

God's Truth: Key to Church Growth

by Terri Moore

It is a fact that many churches are experiencing frustration and lack of growth, if not actual decline and death. But the Church of God, Faith of Abraham, has key qualities inherent in its identity that can provide the foundation for a growing and thriving believing community. The discussion in the book User Friendly Churches by George Barna* makes the point that churches experiencing growth, both numerically and spiritually, are those that are unapologetic about the gospel message and accurately teach the truths of Scripture. With its unique Biblical understanding, the Church of God can impact the world with the word of God.

The Greek word for truth, "aletheia," has the meaning of being "true to reality." Scripture "truth" is not only an intellectual concept or just some ideas pulled from various Bible passages. Truth is reality. It is the opposite of illusion. When the church teaches truth, it is putting forth the explanation according to God of the realities of existence and life with Him in the expectation that lives will be changed to align with that reality. It is the church that is grounded and confident and living in the reality described by Scripture that has answers to offer the world, in general, and individuals, in their specific needs. This is where growth happens.

The Church of God has a firm grasp of much of the reality, the truth, of God's perspective on humanity and its timeline which needs to be offered to and applied in individual lives, churches, and communities. We know the Bible speaks to any situation people find themselves in. We know, but are we convinced? Do we hesitate to boldly share this with others or even enact it in our own lives? Or are we certain, confident, positive, and secure in the reality portrayed in Scripture? Only when we are sure it is true and are experiencing the actual work of God personally and in situations around us will we find we have a basis for church growth today. People need answers, not busyness. They need meaning, not going through the motions. People need purpose and true spirituality in place of the hype and despair that comes from treasures of the world.

The following principles of growing churches summarized from Barna's book User Friendly Churches rest on the church's expression of truth. A key underlying focus of growing churches is that they have "spiritual depth, biblical integrity, and solid ministry priorities" (p. 18) and are driven by God's vision. These churches affirm "the gospel of Christ boldly and without apology" (p. 16), teaching the Bible accurately, without compromise. Through prayer these churches learn what God wants them to do while listening to their target audiences with the goal of meeting felt needs. It remains flexible and discontinues ministries that are no longer productive, creatively developing new approaches to meeting needs.

Barna states that flourishing churches are "in touch with the needs of those it wants to serve" (p. 15). This does not mean that the church takes its lead from worldly methods,

but rather it is led by God in its unique direction to impact society on an individual level. Growth is NOT numerical only. Without inner spiritual growth, which vitalizes the church through positive ministry experiences and connection with God, numbers will ultimately decline. Growing churches are marked by vibrant and sincere spiritual lives lived out in the community of believers and beyond the church's walls, attentive to the felt needs of both those within and outside the church.

The growing church is undergirded in every aspect of its work and existence by prayer. Its reliance on God is demonstrated through the primary importance of prayer and acknowledgment of His work and answers to needs and requests. The church knows its purpose is to honor and glorify God and bring individuals into deepening relationships with God through Jesus, but it discovers from God what its unique mission is and how best the make-up of its congregation can accomplish that mission, recognizing its strengths and limitations and focusing on its area of expertise.

The growing church's mission is clear and leadership and members all are able to communicate the direction and purpose of their church. These churches have an attitude of being on a mission. Barna states that they know who they are, where they are headed, how they plan to get there and why it is vital to do so (p. 186-7). They are aware of and have a plan for possible obstacles, acknowledging that success requires a huge investment of human and financial resources.

Success is measured by lives changed through a deepening relationship with God. The church has a complete plan of ministry that is sensitive and customized to the needs of people. It provides opportunities for individual growth, which happens when focusing on others, and the resources to carry out ministry. Quality (measured as integrity, excellence in effort, consistency (church lives out the message it preaches), credibility, and reliability (church "available and prepared to offer realistic and meaningful solutions" to individuals in crisis)) is continually evaluated and improved through feedback, acknowledgment of failures or ineffectiveness, and designing unique solutions and actions (p. 62-63).

Individual members of user-friendly churches have a focused purpose of honoring and glorifying God through their own lives submitted to God. Ministry is defined as meeting needs with the goal of spiritual growth, which is done through meaningful relationships. Individuals see ministry as a privilege and are positive and eager for the chance to serve (not compelled or pressured), expecting God to be working. Their service is seen as truly making an impact. The individuals of the congregation market the church, inviting and following up with people. Faith is a lifestyle in these churches and there is a sense of missing out on a spiritual blessing if not at a church activity.

Barna identifies five factors that lead to the faith lifestyle: teaching that every believer is to minister; equipping by providing resources, training, and mentoring; acknowledgment and recognition of individuals in their ministries; sharing stories of ministry experiences; and the relevance of Christian faith for people (p. 70-72). The lifestyle of faith becomes possible when people "have their felt needs ministered to through the efforts of the church" and have "their expectation of high quality in ministry satisfied" (p. 106).

Strong leadership keeps the user-friendly church focused on its mission, addresses situations promptly, recognizes when something isn't working, and above all, models the prayer necessary for guidance and petitioning on behalf of ministry needs.

Church of God, Faith of Abraham congregations can use the ideas described in User Friendly Churches as a starting place for evaluation of its church's condition and practices for accomplishing spiritual and numerical growth. Some key points to consider are:

- Growing churches do not limit God
- Growth happens with accurate and unapologetic Scriptural teaching
- Numerical growth happens when spiritual growth happens
- User-friendly churches focus on their areas of expertise, minister from their strengths
- Churches die from the inside out - an inward focus leads to death, outward concern brings growth
- Imitating other churches usually is not successful
- Ministry is customized to target audience, has well-defined goals and plans
- Church is a resource and supports ministries of the people
- Youth ministry is significant

Entrusted with the precious truth of the future kingdom of the Messiah amidst fields "ripe for harvest" (John 4:35), the Church of God can act with confidence that it has a unique relationship with God and His son, Jesus, with the power of God for answers to issues people face today. It is not a time for reticence and hesitation with the truth, for the sake of those who already believe in the one true God, for the sake of our children, for the sake of all those who will believe and find salvation. As the church lives out the truth of Scripture, God's reality, as more than an intellectual idea, relying on the power of God while following the Lord's teaching and model, boldly taking risks to hold out the truth for meaning, healing, and real-life answers, vibrant and confident faith life will grow, attracting and convincing those who are to become part of our church family.

*User Friendly Churches is a summary of concepts discovered by George Barna's evaluation of trinitarian churches showing numerical growth. In spite of these churches' false teachings, or maybe because of the success of groups that are not even teaching Biblical truth/reality, the principles presented in this book can provide starting points for the Church of God to examine its own approach to church life, ministry and service, and spiritual and numerical growth. This paper briefly outlines some of Barna's findings.