

Rooted and Grounded: A Word for New Pastors

by Charles Turner

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My younger brother planted a tree in our front yard when he was in grade school. My older brother and I were upset with the arrival of this shrub that resembled a large weed because now we had an extra obstacle in the way whenever we played football. Years later, that once small, obscure “weed” is now a towering tree that could stand in a national forest. The tree grew and we do not know how, yet we all marvel at how a potted plant placed in the ground by a grade school student is now strong and active removing carbon dioxide from the air.

Like that tree, I believe that church growth is supernatural. However, there are things pastors can do in the churches where we are planted to encourage spiritual and numerical growth. If my brother had dug a hole too deep or too narrow, the roots of the tree would have been negatively affected, but since the tree was planted correctly, it was in a good position to grow. It was properly rooted and grounded.

Recently I looked at Outreach Magazine’s 2011 list of the “100 Largest and Fastest-Growing Churches in America” and was inspired. In a time when the church in America is declining, it is good to see beacons of hope all over the country displaying that God is still active. I have heard mega church pastors often remark that they cannot even explain how the churches they lead grew so large. Though I am not the pastor of a mega church, I have seen the church I serve triple in numerical growth of active members and more than double in tithes and offerings. Based on personal testimonies and observation of members during my tenure (to the extent that it is humanly possible) I have also seen tremendous spiritual growth occur throughout the congregation.

This is phenomenal to me in that I pastor in the New England area often referred to as “the preacher’s graveyard” and is consistently, along with the Pacific Northwest, considered the most church-resistant or “unchurched” area in America. In spite of this, in reflecting on what God has done in my personal experience and in looking at other churches, I firmly believe at least four things—solid preaching and teaching, people investment, strong worship, and a strategic planning process—among many are at the root of congregational growth, all of which must be saturated in prayer.

First, I would tell new pastors, concentrate on your primary task of preaching and teaching. The old hymn “Lift Him Up” has a line that says “...Oh the world is hungry for the living bread...”¹ Our world is filled with skepticism and many people are unfamiliar with the Church or the Bible. In the midst of this, however, people are discovering that there is more to life than educational attainment, financial success, or suffering. There has to be something else that can be offered to fill the void in the lives of these individuals and it is the good news of Jesus Christ. Time spent preparing and communicating the timeless truths of the Scriptures is time well spent. I noticed growth in the church immediately simply because of the desire of people to hear preaching and teaching they could understand and that was biblical. A preacher once said that, “Birds will always flock where there is bread!” Among the many things that will clamor for your attention, do not neglect the preaching and teaching of the gospel.

A second thing I recommend to new pastors is a genuine and intentional focus on people. What I mean by this is focus on relationships. Without neglecting the primary task of preaching and teaching, you need to spend some time visiting the sick and shut-in. You do need to shake as many hands as possible and attend a few birthday parties, basketball games, etc. A pastor told me when I first started that being there for people in times of crisis will go farther than ten of your best sermons. My father, a pastor of almost 40 years, is known for his focus on people and I have seen his credibility and influence grow over the years as he has invested in people.

Every new pastor needs to spend time developing good relationships with existing leaders. The relationship does not have to be, as is often dreaded, adversarial. This does not mean that you will always agree or become golfing buddies or shopping buddies, but you are called to pastor them too and after all, they helped bring you there, so get to know them.

How can you preach and teach to people you do not know? If you do not spend time with your people to understand their world, you will prepare sermons that have no relevance for your congregation. Relationships with community residents, leaders, and politicians representing your area are also worth developing. A couple of the community-oriented members of the church I serve helped me reach out and make connections and schedule meetings with community and government officials as well as business leaders.

The ministerial voice needs to be at the table with individuals making decisions that affect the people in your congregation. It is good to be proactive in this area instead of waiting for something negative to happen and respond. I have found that many times you can get more accomplished sitting at the table than knocking on the door. Just be sure to keep your hands above the table.

A final note on this point is that in today’s world people do not just want to follow a great preacher, they want to see that you are a great person as well. This also helps set a tone and

culture for the congregation as they follow your lead in being relational. I have seen this pay off tremendously in terms of numerical growth and church spiritual health.

Third, along with your preaching and teaching and relationship building, the worship service should be done well. The “front door” must be attractive if people are going to consider coming in. I prefer a blended style of worship (combining traditional and contemporary music and rituals). Whatever your style of worship, put your best foot forward. One reason I prefer a blended style is my personal opinion that we should try to capture the attention of multiple generations. Also, although I am still quite young, I have noticed that my taste and appreciation for some things has already grown as I have matured. The key here is to be proactive and communicate clearly why you do certain things. In a blended service, depending on the Sunday or a certain period in worship, one of the age groups may not prefer a certain element but at least they can understand why it is there and how it ties in to the overall goals of the church. In our attempts sometimes to go “outside the box” we end up actually placing ourselves in another box. In my opinion, a blended worship service helps prevent or at least mitigate against this. Another reason worship services should be a focus is that if the worship is not inspiring and enriching, potential members may not hang around to hear you preach, or they may just decide not to join and simply go listen to you at an afternoon service somewhere else.

Finally, if your worship service is the front door, then along with making every room in the house attractive you need to close the back door, meaning have a method of retaining members. In my experience on staff at two churches and now serving as a pastor the last five years, I have worked closely with membership retention and have discovered that a more comprehensive approach is needed but not typically implemented. Many times in churches the focus is on developing wonderful assimilation models to keep people connected so that they do not fall through the cracks. While this is needed, I firmly believe that more attention needs to be placed on strategic planning. In time, preaching and teaching, loving people, and power-packed worship without strategic planning will lead from growth to plateauing and then declining as all churches and organizations in general experience. A strategic plan or process embedded in the church always anticipates the plateau and listens to God for the next wave of growth. What is strategic planning? Gil Rendle and Alice Mann define strategic planning as, “a structured conversation about what a group of people believe God calls them to be or to do.”²

I remember when *vision* was the going buzzword. It usually meant that churches would get a rhyming catch phrase or some supposedly profound or catchy statement, list a few goals for the year, put their catch phrase on a t-shirt with a scriptural memory verse, and these things constituted their vision. These kinds of things have their benefit, but much more thorough and structural/organizational thinking and leadership is needed. I advise hiring a consultant to help guide at least the initial process and then hopefully this kind of thinking can become part of the culture of the church and part of your process for pastoring. This process will help the church

arrive at its core values, mission, and vision. Beyond those initial basics, the process will lead to your congregation being clear and specific on what God is calling your particular church to be and do in your location and intentionally pursuing action steps to fulfill appropriate goals.

Once the process starts, it never stops, but is constantly monitored and evaluated in order to respond proactively to the world that is always changing. I led my church through a strategic planning process with an outside consultant. Going through the process allowed me to see as a pastor what works and does not work in terms of implementing the plan. While there are things I would do differently if going through the process again, the main thing the process did for me as a new pastor was help me prioritize my time and make decisions based upon whether they would lead to the achievement of the overall vision and not just because something would be a nice or even creative thing to do.

The process is biblical. The book of Acts provides one example. Jesus in Acts 1:8 gives the strategic plan for the Early Church, and we see the plan being implemented as the world is reached by starting first in Jerusalem as the book of Acts unfolds. A strategic plan is a practical tool and is relevant if you want to become or remain an innovative leader. Dr. Aubrey Malphurs reports, "...40 percent of breakout churches have developed a long range plan as compared to only 18 percent of continued plateau churches."³ It is also beneficial to the entire church. Spiritually it will help unite a church around a common purpose and even help move beyond some issues that may have held the church back. There are also many other tangible benefits. As I began this article, I indicated my core belief that all growth is supernatural. But, if what we are doing is led by the Holy Spirit and is biblical, we should see results. With the right steps, growth in the Body of Christ occurs naturally, as did that tree my younger brother planted.

Anything living grows. Howard Thurman used an illustration about a time he observed city workers who dug a hole in the street to work on a water line. They found roots belonging to a tree four hundred yards away that broke through the pipes to get to the water that helped nourish the growth of the tree.⁴ Once a pastor is rooted and grounded in the right things (solid preaching and teaching, people investment, strong worship, and a strategic planning process), the growth takes on a supernatural life of its own that is uncalculated and will do whatever it takes to keep replenishing itself in order to continue to grow.

Notes

1. Oatman, Johnson. "Lift Him Up." Online Location: <http://nethymnal.org/html/l/i/f/lifthimu.htm>
2. Mann, Alice, and Gil Rendle. Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations. Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2003. p. 3.

3. Malphurs, Aubrey. Advanced Strategic Planning: A New Model for Church and Ministry Leaders. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005. p. 24.

4. Thurman, Howard. Disciplines of the Spirit. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1963. p. 13.