

Smoky Mountain Reflections #166

Is it ever good or healthy for a church to get smaller? Well, if you understand the church to be people and not a building, there are some realities we should consider when answering this question. Much church growth literature will point out that 80% of churches in America have either plateaued or are in decline, but plateauing or declining is not always a terrible thing. In fact, the numerical size of any congregation is at the discretion of the Holy Spirit. We should always strive to reach out to the lost with God's truth, but we do not cause a congregation to grow; we are but workers in the harvest field. We as Americans often think that more and bigger is always better, but I feel that this is a faulty assumption when applied to churches, causing us to be unsatisfied with God's provision and support. So, let's look at some reasons why a good church, that is doing God's will in the community in which He called them to serve, might see a healthy decline in membership or attendance.

First, unconverted people may leave because the gospel is being preached. Of course there are unsaved people within the visible church, but sadly, many of these individuals only want to hear a typical feel-good, better-yourself, itching-ear kind of message (which sadly is all that is preached in many churches). Such people will not like the Biblical message of law & gospel ("You are a sinner, but Jesus Christ died for you"). This type of church member will either repent and grow, leave, or stay and cause problems, especially if they are in a leadership position. Preaching the gospel is the right thing to do and is the only thing that can give life to a church. No pastor or congregation should ever be discouraged if they lose people as a result of declaring the gospel. We should, however, always remember those who leave in our prayers, and continue to try to reach out to them.

Church members also pass away and go to be with Christ. In my 10 years here, 23 of our members have left the church on earth for the church triumphant. In some years a church may have more funerals than baptisms or new member receptions, but this is part of the typical life cycle of any church family regardless of size.

Pastors, teachers and other missionaries are trained, tested, affirmed and sent out to serve the church in other places. If a church experiences decline in numbers because they send workers out to be trained or serve the broader church, that is a good thing.

An intentional process is in place to catechize people before they become members. Sometimes people do not join a church because the church takes a stand on Biblical truth. People declined to join or have left St. Paul because they did not like scriptures' position on women's ordination, close(d) communion, cohabitation, or homosexual marriage. Speaking the truth in love is not always received well, but it is better to be upfront and honest than to pull a bait-and-switch.

Sometimes a church has been in decline for a long time, but the membership roll has not been cleaned for many years. After an honest evaluation of the congregation's roster, if it is discovered that many members have moved, gone to another church, or no longer consider themselves members, then reducing the number on paper may appear drastic, but it is simply acknowledging the reality of the situation.

Finally, if the demographics of a community are on the decline, fewer people in the community will mean fewer people in church. For example, Detroit has shrunk from almost 5 million to less than 380,000, and as a result a great many churches have closed their doors. We should of course always seek to have a church wherever there are people to serve, but if a church is a reflection of the community it serves, then it should not fret, but thank God for the opportunity to serve that community.

In Christ,
Pastor Portier