

Stretch Your Faith

Let's dream big. If we stretch our faith and stay close to the Father's heart, His unlimited love for sinners will overflow in every direction.

Some people probably will react negatively to this month's cover story about 30,000-member Lakewood Church in Houston. Whenever we write about a congregation that has seen impressive growth, critics flood my in-box with smug comments like these: "God doesn't care about numbers." "These big churches are just a show." "They must be watering down the message."

I agree that numbers don't necessarily impress God. The group that worshiped the golden calf in the wilderness would qualify as a megachurch. Crowds aren't a sure sign of God's favor or anointing.

I also agree that just because a church is big doesn't mean the members are sincere disciples. In some megachurches faith can be a mile wide and an inch deep.

But let's put aside those valid concerns for a moment and consider this fact: God expects churches to grow! Jesus said His followers would prove to be His disciples by reproducing themselves (see John 15:1-5). Lack of growth can be a sign that we aren't connected to the flow of His Spirit.

I've known churches that have had the same 50 members for several years, yet they spiritualize their smallness with lame excuses. Around and around the mountain they go, always moving but never going anywhere. This spiritual inertia is so common we think it's normal, but actually it is a religious game that

bears no resemblance to New Testament Christianity.

The church in the book of Acts multiplied regularly. Yet most churches in this country either subtract members or add only a few. We need to trash the mind-sets that limit growth, including these:

Isolationism. The us-four-and-no-more syndrome must go. God did not call us to hide inside the church and sheepishly wait for Christ's return. Biblical faith compels us to boldly engage our culture.

Inward focus. Some anemic churches defend their lack of growth by saying that God has called them to a "special ministry" such as prayer, prophecy or worship. Their baptismal pool is dry and rusty. Meanwhile these folks insist they are called to minister to the Lord, not to people.

Excuse me? If your "special" ministry to the Lord is not resulting in new converts, then you have veered off track.

Elitism. I've heard people in small churches offer arrogant reasons why they lose members. They say it's because God is "purging" the people who don't want to "pay the price"—when legalism or an authoritarian leadership style is the real problem. Get rid of the toxic attitudes and false doctrines that prevent growth.

Tradition. Growth is stifled by the "We've always done it this way" mentality. If we think ministry must occur in a church building, we won't be open when the Holy Spirit tells us to start churches in movie theaters, offices, college dorms or housing projects.

Growth requires a willingness to take risks, try new strategies and reach new audiences. We must stretch. And when we do, we must be prepared for loud reactions from religious people who prefer church to be safe and stagnant.

This is an hour of harvest. Your congregation may not grow to be as large as Lakewood Church. But then, who says it can't?