

Grow!

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A growing tree is a familiar picture of the life of a Christian. A Christian who loves God’s word is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither (Psalm 1:3). The growth of a plant symbolizes the growth of the church on earth. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which grows from a tiny seed into a tree big enough for birds to roost in its branches (Matthew 13:31-32). It is clear from scripture that growth is a concern for every Christian and for the church as a whole. Thus the scriptural principles of growth are a fitting subject for this convention to study before we direct our attention to our synod’s need for spiritual renewal and to our synod’s mission vision for the years which lie ahead of us.

Scripture speaks of many kinds of growth and uses many different illustrations to describe the kinds of growth which the church needs if it is to prosper on earth. In the few minutes we have for this study we can consider only a few of the highlights. Let us briefly consider the kinds of growth for which we as a convention and as a church should work and pray.

A Growing Number of Workers

The Lord provides for the growth of His church by supplying the church with spiritual leaders who will help all of God’s people grow in works of service. It is Christ who gives “some to be evangelists and some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God’s people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up unto him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament grows and builds itself up in love, as each part, does its work” (Ephesians 4:11-16).

In recent years our synod has been receiving about 55-60 new pastors each year. The mission vision statement which is being presented to us at this convention calls for us to train 70 new pastors each year if we are to meet the challenges and the opportunities which lie before us. But the present enrollments of our worker training schools indicate that within two years we will enter a period during which the number of new pastors we are receiving each year will fall into the low 40s and perhaps even into the 30s. Since we will apparently need 35-40 pastors per year just to replace those who leave the ministry through death, retirement and resignations, it is easy to see that we will not be able to respond to the growing need for team pastorates in many of our larger congregations nor to the mission opportunities which we have at home and throughout the world unless there is a significant increase in the number of men preparing for the pastoral ministry. Certainly, there is an urgent need to increase the participation of all of the members of the church in the work of the church, but according to the scriptural model we can expect a strong ministry by the whole church only if there is a sufficient number of pastors and teachers to prepare all of God’s people for works of service.

I believe that the most urgent challenge facing our synod is how shall we adequately respond to the scriptural injunction, “the things you have heard... entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (II Timothy 2:2). We cannot expect growth or spiritual renewal unless we make it an urgent priority to “ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest field” (Matthew 9:38). We cannot expect the Lord’s work to prosper among us unless we do everything in our power to encourage and to train our children and grandchildren and the students entrusted to us to serve the Lord wholeheartedly. The church can grow and prosper only if we raise up another generation which loves God’s word. “Then our sons will be like well

nurtured plants and our daughters like pillars carved to adorn a palace” (Psalm 144:12). Then they will carry on the gospel work we love for another generation.

Growing Pastors

It is urgent that we increase the number of people serving in the full-time ministry. It is also becoming increasingly urgent that we make a concerted effort to help workers remain in that ministry and that we help them remain effective in that ministry. Paul urged his young co-worker Timothy, “Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (I Timothy 4:15,16). The number of resignations from the ministry is disturbing. The number of cases of strife or dissatisfaction between called workers and congregations is alarming. It may well be that the materialism and the stress on the family which characterize our age are taking an increasing toll on our called workers as they struggle with their own problems and with those of their flock. Much of the strength needed to progress and persevere in the ministry must come from the worker’s inner devotional life, but encouragement from members and from colleagues and opportunities for spiritual and professional growth which we provide for our called workers can help them progress and persevere. The growing stress and problems of our times seem to require an increasing emphasis on helping our called workers grow throughout a lifetime of ministry.

Growing Members

Our synod’s statistics for church attendance, use of the Lord’s Supper and the attendance of Bible class, adult confirmations and back-door losses were among the alarming tendencies in our midst which led the delegates to the 1987 Synod convention to adopt a special program to promote spiritual growth in our midst. To cite but one example: it is shocking, even scandalous that in a church which is known as a Bible church only about 10% of our adults regularly attend Bible study with their fellow Christians. It certainly appears that a very large percentage of our membership needs to hear the warnings which the writer to the Hebrews addressed to his flock, “Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food. Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Let us therefore leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity” (Hebrews 5:12-6:1). With about 40% of our members in church each Sunday it is clear we still need the admonition, “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Scripture’s words about personal growth through the means of grace stand against us as a rebuke and as a call to repentance for past and present negligence, but they also stand as an invitation and a promise. “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (I Peter 2:2). In I Peter 1 and 2, Peter first urges that the individuals use the means of grace so that they may live and grow. He goes on to speak of these believers coming together as a house of living stones built on the foundation of Christ. When the individuals grow, the church will grow too.

Like Paul I pray that all of you are “growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience and joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light” (Colossians 1:10-12).

Let us work and pray that the beautiful description of God’s new Israel spoken by Hosea maybe true of us. The Lord says,

I will be like dew to Israel.
 He will blossom like a lily.
 Like a cedar of Lebanon
 He will send down His roots.
 His young shoots will grow.
 His splendor will be like a olive tree.
 His fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon.
 Men will dwell again in His shade.
 He will flourish like a vine,
 And His fame will be like the wine from Lebanon.
 (Hoses 14:5,7)

Growing in Giving

Growth in giving is normally the result of other kinds of spiritual growth which are produced by the means of grace. If Christians are growing in all other areas of spiritual life, we should expect them to grow in giving as well. Paul told the Corinthians, “As you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us – see that you excel in this grace of giving” (II Corinthians 8:7).

Some kinds of growth in the church are not dependent on financial giving, but only on diligent use of the means of grace. But other kinds of growth – adequate staffing of our congregations and institutions, adequate training of our future workers, and an increase of mission outreach require the generous offerings of God’s children. We can increase our response to the great commission only if our members increase the portion of their lives and of their possessions which they devote to the Lord.

Growth in Numbers

The New Testament takes note of the numerical growth of the church. Sometimes this growth was great – on Pentecost about 3000 were added to the church (Acts 2:41). Sometimes this growth was small – in Athens a few men became followers of Paul and believed (Acts 17:34). Paul made definite plans and set goals for his mission expansion. Sometimes, as with his plan for expansion into Spain, he was unable to carry out those plans in the time and manner which he had expected, but his plans were reshaped by the Lord.

We should have plans and hopes for the numerical growth of the church, but we should work and plan with the realization that we cannot predetermine the final outcome of our work. Our assignment may be to found many congregations and witness great growth as Paul did. But our assignment may be to preserve a faithful remnant through dark days and to harden the rest as Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel did. If these are indeed the days when “the love of most will grow cold because of the increase of wickedness,” we may have to measure the results of our work in the faithfulness of a few, rather than in the gathering of many. In either case, it will be the same law and the same gospel which we preach. The results will be in the hands of the Lord.

Working for Growth

We know that in every form of growth in the church we can only plant and water, but God must give the increase (I Corinthians 3:6). Nevertheless, we are repeatedly admonished to do that work of planting and watering. We are urged to pray that the seed which has been planted will grow and flourish.

When we look at the host of problems that confronts the church, including our synod and our congregations, when we see the evils which fill the world around us, we are almost tempted to throw up

our hands in despair. If we list the problems our synod must overcome, we might well ask where to begin. I am sure that many pastors, teachers, and laymen in our synod, looking at the problems that surround us, are tempted to say, "I am only one man. I can't do everything." That's true, but each of us can say, "I am one man, and I can do something. And what I can do, I should do. And what I should do, by the grace of God I will do."

Spiritual growth and church growth must begin with each of us, one by one as individuals. When you go home, look at your own devotional life and your prayer life. Ask yourself, "What can I do to grow in this area of spiritual life?" If you aren't going to Bible class, start. If you are attending, go and invite a fellow member to share the joy of such study with you. Speak words of support and encouragement to the pastor, to teachers, and to workers in the church who seldom hear a word of appreciation. Encourage young men and women in your congregation to consider the preaching or teaching ministry. Support those who are already preparing for that work. There is much to be done. But spiritual growth does not begin by looking through the forest for oak trees. It begins by planting tiny mustard seeds. Each of you can plant those seeds. There is much to be done. Each of you is only one man. You can't do every thing, but together you can plant the seeds which will grow into a forest. You can't do everything. But you are one man, and you can do something. And what you can do, you should do. And what you should do, by the grace of God you will do.