

God Did an Awesome Thing: A Church Growth Strategy That Worked

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I was an enthusiastic young pastor attending my first ministerial meeting. A conference official stood in front of us and said, “Now, we have a program that will finish the work.” I got excited; I wanted the work to be finished so we could go home to heaven. Two years later, he stood before us again, saying, “Now, we have a program that will finish the work.” I got excited again; I wanted Jesus to come. Well, we are still here. Two years later, another leader stood there, saying, “NOW, we have a program that will finish the work!” I paid no attention. I knew that none of these programs were going to do anything. Evangelistic programs and church growth techniques are great. The only problem is that they do not work without God’s power.

We all long to see God work in us and through us in powerful ways. We dream of a vibrant worshiping community of faith, evangelizing the world with love and power, triumphant with the Spirit. What we see instead are congregations in a plateau or decline, made of people who are enthusiastic about worldliness and apathetic about their faith.

James Rutz lists the top ten problems facing the church: apathy, shallowness, worldliness, failure to give, pastoral burnout, teenage dropout, fear of evangelism, flabby self-discipline, maxed-out schedules (with no real results), and a chronic shortage of strong and committed members. This status he calls “The State of the Church Today.”¹

But what was the state of the New Testament church? It was a community of believers empowered by the Holy Spirit and turning the world upside down with its message and life. This method spread like wildfire across cultures, overcoming the obstacles of paganism, persecution, and Pharisaism. It was powerful!

A. W. Tozer once wrote, “If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95% of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church 95% of what they did would stop and everybody would know the difference.”² Today, more than anything, we need the Holy Spirit!

Not by Might

When we rely too much on human effort, we rely too little on divine power. We think that if we had a youth pastor, a better preacher, a better choir, a better school, or a better building, then the church would succeed. All of these things are good, but they’re not the cure for our ill churches. After we have attended every seminar, tried every strategy, checked off every task, we find ourselves in the same spot—only more tired.

The Scriptures give us a holy prescription. “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD Almighty’ ” ([Zech. 4:6, NIV](#)). The word *might* means every conceivable human ingenuity.³ We think that the work of God is going to be finished by what we do, through programs we develop, resources we find, and talents we exhibit. Wrong. These are not the things of eternal significance. What really works is the Spirit of the Lord Almighty. We do not need more formulas, we need more *filling*. We do not need more plans, we need more *power*. We do not need more strategies, we need more *Spirit*.

Ministry Unplugged

At the heart of our problem is disconnection: we are missing the vital connection to the Vine. Without Jesus, there is no life. He tells us, “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” ([John 15:4, 5, NKJV](#)).

Some time ago, a church had 80 members. One day the church members met together with a great vision. They decided to build a church that seated 600 people. Over the next few years, the church grew to about 100 and they started their dream church. But as the building and designing went on, fighting began and attendance dropped to about 40 and stayed there for one year.

That is when I came to be their pastor. I was excited for the challenge because I was working on my doctoral degree in leadership and church growth. I used all the things I had learned, implementing the strategies, plans, and programs I had been taught. After three and a half years of cutting edge work and 60- to 80-hour weeks, something unusual happened. Our attendance went to 30. I had become a church decline expert.

I spent those three and a half years doing ministry unplugged from the Source of life, separated from the Vine. I had forgotten the most important ingredient in healthy church growth: the power of God. God is the One who grows His church; we are to depend on Him.

“The first lesson to be taught the workers in our institutions is the lesson of dependence upon God. Before they can attain success in any line, they must, each for himself, accept the truth contained in the words of Christ: ‘Without Me ye can do nothing.’”⁴

Ellen White calls this the first lesson; I learned it last for I find it naturally easier to implement plans or strategies than to surrender my heart, plans, and ideas to His will.

The Fantastic Future

Jesus said to His followers, “But you shall 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” ([Acts 1:8, NIV](#)). They waited on the Lord, prayed, and received power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. They went out evangelizing the world with the gospel. With one accord they devoted themselves to prayer (v. 14). Prayer can do what no power on earth can.

Communication with God is essential. Self-reliance will fill years with frustrated ministry. Our church needs to get plugged back into a real power Source through prayer. Connecting with God gives the church a fantastic future; all things are possible with God. Prayer is the way forward to revival, power, and growth.

The Means of Renewal

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land’ ” ([2 Chron. 7:14, NIV](#)). This is the essence of renewal; this is the promise of God for us today.

Consider the five essentials for renewal embedded in this text. (1) We belong to God and are His people. (2) We call on His name. (3) We humble ourselves. (4) We pray and seek Him. (5) We repent of our sins. Then God will hear our cries, answer our prayers, and renew us. This is not a program that we buy into, but an organic relationship with God. This is not a strategy, but a commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ellen White says, “A revival of true godliness among us is the greatest and most urgent of all our needs. To seek this should be our first work. . . . But it is our work, by confession, humiliation, repentance, and earnest prayer, to fulfill the conditions upon which God has promised to grant us His blessing. A revival need be expected only in answer to prayer.”⁵ Renewal takes place when people take God seriously and spend considerable time seeking Him. “We may be assured of this: the secret of all failure is our failure in secret prayer.”⁶

From Despair to Hope

After my church declined from 40 to 30, I decided to quit the ministry and go back to engineering. I figured I would make more money, have weekends off, and I won't have to deal with difficult people. I finished typing my letter of resignation and the doorbell rang. While at the door, my wife found the letter. Later she asked me why I wanted to quit pastoral ministry. “It's simple. I have calculated that if the current trend continues, in three and a half years there will be only you and me left in the church. I want an honorable exit.” My wife looked at me and said, “Have you been praying for your church?” I thought that was a bit judgmental and harsh. I started to defend myself, but pretty soon I had lost the argument because deep inside I had to admit that I was more into strategic planning and programming than into prayer and spirituality.

With her encouragement, I decided to spend one day a week in prayer and fasting. I was supposed to eat my last meal on Sunday night and go to the church to spend all Monday in prayer. The first Monday morning I went into the church and knelt down in front of one of the pews to pray for the family that sits there. After two minutes of prayer, I fell asleep, and I slept for eight hours. Ordinarily, I never sleep during the day, but my attempt at prayer seemed to change all that.

My biggest challenge of the day was what to tell my wife when I got home. She asked how it went, and I mumbled something like “great,” and in my heart I added, for the two minutes that it lasted. But with her encouragement, I kept at it. The next week I spent three minutes in prayer, and the next week four and back to two. Then I made the

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greatest spiritual discovery of my life: the greatest challenge to my spirituality is myself, not the Internet, radio, television, or sports. Me. I am not wired to do this. Give me a program, strategy, or something to do, and I will do it. Spirituality is about a submissive life and a connectedness with God, which is contrary to my nature

My wife continued with her encouragement, and I continued in my commitment. I said, “I will do it and keep doing it, even if it kills me.” Luckily, it did not kill me. Over time, things started to change in my life. For eight months I continued this praying effort and the first weeks of determination and struggle later turned into joy and peace. In my newfound enthusiasm, I started to look for new ways to incorporate prayer in my life and practiced one hour of prayer walking every day. I began to be filled with hope and optimism. There was more effectiveness in my preaching and ministry. My ministry was no longer my own, it was God’s. The discipline of prayer was changing me.

Then one Sabbath I was preaching and from the pulpit I saw the same faithful 30—plus four more: a husband, wife, and two little daughters. I said to myself, *They must be from out of town, we never have visitors.* I did not consider that they might be seekers—at that time our church was so depressing, I would not have attended, except that I was the pastor.

I greeted them at the door and asked if they were visiting. They said they lived across the street. I asked how they happened to come to this church. The husband said, “I was fishing in Alaska, my boss there was an ex-Adventist. Every evening he’d gather the crew and talk about his philosophy of life. One day he told us, ‘If you ever go to church, try the Seventh-day Adventist church.’ When I got home, my wife said, I feel like, as a family, we should take God more seriously.” They saw the Adventist church across the street and decided to give it a try.

They were hungry for God. I studied the Bible with them twice a week and they were baptized two months later. When I baptized them, I dedicated the sermon to them, and as I shared their story, I shared my story too. I told my congregation about my struggle with prayer, and how I used to come into the church and pray for them. I told them how I had prayed that God would send me someone to baptize. And then I said, “The God of the whole universe was listening to the prayers of a discouraged pastor in the middle of nowhere, and He gave me this couple.”

As soon as I said this, a 69-year-old man stood up, and he came to the front crying. In front of everyone, he said, “I have four grown children and all of them are far from the Lord. If God answered the prayers of Pastor Joe and brought him this family, He will answer my prayer and give me my children and their families. I’m going to pray day and night for them. Will you pray for them and for me? Hold me accountable and remind me that God answers prayer?” As he finished his testimony, a woman from the other side of the church came forward sharing a similar testimony.

That Sabbath morning, more than ten people gave testimonies. This started a movement of prayer. People started to pray before, during, and after church, during the week, and on the weekends. They prayed individually and in groups, they prayed earnestly and with passion. Eight years later, that church had grown from 30 defeated people to about 500 fully devoted followers of Jesus. They grew from 30 people without

purpose to 500 people who turned their city upside down. God did an awesome thing. All the church growth strategies that I implemented did not work, but prayer transformed our lives and church.

We are busy people. Deadlines loom ahead of us, appointments press in around us, tasks demand our attention every hour. In all this busyness, we tend to ignore the one true priority. Let us reject busyness and answer the whispered invitation of God to commune with Him. When we tried every other technique, we failed. But when we tried God, we succeeded. God is faithful to His promises. He will do great things for us if we surrender ourselves to Him. God wants to repeat this success story over and over and over—starting with you.