

FROM ANECDOTE TO EVIDENCE

BY GRAHAM ARCHER, CPAS DIRECTOR OF MINISTRY

The findings of the Church Growth Research Programme have now appeared, shedding light for the Church of England on what often appears to be the gloomy statistics of church decline. Its aim is to understand what helps churches to grow and what has the opposite effect. The 32 pages are well laid out and peppered with clear examples of good practice and structured analysis. It is very readable and available freely from the www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk here.

The report isn't all about leadership, but a leader who wants to see his or her church or churches grow would find in it a rich variety of helpful insights. In this article, I have pulled out six.

1. REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

'What seems crucial is that congregations are constantly engaged in reflection; churches cannot soar on autopilot. Growth is a product of good leadership (lay and ordained) working with a willing set of churchgoers in a favourable environment.' Professor David Voas in the executive summary.

Not surprisingly, the research tells us that an autopilot is not a good leader. Leaders reflecting with congregations keep testing what good practice looks like. Those who hope that doing the same things the same way is good enough will find that they are left behind in a constantly shifting culture. But following other people's fads is not the same as engaging in a serious reflective process that prayerfully seeks to connect the timeless truths of the gospel with the distinctive nature of the community that we serve. Voas goes on to write 'Vitality comes with reflection

and choice; the particular style is less important than the fact that it has been considered and embraced rather than adopted by default.'

2. DISTINCTIVE LEADERSHIP QUALITIES

The leadership qualities which stood out in the survey as being significant in relation to growth included: motivating, envisioning, and innovating.

The research also highlighted important elements of leadership behaviour including engaging well with newcomers, being intentional about worship style, having a vision that includes intentional growth and training people for ministry. This underlines a value that we have been promoting for many years at CPAS; leadership and ministry are separate but complimentary roles.

Many full-time leaders have received significant ministry training, but very thin leadership training. One of the most challenging aspects of the report is the analysis that some clergy characteristics are negatively associated with growth. Empathising, persisting and managing, are not in themselves negative, but the researchers noted that these qualities 'may not have strengths in being flexible and pushing people in new directions'.

3. HAVING A CLEAR MISSION AND PURPOSE

'Of those who report a clear sense of mission and purpose, 64% have grown compared to 25% that had declined. For those that stated that they did not have a sense of clear mission and purpose, 26% had grown and 52% had declined. For those who were unsure 41%

had grown and 35% had declined.’

The statistics speak for themselves, the point here is that churches need more than just a mission statement, but a strategy for growth that brings the mission statement to life, gives it traction and acts as a rallying cry for the church community. Once the sense of purpose is defined and embraced, it is then possible to give permission to try things out that fit the vision. The report goes on to say ‘researchers describe successful churches with a “let’s give it a go” mentality. These churches try different initiatives as experiments – if they work they invest in them, if they don’t they drop them.’

4. ACTIVELY ENGAGING CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

‘Churches which offer programmes for children and teenagers are more likely to grow. Three quarters of churches that offer retreats, conferences or camps for youth report growth, against half among those who do not.’

As delighted as we are at CPAS to see the recognised value of residential youth work, it is clearly the mind-set of parishes and churches that truly matters. If leaders can articulate the value of investing in children and young people, the diary and balance sheets will begin to reflect that priority. In the Anglican Church nearly half of our churches have fewer than five under 16s as active worshippers, but where there is an active youth ministry, there is likely to be growth. The emphasis in the report is not so much on events and programmes as defining those things that help young people to keep engaged with God and then prioritising them.

5. LAY LEADERSHIP

‘A church where volunteers are involved in leadership, and where roles are rotated regularly, is likely to be growing – especially where younger members and new members are included in lay leadership and service.’

The researchers asked if the same people tend to serve in the same roles year after year and demonstrated that where there is a lot of rotation of roles, 47% of churches reported growth compared to only 8% of those where there was very little rotation. As a recent church leader myself, this is quite challenging. One kind of church leader’s dream is that people would volunteer and stay in a role for years with no trouble; but a culture that is constantly challenging people to take up new roles and has alongside it a programme of training and development is refreshing and invigorating.

6. NURTURING NEW AND EXISTING CHRISTIANS

‘Two thirds of churches which said they offered encouragement and support through specific discipleship courses or courses “preparing members to be a Christian witness in their daily lives” showed growth’.

Good welcoming and follow-up for visitors is a positive start which needs to launch people into a whole community that is

committed to growing as followers of Christ. Making the connection between personal spiritual growth, church community participation and engaging in mission outside the walls of the church is vital. This is more than a dry strategic formula. Holistic mission is dependent on developing ‘a greater desire to love and serve one another’.

The great potential of any good report is not just that it exists and is available to be challenged and tested; the real value is when readers take seriously its findings and allow them to influence their practice.

Happy reading.

