

CHURCH GROWTH AND EVANGELISM IN A NEW WORLD: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTIONS IN A CHANGING WORLD

By Bob Young

Culture is changing in front of our eyes. The Bible sits above culture, but culture informs what the Bible application looks like in the present world. The principles of Scripture must be applied within the culture. How is the contemporary culture affecting church growth? How is contemporary culture affecting evangelism? What impact will the developing culture have on church growth and evangelism in the future? This is another way of approaching the age-old question: what works?

Many churches and many Christians are frustrated because the church is not growing. The things that seemed to drive church growth in the past are no longer effective. How people see church and what expect from church is changing because our culture is changing. The mission of the church has not changed, but how the church inserts itself into the world with understandable words and practices is always changing. There are very few places where church today looks like the church I knew in central Kansas in the 1950s.

If I had to choose one thing, I would urge churches and church leaders to increase our emphasis on establishing healthy connections. The church must learn healthy internal connections with meaningful fellowship and the capacity to assimilate new members. The church and its members must learn now to interact with the world. The gospel travels across bridges; it is not fired into the air hoping it will land somewhere. If there are no bridges, there is little hope that the gospel will arrive in new hearts. I believe the future growth of the church where you worship will depend to a large extent on how successfully the church contacts and connects with people.

Consider several dimensions of what this means.

The primary contacts and connections will not occur within our church buildings. We try to get people to attend church, but when a visitor happens to attend most churches are ill-equipped and ill-prepared to be genuinely welcoming, personal, caring, and interested. In most churches, the mission of the church—the reason for its existence—is not obvious Sunday after Sunday. We do not verbalize the mission, we do not preach the mission; we do not focus much on the mission. The result is that lots of visitors come and leave and never quite understand what makes a specific church different.

Jesus connected with people. The connection was personal. People followed him. That is still the goal. The first step to helping people connect with Jesus is to help them develop a connection with someone who is connected to Jesus.

People who have developed a meaningful connection are much more likely to attend. This is an interesting point because it helps me understand evangelism; it is even more interesting to me because it explains why many who claim to be Christians do not attend. Participation in the church, fellowship, worship, service, ministry, discipleship grows out of my connections. The assembly is a terrible evangelistic tool—unless there are non-Christians present as a result of connections that began outside the assembly.

One advantage of growing the church through connections is that the church is no longer competing to provide the best show, the best consumer experience, or the best services and ministries. Trust me on this. Connections are a much better driver of attendance than invitations or guilt.

Inviting or attracting people who have little or no connection can be a distraction. Let me explain. First, when numbers of non-Christian people are invited or attend the church, the members think the job is done and often fail to establish connections—they fail to engage the visitors who have come. Second, inviting lots of non-Christians often puts the church in consumer mode, trying to meet every desire and

need of those who may come. Third, attracting non-spiritual people often leads the church to develop activities that do little to advance the mission of the church. Fourth, both those within and those on the outside of the church tend to evaluate the church by false criteria. Fifth, evangelism gets lost in the shuffle and hyperactivity.

Connection is the key to effective discipleship. Discipleship involves mutuality. Being a disciple of Jesus is not measured by how much one knows, although knowing him, knowing about him, and knowing what he wants are all supremely important. The goal is becoming like him—that involves spiritual relationship, knowledge, and lifestyle that imitates him.

The heart of every effective church is a small group of people who make lots of sacrifices and do a lot of the work. An unwritten rule, often called the 80-20 rule, says that 80% of the work/giving/ministry is done by 20% of the people. When new people become involved, it is almost always the result of the connection they have with someone who is already involved.

Connection helps avoid consumerism. Churches with numerous healthy connections have the luxury of focusing a lot less on the typical consumer concerns. People can be loved in a church without dozens of ministry options. People can find purpose, place, and involvement in a church with a limited number of ministries. The problem is not a lack of opportunities—the problem is a lack of commitment, or the consumer-driven belief that I should only have to be involved in those things that really “ring my bell.” The last time I looked up “yield” in the dictionary it still talked about giving up my own way, right, or desire. Consumerism always defines church in terms of what I want or prefer.

When the church becomes a connected family, things change. Relationships change the way I think about and evaluate the church. Relationships change my expectations. Some studies suggest that the emerging generations are a lot less consumer-driven than previous generations and are much more open to personal involvement and participation. Minimalism is “in”—tiny homes, smaller homes and cars, and less stuff. Healthy connections are the alternative to consumerism that many are seeking.

Connection drives involvement. I mentioned this before. The church that is connected with others will find others wanting to be involved in the activities or ministries of the church even when they are not yet members. Connected people tell others and try to involve others. That is the power of connection—the power of engaging others.

It is not my purpose to criticize the way we “do church.” I am simply suggesting that the church genuinely interested in finding new members must find new ways to connect with the world outside the four walls of the church building. The power of these connections is incredible. Connections will increase attendance, help keep the mission of the church in focus, encourage authentic discipleship, avoid competitive consumerism, and encourage involvement.

Most of the churches I know want these very things. Let us build bridges into our world; let us connect with and engage our world.