printed evangelistic material, appropriate staff size and adequate facilities, the minister said.

In 2001, the church launched initiatives to address each weakness. The church increased its staff by starting an internship program. Its first intern, Chris Crooks, became a full-time evangelist for the church. The congregation also started a Monday Night for the Master program and delivered homemade pies to the homes of first-time guests. The church, which had about 195 in attendance in 2000, now averages 266.

"Our growth has been through reaching the lost," Laird said. "Members are sharing their faith with neighbors and friends."

About 20 percent of the church works at nearby Malmstrom Air Force Base or serves in the Army National Guard.

"We traditionally send more members out as servants of Christ than we have move in," Laird said. "Our members have moved to numerous locations across the United States and have served the Lord in Italy, Iraq, Afghanistan, Germany, Japan, England, Korea and Turkey during the past 10 years."

NORTH RALEIGH CHURCH OF CHRIST

RALEIGH, N.C. — This church in the prosperous Research Triangle had about 175 members in 2003. Today, it averages about 280.

"The heart and soul of things here is that we've tried to accommodate families," minister Ken Chaffin said. "To that end, we hired a youth minister, we hired a part-time children's minister, and most of our programs are focused to families in one way or another."

The church started a preschool three years ago with 25 students. Enrollment since has reached 140, Chaffin said.

The church also has hired a children's minister.

Church leaders encourage members to cultivate meaningful relationships through a small-group ministry, Chaffin said

"We have tried to be relationship oriented," the minister said. "Our small groups are at the core of those relationships, and we spend a great deal of effort trying to promote it and make it the cornerstone of how those relationships are based."

CHURCH OF CHRIST AT GOLD HILL ROAD

FORT MILL, S.C. — The Gold Hill Road church held its first service on June 2, 1996, with 56 people in attendance. The service followed two years of planning by the Charlotte Avenue church, about nine miles away in Rock Hill, S.C.

Now, the planted congregation has an average attendance of about 340. Gold Hill Road elder Brett Pharr credits commitment to "a steady emphasis on original Christianity" for growth since the church was planted.

"The doctrine and conscience matters that we pay attention to are no different than the church 50 years ago and, more importantly, they are no different than the first century," Pharr said.

The church's leaders also try to maintain a small staff to encourage member involvement.

"This has allowed greater service from our members and prevented an inward focus," Pharr said. In addition, church leaders have maintained a focus on evangelism.

"We are very mission-minded," Pharr said. Church leaders "allocate substantial funds and time toward local and foreign missions."

SATURN ROAD CHURCH OF CHRIST

GARLAND, Texas. — For the third consecutive year, the church in this Dallas suburb surpassed 150 baptisms in 2007, senior minister John Scott said. Since 1992, the church's membership has grown from 950 to more than 2,300.

"Our area is a transitional community — an aging Caucasian population with huge influx of Hispanics and African-Americans," Scott said. "The challenge is ... building a new multiethnic congregation where a once all-white congregation stood."

The church has taken steps to make its ministerial staff look like its community. Mike Crosby, who is black, recently became the church's evangelism minister. Crosby, Scott and Joe Hernandez, the church's Hispanic minister, take a team approach toward evangelism, Scott said.

Strong ministries for children and teens have drawn families to Saturn Road, Scott said. The church sponsors a ministry to children in its neighborhood that runs daily for seven weeks each summer and is involved in outreach to a local drug rehabilitation program for women.

"Our leadership has committed itself to be a church of mirrors, reflecting who lives in our area now," Scott said. "We talk about and celebrate outreach."

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