



HOW EFFECTIVE IS OUR GREENHOUSE?

Excerpt from the book *God's Greenhouse: How To Grow People God's Way*

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“A Plea For Re-Thinking Church”

A little boy attended church for the first time. The ushers passed the offering plates down each row. When the ushers reached his row, the little boy said loudly, “Don’t pay for me, daddy. I’m under five.”

Every parent can remember those days of discounted tickets for our children! I knew of one parent who was so cheap (he still owned his first dollar) that he got a discounted ticket for his seven-year-old child by *carrying him* through the line for the five-year-old children! He saved an enormous three dollars by lying about his son’s age!

In time, though, even seven-year-old children look their age! The discounts ebb until they disappear altogether. The children’s menu at the restaurant is replaced with an adult menu, and, in some cases, we then stop going out to eat! The cost is suddenly more than we can afford.

The American process is based upon a premise that we eat more as we grow older. Therefore, the size of the meals and the cost of the meals are adjusted upward regardless of whether the person actually eats more. You may be an adult and eat like a bird, but you will pay the same price as the adult who eats like a horse!

We have a tendency to grade spiritual maturity in the very same way – by age! If one has silver hair (or no hair) *and* has spent many years in church, we make the assumption that he has now arrived at a state of spiritual maturity.

It is my experience, though, that many of our middle-aged and older adults have never grown past the baby stage described by Paul in I Corinthians chapter three. I sometimes find myself asking, who is to blame for their lack of growth? Sometimes it is the fault of the Christian. He never applied himself to be a fully

committed disciple of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, many adults were never given the tools to develop to a higher level. In such cases, their churches had a very low definition of maturity.

Let me give two examples from the same church. I knew a deacon who had been a deacon for more than twenty years. He was a good man. He would be a good companion to have in a foxhole when the enemy is charging! This deacon told me very honestly, "I thought I was a good deacon until you came here as our pastor. Now I know how little I knew and how little I did." That statement was an adequate assessment of not only him but of his entire church. The church was showing the effects of an inferior process for maturing Christians.

Our church secretary had been the secretary for nearly thirty years. She told me very honestly, "We thought we had high standards until you came. Now we realize we had very low standards." Incidentally, twelve years after I moved on, that church had transitioned from a soulwinning church of one hundred and twenty attendees to zero attendees. The doors were now closed. What a tragedy!

Those same comments can be repeated in many ministries. How do things like this happen in God's churches? We pride ourselves on being a people who believe in the Bible, but the actual maturity level of most churches is pitiful, sad, and failing. Instead of the church beating down the gates of hell, we are in retreat and even decline in far too many places.

The reason this condition exists is because we have an inadequate view of spiritual maturity. We have a bad tendency to think in terms of age, effort, participation, and attendance. In reality none of those items create maturity. *They may be signs of maturity, but, in themselves, they do not create maturity.*

The story is told of a man who asked for a pay raise based upon his forty years of experience. The boss said, "No. You have done nothing more than experience one job for forty years. You are not experienced in anything else."

That illustration pictures many of our church members. We have not developed outside our weeny, teeny little world.

May I suggest that we redefine maturity in terms of completeness or well-roundedness? This helps us establish a very clear target. In these cases, clearer is always better! The five commonly accepted objectives of ministry, discipleship, worship, fellowship, and evangelism are manageable, definable, and measurable. Items such as prayer, tithing, and music would be better treated as subcategories in one of these five broader categories.

My personal philosophy toward ministry grew by leaps and bounds when I discovered the truth of Ephesians 4:11-13. I had read the text many times, but finally it sank in! The entire context reads as follows, "Christ personally gave to the church some people gifted as apostles, some people gifted as prophets, some people gifted as evangelists, some people gifted as pastors who also serve as

teachers, *for the purpose of training or equipping the saints to do the work of the ministry*, in order that the body of Christ might be built to a higher level, until all of us reach the level of unity in the faith and a complete knowledge of God's Son, growing into a spiritually mature man that measures up to the full measure of Christ's fullness."

That is a mouthful. I don't have time to explain every thought, but I want to give you something that is very, very special to me. It is so special that it may revolutionize the way you see this thing we call "doing church."

I underlined the word "training" because that one word changed my view of church. The word translated "training" is derived from the Greek word "katartismos." It appears in the same sense in II Corinthians 13:11, Galatians 6:1 (translated restore), I Thessalonians 3:10, Hebrews 13:21, and I Peter 5:10. The complete word in this verse actually has the idea of "equipping or preparing for service." God gives us these gifted men who specialize in training us to do "the work of the ministry."

You can think of these people as the instructors in God's Greenhouse. They are the people who make the classroom experience a profitable experience. That is, if you listen to them and do what they say! (We developed the importance of the classroom experience in Chapter Fourteen's "The Teeter-Totter Of Success.")

Do you remember how God's Greenhouse began? It began in I Corinthians chapter three. "Paul sowed, Apollos watered, and God gave the increase." Paul was good at sowing, Apollos was good at watering, and God did what only God can do and gave the increase. It worked marvelously!

Effective sowing and effective watering in God's Greenhouse does not happen by accident! Paul was really good at what he did. Apollos was really good at what he did. Both of them had been trained or equipped to do the work of the ministry! In turn, they trained or equipped others to do the same work of the ministry! In turn, those trainees trained others to do the same work of the ministry! This has continued down to the present day with the result that we are now the ones who are equipped to do the work of the ministry.

How can this training be done more effectively?

First, it means we need a better process to develop our people! The word process is in contrast to an event, especially an event that occurs only once. The word process denotes it is a continuing, repeatable system of development. Jack Hyles pastored the very large First Baptist Church of Hammond for many years. He was noted for often saying, "A great church is a good church which has seen it all, done it all, and yet *keeps on doing it!*"

Such a church continues its process week after week, month after month, and year after year. It knows what it is trying to do, keeps updating its tools

(programs, procedures, staff), and keeps its eye focused on the process. ***This process trains the people then turns the trained people into trainers of more people*** (II Timothy 2:2). There will be times when God moves your better trained people to other churches for ministry. Praise the Lord! That is one way to determine if you have a God-honoring process. Such an “advancement” will create openings for those who are going through your current training process!

In addition, we need a way of measuring where we currently are and what is currently possible. The business world refers to it as a “best practice study.” It must be acknowledged that few church leaders truly know how to measure church performance. Accordingly, the pastor often gets much of the blame for poor church performance. This creates a vicious cycle of defeat for both the pastor and the church. However, it is my hopefully unbiased conviction that most pastors are not the problem! God did not send the pastor to be the problem but to be *part* of the solution. The church leadership needs to recognize that it can never identify the problem or solve the problem unless it has a way of *measuring the current performance of the church*.

Let’s look closely at two charts. These charts are derived from a survey done by Ellison Research of Phoenix, Arizona which appeared in the November, 2005 issue of *Facts and Trends* (a Southern Baptist publication). Though old, this remains one of the most enlightening surveys I have even seen for two important reasons. First, it illustrates graphically what churches can do; second, it provides a means of *measuring my own church* versus other churches. Through this survey I can identify and target the bull’s eye rather than continue shooting in the dark!

WHAT IS OFFERED PER YEAR BY SIZE?

Tool	Small %	Medium %	Large %
New membership training	50	64	87
Basics of Christianity	39	52	65
How to study the Bible	38	41	60
Evangelism/outreach training	29	43	62
Spiritual growth/renewal	33	34	53
Effective prayer	31	30	52
Spiritual gifts inventory	23	31	55
Marriage enrichment	16	33	56
Leadership development	21	25	45
Basics of church’s denominational perspectives	21	25	33

Parenting/child development	9	15	55
Financial management	10	13	40
Skills and talents profile	9	17	34
Grief recovery	5	7	25
Recovery from substance abuse	6	6	15
Health/weight loss/exercise	4	5	19
Ministry in the workplace	5	4	7
Divorce recovery	3	2	16
Life skills	2	5	9
Totals	354%	452%	788%

WHAT IS OFFERED BY DENOMINATION AND PERSPECTIVE?

Tool	S. Baptist	Methodist	Lutheran	Pentecostal	Presbyterian	All others	Mainline	Evangelical
New membership	52%	58%	84%	62%	76%	66%	67%	61%
Basics of Christianity	36	39	58	55	41	53	48	49
How to study the Bible	32	45	55	37	50	53	56	38
Evangelism/outreach training	54	24	31	38	19	32	22	49
Spiritual growth/renewal	34	36	38	31	47	39	40	34
Effective prayer	34	26	15	46	23	38	27	36
Spiritual gifts inventory	37	30	22	37	23	36	28	32
Marriage enrichment	36	20	16	37	12	28	17	34
Leadership development	22	22	20	38	29	31	22	27
Basics of church's denominational perspectives	17	36	43	26	45	22	38	23
Parenting/child development	25	12	10	16	25	20	14	21
Financial management	24	11	7	29	4	17	6	21
Skills and talents profile	18	14	22	16	16	21	18	16
Grief recovery	11	16	16	2	7	11	14	7
Recovery from substance abuse	8	10	10	8	7	7	6	8
Health/weight loss/exercise	12	9	12	4	12	8	7	8
Ministry in the workplace	6	2	2	6	2	7	3	6
Divorce recovery	8	8	4	5	2	5	3	6
Life skills	2	4	3	5	4	5	4	3
Totals	468%	422%	468%	498%	444%	499%	440%	479%

Several denominational facts are worth noting. Lutherans have the highest percentage of new membership classes at 84%, compared to Southern Baptists who have the lowest percentage at 52%.

Southern Baptists also have the lowest percentage of classes teaching basics of denominational beliefs with only 17%. This occurs in spite of Southern Baptists priding themselves as a “people of the Book.” (I have the freedom to say this since I am a Southern Baptist.)

Only 49% of evangelical churches have classes oriented to evangelism/outreach training. Evidently 51% of evangelical churches have missed

the purpose of the Great Commission. Pardon me for asking, but is it possible they are not really evangelical? Interestingly, not one of my pastorates provided evangelism/outreach training in the two years prior to my arrival. Not a single one! Yet isn't this supposed to be one of the highest priorities of God's church? How can this be? What is your own past and present experience? Is your current church accomplishing this goal? I am sure you would agree this is a revealing issue.

Genuine purpose driven churches provide the necessary training, because training provides the means to achieving their purpose!

Robert Gross, former president of Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, once shared with his supervisors, "It's one thing to build a product; it's another thing to build a company. Companies are nothing but men, and the things that come out of them are no better than the people themselves. We do not build automobiles, airplanes, refrigerators, radios, or shoestrings. We build men. *The men build the product.*"

The last statement can be paraphrased in the following way in church language: "*The men build the kingdom of God!*" Kingdom building is hard work! It requires skilled craftsmen just like any corporation. That's why we're called co-workers with God!

It is my firm conviction that every church (regardless of size) can establish a better training program. Just a cursory glance at this survey indicates that the majority of these classes are necessary to develop complete or well-rounded Christians.

I am especially proud of the training we provided in a pastorate that averaged one hundred and twenty people in worship. That's not a lot of people, but it proved to be enough! Based on this survey, it is interesting to note that we apparently provided more tools for personal development than even the large churches.

May I share with you how a purpose driven emphasis (worship, ministry, fellowship, evangelism, and discipleship) can work in real life? Our purpose statement read as follows: "Our church's purpose is to help every member become complete in Christ by emphasizing personal development in discipleship, evangelism, ministry, worship, and fellowship."

On the basis of this purpose statement we proceeded to develop opportunities to grow people! Some folk grew to levels they would never have attained otherwise. Interestingly, many of those opportunities are included in this survey. Let's take a look.

- New membership – we implemented a periodic four-hour seminar CLASS 101 called “Discovering Church Membership.” This seminar was patterned after Rick Warren’s Christian Life And Service Seminars. It introduced new members to our church’s goals and made them aware of our own expectations for them.
- Basics of Christianity – we provided a “BASICS” class during Sunday School for adult beginners in the faith. This class followed a one-year cycle designed to teach the trinity, inspiration, deity of Christ, etc. I taught this class. Six people completed the first year’s cycle and rotated out. It was our practice to allow new students to rotate into the class at any time since the sessions did not build upon prior knowledge.
- How to study the Bible – not provided.
- Evangelism/outreach training – we provided training on Thursday evenings using the Southern Baptist program known as the NET. In addition, we converted our mid-week service to a “Be A Missionary” Wednesday service for all adults. Evangelism training happened every Wednesday night, because this was a very weak spot for the current membership. In addition, we provided a periodic four-hour seminar CLASS 401 “Discovering My Life Mission” developed by Rick Warren.
- Spiritual growth/renewal – we taught a periodic four-hour seminar CLASS 201 called “Discovering Spiritual Maturity” developed by Rick Warren. This included a process for establishing a daily quiet time with the Lord!
- Effective prayer – we intentionally programmed more prayer into our midweek service. Why? There was a significant performance gap between the effective prayer habits of the Social Security generation and the ineffective prayer habits of the younger generation. Also, we provided copies of the book *Praying Effectively For The Lost* by Lee E. Thomas and used it as a study text. Our Wednesday service concluded with small prayer circles. Last, our internet prayer chain included more than sixty email addresses.
- Spiritual gifts inventory – this was done through a periodic four-hour seminar CLASS 301 called “Discovering My Ministry.” It is provided by Rick Warren. *It is the best material I have ever seen* on this subject, but it does require extensive homework.
- Marriage enrichment – not done. However, I routinely provided a four-sermon series each summer titled “How To Deal With Family Problems.”
- Leadership development – CLASS 501 (monthly Saturday morning leadership training) was developed in-house to meet this need. One session created a comprehensive listing of every ministry presently functioning in the church so we could help new people find a way to serve immediately!

We listed a staggering 332 ministries that continually happen in a church averaging one hundred and twenty people.

- Basics of church's denominational perspectives – this objective was met in the Sunday morning BASICS class.
- Parenting/child development – not done although we did provide free educational tutoring for students.
- Financial management – not done. What potential, though, especially with this younger generation!
- Skills and talents profile – this profile was part of CLASS 301. That class helped students evaluate their Spiritual gifts, Hearth, Abilities, Personality, and Experience (otherwise known as SHAPE). It taught, in essence, identify what you are good at and use it for the glory of God!
- Grief recovery – not done.
- Recovery from substance abuse – not done. However, a larger Baptist church just a mile away included grief recovery in its training process.
- Health/weight loss/exercise – not done.
- Ministry in the workplace – this is admittedly a vague category. Our Wednesday night “Be A Missionary” theme equipped soulwinners to share Christ in their place of employment. One Hospice worker used the CLASS 401 training to lead several patients to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ! That ministry was as effective as door-to-door visitation!
- Divorce recovery – not done.
- Life skills – not done.

How well does your church do in providing these important ministries? Let's grade ourselves in the same ministries as the ministries in the above charts. Give yourself a score of 100% in each ministry category your church provides. Give yourself a score of 0% in each category your church does not provide. Add the results. Next, compare your own total with the totals in Chart 1 of the small church, medium church, and large church (the large church category begins in the area of at least five hundred in regular attendance).

As noted above, we provided personal growth opportunities in categories 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 13, and 17. Based on our grading scale, we achieved a 100% rating in ten categories. That's a total of 1,000%. By contrast, the large churches (Chart 1) only attained a 788% rating. This rating system is not intended to be really scientific, but it illustrates that a small church can do much of what needs to be done!

At the same time, it leaves me wondering why the large churches do not provide more opportunities than they do. Perhaps St. John's syndrome has taken

root! St. John's Syndrome states, "Churches become less effective the longer they are in existence." Why? The church's original sense of purpose evaporates through time. In many cases it is simply a matter of the leadership arriving at its own maturity but forgetting its responsibility to help others (usually the next generation) come to maturity.

It is important to realize that the opportunities in these charts are very focused opportunities. They do not minister to every person at every point in his Christian life; however, they do minister to a substantial number of people at various points in their lives.

We do not begin or sustain a ministry just to have a ministry; instead, we allocate resources only after determining that the ministry will grow the people in accordance with our five-fold purpose.

God's church will become a much better church, if this purpose is accomplished in just a *minority* of our attendees. The impact upon the community can be monumental over time.

Once again, our goal is to grow people! This is exciting! Experience teaches that people experiencing personal growth are generally more excited about life, because growth raises our self-esteem. Self-esteem is usually related to one's significance in life. Most people truly want to make a difference in this world!
What makes a bigger difference than a growing Christian?

The church benefits, the individual benefits, the community benefits, and the cause of Christ benefits in ways that we cannot even imagine! Only eternity can reveal the results! God has placed a hidden treasure in each member. Our God-given assignment is to help the members locate and unleash that treasure!

Once again, it's time for reflection. Does your current process bring people to a complete or well-rounded stage of Christian living? Think about your leadership team then about the teachers and other staff members. Are they as spiritual and effective as the prior generation? For example, due to the passing of the Greatest Generation some churches are now struggling with very few prayer warriors. Answer the following questions:

- How successful are your people in personal soulwinning and recruiting adults for church membership (an evangelism or outreach issue)?
- Are your people like Jesus in their lifestyle in such areas as love, forgiveness, temptation, and attitude (a discipleship issue)?
- How faithful are your people in attendance, giving, and prayer (a worship issue)?
- Do your people create a sense of belonging for the new members (a fellowship/assimilation issue)?

- Have your people identified their ministry? Are they active in that ministry (a ministry issue)?

Next conduct a review of your newest adult members. Write down each name then identify the tool(s) which will help that person reach a complete, well-rounded stage of maturity within seven years. Businesses do something similar in their management training programs, so why not do the same with God's church? For instance, is the new member also a new convert? If yes, how will he prosper in a normal Sunday School class where most of the discussion takes place on a giraffe level rather than a sheep level? He will likely be confused! Maybe even discouraged! Perhaps an introductory course will work best for him. In Paul's words, "he needs the milk before the meat." He needs to grow from infancy into a not-so-infant stage then eventually a spiritual adult.

After all, babies begin their development by rolling over, then they crawl, then they pull themselves up, then they walk, then they go to school, then they grow up, and the little child somehow becomes an adult and starts the cycle over with his own family. It has been like that ever since the creation of Adam and Eve.

One dies and is replaced by one being born. Life's race for one is now over; life's race for another is just beginning. The pages of one life have been completed; the pages for the other life are still blank.

I would like to help the one being born to fill in those pages. *I would like to sow my life in his life.* I would like him to know my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the abundant life.

"Behold, a sower went forth to sow."

I am that sower.

So are you.

May God help you to build a greenhouse environment for your people that can truly be called "God's Greenhouse."