

Breaking Growth Barriers

Workshop by Nelson Searcy given August 13, 2009

The following is a brain dump from my participation at Searcy's workshop given at Branch Creek Community Church in Landsdale, Pennsylvania last week.

Searcy is a passionate church planter who feels a strong calling to the north-east. While he grew up somewhere down South, he spent the first part of his career working at Saddleback where he began to think about planting in NYC. His church launched in the fall of 2001 and now has several campuses and about 4000 people.

Growth Barriers:

Searcy's definition of 'barrier' is "anything that prevents the church from reaching its full redemptive potential (more thought on that in a minute).

There are typical choke points experienced as a church grows in size that must be overcome in order to continue growing. These common attendance choke points are 65, 125, 250 and 500. Of course there are more but there aren't many New Church congregations that have made it to the 500 barrier.

Now back to the a little commentary about the definition of a 'barrier'. Searcy made a strong point that the Lord grows the church. He desires growth, He causes it to occur. This is backed up with powerful teachings. "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it" is one. The point of thinking about 'barriers' is that when a person recognizes that the Lord is going to establish and build His church, then all he needs to focus on is identifying and removing what he is doing that currently prevents this from happening. As we seek and identify the things we do that prevent church growth, we can remove those barriers and let the Lord do His work. So when we ask "how do I get my church to grow", we are asking the wrong question. Rather it is better to ask: "What is keeping my church from growing."

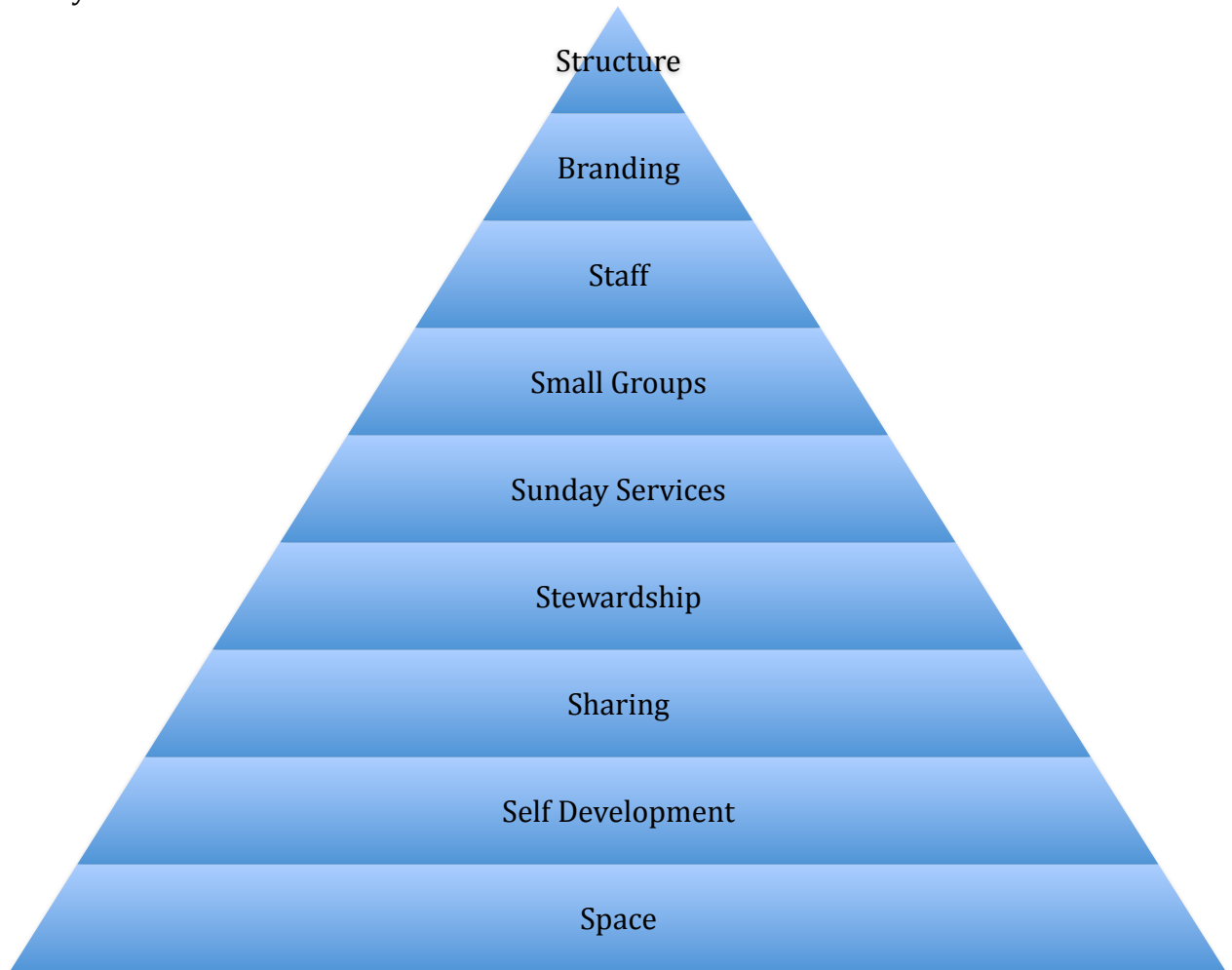
Searcy was suggesting that this conversation is about alignment. The desire for growth of the church is a good desire as it is in alignment with the Lord's desire to establish the church on earth. So the next step is to bring the life and organization of the church and one's own life into the alignment that will allow the Lord to do the work. From a New Church perspective I think of the teachings about the influx, or inflowing of the Lord's life into a body. The principle is that you receive in the measure that you give.

Perhaps most important in the growth equation is clarity of purpose of the church. Again quoting Searcy, the purpose of the church is the redemption of the human race. I understand that our theology defines redemption and the process of redemption differently, but the statement is still true. The work of the church is to

introduce and prepare people for heaven. This is fundamentally the Lord's work. Church growth might be summed up removing barriers to enable the Lord to do His work of redemption, salvation and preparation for heaven. To me the clear conclusion of this thought is that it is imperative that we be clear, in evangelization about our beliefs, articulating them so that people can use them to allow the Lord to work in their lives.

Causes of Barriers to Growth Within a Congregation

Searcy had a handout that looked like this:



Outside the triangle are also three items: Spirit, Systems and Strategy

The point of the Triangle is that in Searcy's opinion, more time, energy and effort should be put into managing the areas at the bottom of the triangle than at the top. He rightly points out that some churches are distracted from growth when they put

way too much time into re-organizing their structure. Also, many will put their church into decline through too much focus on branding and reputation issues at the expense of much more critical issues.

While I personally am not totally convinced of the order of his priorities (I might emphasize Sunday services and small groups more the pyramid still makes sense.

Space

Searcy made the good point that space issues were important simply because people stop coming when a space is 70-80% full. The feeling of too many people makes visitors and guests uncomfortable. The members, because they perceive the space being full stop inviting friends to church. As a result the congregations ceases to bring in more people.

One good word of warning was to be very careful about simply beginning a second service to remedy this. A second service that is started with a congregation under 200 in avg. attendance frequently fails. The reason for this is that 80% of the congregation will attend the service that has the preferred time. The service held at the next time frequently is regarded as inferior to the prime time service slot. It becomes difficult to get the 2nd service to fly.

An easier solution is to rent space that is larger than necessary, then using 'pipe and drape' cordon off unused space to ensure that the area will not feel too empty. As the space fills, one can move the pipe and drape to allow for more people.

The same issues apply for the parking lot. His formula for how large the parking lot should be is 1.2 people per parking space for a church lot. That suggests pretty big parking lots for US churches! All of these considerations make good reasons for renting as long as possible.

Personal Growth

The second item of greatest emphasis in the evangelization conversation is personal growth. Searcy told a story of his travelling with Zig Zigler when he was in his teens. He noticed that Zigler was constantly rehearsing his speeches right up to the moment he presented them. Zigler told him that he never spoke in public until he had rehearsed his message 100 times. A sermon is going to improve if it is rehearsed. But there are other ways to sharpen the saw as well. Reading the Word, studying pastoral skills are vital to effective evangelization. One might also consider paying close attention to physical and emotional health. People sampling the New Church will be asking if this is a person whom I can trust, are they walking the walk themselves.

Searcy suggested coming up with a written plan for personal growth that is a part of one's professional development regimen.

Sharing/Evangelism

Searcy also spoke to the third tier on the pyramid "Sharing" (Evangelization and assimilation)

As a part of this discussion Searcy suggested that a healthy church has 5% of its worship attendance first time visitors. It is helpful for evangelist pastors to calculate and track their first timer ratio trying to develop it to 5% or even better.

Searcy described a matrix that helps think about how to increase first time attendance:



The Pastor and staff need to be asked how frequently they make contacts and invite guests to church. While this shouldn't be the only source of invitation, the staff need to be leading the charge.

Personal/Relational is a reference to members inviting people they are in relationship with. This is the key way a church grows, but it is not the only way.

Promotional The secondary way is through invitation made to people who have no contact with church members of the organization itself. These people are reached through advertising, mailers and the internet.

The final box, **Preparation**, is a reference to the need to preparing the congregation to appropriately receive visitors and guests. The Worship service should be properly prepared to engage those not familiar with the teachings and traditions of the congregation, etc.

A leadership team can brainstorm ways to optimize each of these categories. For example, a church can develop cards that help members speak about their church and invite new friends to join them.

David's closing thoughts. The seminar sparked some useful insights. The reigning thought for me relative to what we do in the New Church is that the Lord builds His church for the purpose of introducing people and preparing them for heaven. To be effective in evangelism we need to let our light shine from the rooftops by clearly articulating our teachings in appropriate ways so that the Lord can come in and do the work. We are sharing a message and the love behind that message because the Lord wants to bring those who are spiritually starving for that message in to bless them. We are servants in this great mission. But a major part of that serving is to simply creat an organization that is in alignment with the Lord so that He can do the work.

Peace,
-Dave