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Church Growth Strategies in the 21st Century: A Case of Selected Churches in Thika West District, Kiambu County, Kenya

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to investigate the contribution of different church growth strategies in the 21st Century in Thika West District. The church as a living organism is expected to grow. In the Great Commission in the book of Matthew 28: 19-20, it is revealed that the desire of Jesus Christ is that his church should increase. Growth therefore is an integral part of the church. The question for discussion is not whether the church should grow, but in what ways growth occurs and by what means. The aim of this study was to investigate how different growth strategies contribute to the holistic church growth in the selected churches of Thika west District. The study was based on a church growth model propagated by Mead (1993). Findings of other researchers on church growth strategies formed the bulk of the literature reviewed in this study. Methodology was a mixed design of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Sampling procedures were purposive and simple random while target population comprised of Pastors, cell group leaders and church members from the eight churches in Thika West District. Data collection methods were questionnaires for church members and cell group leaders and in-depth interview guide for pastors. Qualitative data was analyzed through the use of descriptive statements while quantitative data was coded and analyzed using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). The findings were consistent with the research questions with 94.3% of the participants acknowledging existence of many church growth strategies in their churches. Evangelism as a strategy for church growth was the most preferred strategy. Hence, churches that did not have evangelism as a strategy for growth were recommended to have.

Keywords/phrases: church growth strategies, cell based churches

1. Background of Study

From the earthly ministry of Christ and the Day of Pentecost, to this present time, it has been God's divine plan that the Church should grow as Jesus said "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit" (Jn. 15:18). Every church, whatever its size, must regard numerical and spiritual growth as being of supreme importance. Church growth, however, does not just happen. It must be prayed for, planned for, believed for and worked for. Smith (1994) states that when considering a strategy for church growth there are several areas which need attention such as prayer. No attempt should be made to increase God's church without first asking for divine guidance and enablement. Only after prayer is it possible to develop a workable plan to win new people to the church.

Erwich (2004) reiterates that a "hit or miss" attitude towards church growth will not result in a healthy growing church. Growth patterns usually reflect the strategies used by a church. In this respect a church must properly discern the surrounding community in order to reach those people for Christ. Different communities have different needs and so different strategies must be employed. The minister according to Shenk (2003) is the key figure in church growth. He/she must have a vision of growth (spiritual and numerical) and then transfer that vision to the congregation since where there is no vision people perish (Prov. 29:18). Vision leads to a schedule of activities, all of which are designed to reach achievable goals.

Gavran (1990) states that church growth is a dynamic phenomenon which can only be achieved through a combination of diverse strategies. Each strategy is expected to bring out its unique contribution and compliment to what amounts to church growth. Church growth according to him is that discipline which investigates the nature, expansion, planting, multiplication, function and health of Christian churches as they relate to the effective implementation of God's Great Commission to "make disciples of all peoples" (Matthew: 18-20). Wagner (1990) argues that church growth is God's will and God is pleased with it. Therefore, according to him, the church has to grow spiritually and keep growing numerically since its long range goal is the discipling of all peoples. Thus, church growth entails many dimensions which cannot be achieved through one strategy. This answers the question why church growth strategies must be many for effective growth to be achieved. For instance, if church growth is conceived only

as numerical increase, the only criterion to evaluate the effectiveness of promotional efforts will be “how many people come to church every Sunday” thereby disregarding consideration of other aspects.

Jensen and Stevens (2000) view church growth as the balanced increase in quantity, quality and organizational complexity of a local church. The maintenance of balance among these three elements results in healthy church growth. The balance suggested by Jensen and Stevens requires multiple strategies to achieve since the strategy that may cause quality and quantity growth may not be strong enough to cause organizational growth also. Smith (2003) reiterates that church growth is that body of discovered, biblically appropriate and biblically based strategies that relate to the numerical increase and development of churches and Christians through fulfilling the mandates of evangelizing, discipling, incorporating and evaluating to ensure continued progress and ministry. Therefore, to achieve church growth, appropriate strategies must be applied.

2. Biblical and Theological Foundations of Church Growth Strategies

Church growth strategies change with changing circumstances. This was clearly demonstrated by Jesus Christ when he lived on earth. The Bible has many examples of diverse strategies which Jesus applied as he reached out to the lost. For example, Jesus used teaching as a strategy for church growth and he spent a lot of his time teaching his followers on different themes such as forgiveness (Luke; 15), prayer (Luke; 18), faith (Mark; 11) etc. He used parables to make his teachings as interesting as possible. Jesus also used other strategies of service or miraculous works like healing, feeding, attending communal activities e.g. weddings and funerals as ways of reaching out to the lost.

This practice of changing strategies with changing circumstances was also applied in the Early Church by apostles such as Paul and Barnabas as they founded churches in the Gentile regions. All these were aimed at fulfilling the Great Commission of Jesus Christ who did not specify which strategy to use when he charged all Christians to preach the gospel in the entire world. Indeed, the Great Commission according to Raines (1991) is what gives room for diverse strategies as long as they are effective in winning the lost.

Church growth according to Wagner (1990) is deeply related to the purpose of the church and in order to see the church grow, the church must faithfully carry out its purpose. Hemphill (1994) reiterates that churches should focus on fulfilling and emphasizing the five basic purposes of the church which are worship, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship and ministry/service. These functions cannot be performed through one strategy since they require diverse skills. The results of performing them effectively are not only spiritual growth but also numerical growth.

Ebbie (1994) emphasizes that church growth takes place when Great Commission disciples are added to church and are evidenced by responsible membership. He says that church growth encompasses eight factors. These are (1) the numerical increase of churches and of members in churches, (2) evangelism, (3) assimilation of the evangelized into local congregations of worshiping, (4) discipleship of the congregation, (5) the strategies and methods of maintaining growth, (6) reproducibility, (7) the use of appropriate biblical methods and (8) continuously monitoring and evaluating the results of the church growth.

Ebbie's opinion is that church growth is the will of God and a healthy body of the church can only grow when the parts are connected to the head (God) and to each other (community). Rainer (1990) reiterates that church growth is neither a skill nor a method but it is a spiritual service with practical steps. These practical steps are the strategies which are adopted by different churches as they seek to grow numerically and spiritually.

3. Key Questions that Guided the Study Were

- What strategies are used in Thika West District churches for growth purposes?
- Find out advantages of each strategy used for church growth?
- Which shortcomings do different strategies suffer that may hinder church growth?

4. Significance of the Study

This study examined different church growth strategies. It was hoped that such literature would benefit future researchers who may want to do further research on church growth in the wide field of Christian Religious Studies.

The findings of this research particularly on the advantages of different strategies in church growth would hopefully benefit pastors and church leaders in knowing how different strategies contributed to church growth. Students of religion in Universities and Theological Colleges might likewise benefit from this study. They might find it relevant in coverage of areas like contemporary strategies of church growth.

While this study focused on the situation in Thika West District, it was expected that the findings would be broadly applicable to many church groups of similar urban settings. Researching this topic would hopefully contribute to knowledge, guide church members to become “partners in the work” with their pastors and encourage dynamic church growth.

In addition, this study would enlighten church leaders and pastors on possible challenges that church growth strategies encounter and give suggestions on how to circumvent.

5. Theoretical Framework

Mead's (1993) model of church growth was applied in this study. The model classified church growth into four types of growth. These were Numerical growth, Maturation growth, Organic growth and Incarnational growth. Mead says numerical growth should not be ignored because the mission of the church is focused on finding and winning people to Christ. Mead stresses that while numbers are not everything, they are something and the church ignores them at their peril. He laments that a congregation that does not seek its own way to grow numerically may eventually die.

Maturational growth or spiritual growth according to Mead is the ability of the congregation to challenge, support and encourage each one of its members to grow in the maturity of their faith, to deepen their spiritual roots and to broaden their religious mind. The church has a responsibility to help lay persons understand the concept of spiritual maturity, to encourage and support them to grow in mature faith.

In organic growth, Mead emphasized that the task of the church was to build the community, fashioning the organizational composition, developing the practices that result in a dependable, stable network of human relationship in which people could grow and make a difference. The body of Christ as clearly illustrated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 with many parts functioning in different roles to make one perfect body is used by Mead in illustrating organic growth of a church. He says for a church to grow to be more effective organism, a good foundation could be formed with the development of the talents and gifts of each member of the congregation and in the laying down of healthy norms for the harmonious relationships among congregation members.

The fourth aspect of growth propagated by Mead was incarnational growth. He stressed that this was where the congregation grew in the ability to en flesh the community and to show their faith by practicing it. Incarnational growth is all about how the members of the congregation can be an influence on society and how they could change it. That congregation must build themselves as religious communities and en flesh their values and concerns in the environment around them. This model of church growth was found fitting in this study because of its holistic approach to church growth which takes care of both the qualitative and quantitative church growth.

6. Critical Review of Theories and Gaps in Church Growth Strategies

Small Groups Strategy was among the most important strategies for church growth according to Schwarz (2009). Through small groups, church members build each other by serving others with their spiritual gifts. Mead's (1993) theory of church growth particularly on the aspect of maturational growth concurs with Schwarz that small groups strategy for church growth plays a significant role on the need to nurture and be nurtured by one another.

Thus, small group strategy which was also practiced by Jesus Christ during his time on earth is purported to be a reliable strategy for effective church growth. This is further supported by systems theory of church growth whose proponent is Houston (2008). This theory emphasizes dependence and inter-dependence among congregations where in small meetings, the younger Christians depend on the spiritually older Christians for nurture and care which is aimed at spiritual maturity at some point.

However, this small group strategy according to Malone (2006) is greatly challenged by unmet expectations which may eventually make some group members to pull out. Malone argues that in every group, every person including the group leader has personal needs and expectations ranging from emotional to psychological, spiritual, social and intellectual. While no group may meet all needs, people do expect some needs to be met. If they fail to be met, members may begin to drop out. This pulling out from the group necessitates use of another strategy that might not only help to retain them but also to attract others for growth purposes.

Another strategy for church growth is known as Empowering Strategy. This is where leaders focus on empowering lay leaders. They concentrate on equipping, supporting, motivating and mentoring individuals thereby enabling them to be faithful Christians (Schwarz 2009). This strategy is about multiplication of energy, creating and sustaining a larger network of people who can do the work. The strategy fits well with Wagner's theory of church growth as expounded by Gorman (2002). It emphasizes primarily on strong leadership skills where pastors exercise active ways of thinking, display strong leadership skills and serve their roles as catalysts to the entire church. This is supported by leadership theory propagated by Elmer (2007) who states that strong leadership enhances multiplication of energy by creating and sustaining a larger network of people who can do the work. Strong leadership is about people mobilization. Thus, strong leadership as a strategy for church growth is effective.

Another important strategy for church growth according to Jang (2009) is Passionate Spiritual Strategy (PSS). Through this strategy, the church grows in quality and quantity. Gorman (2002) reiterates that many believers assume that church growth is dependent on spiritual persuasions such as charismatic or special spiritual practices like liturgical prayers. But the most important point is "are the Christians in the church "on fire"? Do they live committed lives and practice their faith with joy and enthusiasm?" Although the church has "pure doctrine and orthodox faith, church growth cannot be expected to grow without contagious enthusiasm and passionate spirituality with members living their faith and sharing it with others (Jang 2009)

Limited Enthusiasm theory of church growth contributes positively to this strategy since it upholds that faith is largely spread through enthusiasts or active believers. Most conversion growth comes from contact between an enthusiast and an unbeliever and that growth for any church ends when church runs out of enthusiasts and not because the number of unbelievers runs out. This theory was however challenged by Elmer (2007) who argues that no church can fully rely on enthusiasts for continuous growth since the enthusiastic phase of a believer only lasts a certain length of time after which they become inactive meaning that there would be no further growth after that. Discipleship theory propagated by Ogden (2002) however contrasts Enthusiasm's theory since it emphasizes on consistent follow-up of new believers by church members and not necessarily by enthusiasts only. This theory encourages the church to create a system where new believers are followed up and disciple by the older believers irrespective of whether they are enthusiasts or not. So, all these strategies have shortcomings which can only be overcome through incorporation of other strategies for complimentary purposes.

Discipleship and Perfecting Strategy is yet another important contemporary strategy for church growth. Making disciples is regarded as the core mission of the church based on the word of God in Mathew 28:19 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Evangelism according to Wuthnow (2008) precedes discipleship which must be followed by "perfecting" i.e. guiding towards spiritual growth and development. This is meant to lead to spiritual maturity and ethical improvement.

Perfecting implicates the stage of nursing to bring up new born Christians to be responsible members of church as individual members of the body of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the church is responsible for doing its best to nurse church members. When the

individual church members become mature through the process of perfection, church growth results naturally (Gavran 1997) and (Smith 2011). These sentiments were also expressed by Mead (1993) in his theory of holistic church growth.

Another important strategy is Gift-Oriented Strategy. According to Schwarz (2009) the gift-oriented approach is based on the conviction that God in his sovereignty determines which Christians are charged with which ministries. Thus, the role of church leadership is to assist them to recognize their gifts and to involve them in appropriate ministries. Ministry work according to him is not given on basis of uncertain possibilities but on the basis of spirit-given gifts which need to be discerned and developed.

Applying this strategy in the church brings in a large group of people who work on the basis of their giftedness. In this way, lay workers accomplish remarkable results in their ministries, thereby bringing about church growth (Schwarz 2009). A leadership theory of church growth by Elmer (2007) advocate the same approach of service to God using the God-given gifts and talents and purports that when believers church duties are matched with their talents and gifts, results are tremendous. However, Wuthnow (2008) pokes holes in this strategy when he highlights the challenges faced by leaders in effort to identify gifts and talents to match assignments in church since not all members are willing to serve.

7. Methodology

The study made use of a mixed research design of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Descriptive survey was used in investigating the diverse strategies used for church growth. These research designs were appropriate for this study because they enabled the researcher to give in-depth analysis of different strategies for church growth. The target population was members of 8 Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal churches of Thika West District Thika west District which is situated in Kiambu County, Kenya. It is located 40 km north of Nairobi city and its size is 93 sq. km. It is 1420 to 1550 meters above sea level. Average temperature is 25 degrees Celsius and rainfall average 1020 mm p.a. The population of Thika West District according to 2009 census is 218544. Of this, 108630 are females while 109914 are males

8. Sample Size and Sampling Procedures

Bell, (2003) defines sample as a group of people who are used to obtain information about a larger group or a whole population. In this study, a sample size of 220 church members from 8 churches were selected since it will not be possible to include all members. Out of the 220 participants, 25 were sampled from 6 churches and 35 participants from 2 churches that were larger than the others. Sampling procedures were purposeful and simple random techniques. These techniques were suitable for this study because of the nature of its objectives. For purposes of effective data collection, the participants were divided into three categories namely Pastors, cell group leaders and church members. Purposeful sampling method was used to select two Pastors from each church while simple random technique was applied in selecting 8 cell group leaders and 15 members from 6 churches and 35 from 2 churches. Below is a distribution analysis table of the participants.

Church	Pastors	Cell leaders	Church Members		Total
			Men	Women	
Deliverance Thika Town	2	8	7	8	25
Deliverance Makongeni	2	8	7	8	25
PCEA Elijah Kagiri	2	8	7	8	25
PCEA Happy Valley	2	10	10	13	35
Full Gospel Thika Town	2	8	7	8	25
Full Gospel Witeithie	2	8	7	8	25
ACK Juja	2	8	7	8	25
ACK St. Andrews	2	10	10	13	35
Total	16	68	48	72	220

Table 1

9. Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The researcher sampled 220 participants from the eight selected churches in Thika West District. Out of the 220 participants, those who participated effectively in answering the questionnaires and in the interview guide were 210. Therefore, the findings of this research were based on the 210 which was a response rate of 95.5%. According to Creswell (2012), 60% of data collected is good enough for analysis.

10. Categories of Participants

Table 2 displayed below shows categories of participants who were drawn from the eight protestant churches in Thika West District. These categories as shown in the said table 2 were 11 (5.2%) pastors, 56 (26.7%) cell group leaders and 143 (68.1%) church members. All these categories put together formed the 210 sample size. Although the pastors and cell group leaders' categories registered smaller percentages compared to the church members, they never the less gave very valuable contributions in their capacity as leaders especially in response to the first two objectives of this study which were (1) Investigation of the contribution of church growth strategies in Thika West District churches and (2) advantages of each strategy in church growth.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Church member	143	68.1	68.1	68.1
	Group Leader	56	26.7	26.7	94.8
	Pastor	11	5.2	5.2	100.0
	Total	210	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: Categories of participants

11. Discussion of Findings on Existence of Diverse Strategies for Church Growth

The researcher sought to establish the diverse church growth strategies in existence in Thika West District since there is no single strategy that can cause church growth all by itself. The findings showed that all the eight churches used different strategies in their efforts to achieve church growth. Strategies such as evangelism or door to door witnessing, crusades and open air meetings, preaching, retreats and many others as shown in figure 1 below were all incorporated by the eight churches that were investigated. The findings showed that 198 (94.3%) participants agreed that their churches used many strategies for church growth. Although different churches had diverse strategies, evangelism or door to door witnessing as shown in figure 1 below was the most preferred with 26.6% and closely followed by crusades and open air meetings with 22.4%. Church get together had the least preference of only 7 (2.4%) participants.

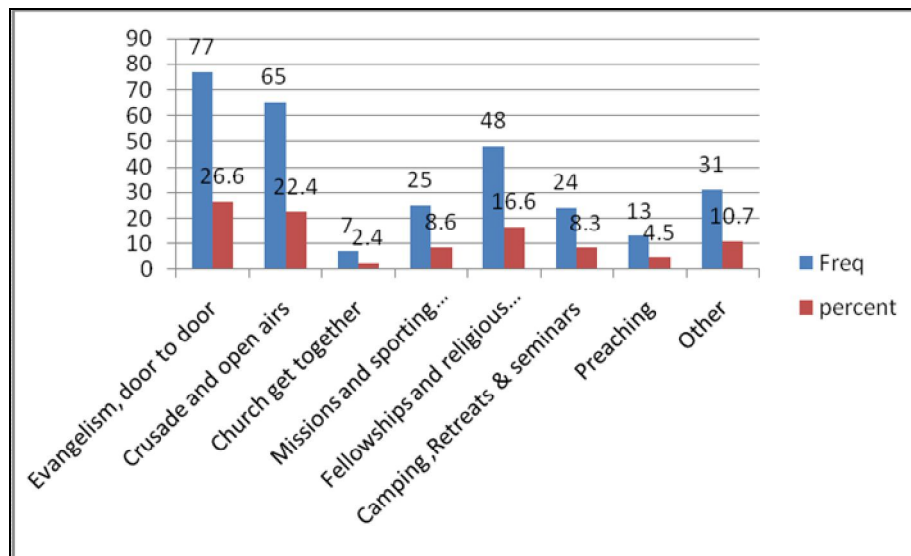


Figure 1: Other church growth strategies

The findings from figure 1 confirmed what was stated earlier that churches have diverse strategies through which they seek to attain church growth and no single strategy can be credited fully. Moreover, the same figure 1 displayed the multi-diversity strategies of church growth. All these strategies irrespective of their big or small contribution were essential in all the selected Thika West District churches since there was none without them.

Different participants expressed different preferences of strategies. For instance, the 48 (16.6%) participants who preferred fellowships and communal religious functions like weddings heaped a lot of praise on these activities as a strategy for church growth. Some reported that their true and genuine friends are those in their fellowships who they look forward to meeting every Sunday and also in mid-week fellowships. They team up together to do evangelism or singing groups and other social events.

Similarly, other strategies like camps, retreats and seminars were appreciated for spiritual growth since they enable members to have prolonged periods of thematic teachings which are not possible during Sunday services. Therefore, as stated earlier, each of these strategies brings out its unique contribution and contributes positively to the much sought holistic church growth.

12. Summary, Recommendations, Conclusion and Areas of Further Research

12.1. Summary

Church growth is a sum total of combined strategies where each compliments the others in its unique ways. Evangelism was the most preferred strategy for church growth in Thika West District.

No single strategy can cause church growth all by itself. This explains why all the eight churches had many strategies for church growth. Each strategy has both strengths and challenges and that is why none is sufficient all by itself.

12.2. Conclusion

The following conclusions based on the research findings were made:

Evangelism plays a very significant role in numerical church growth.

Church growth is achieved through a combination of many strategies.

All strategies for church growth experience challenges which should be circumvented appropriately through incorporation of other strategies for maximum benefits to churches.

12.3. Recommendations

Active evangelism programs were proved to be a genuine cause for numerical church growth, thus evangelism would be a greater avenue of Church growth within Thika area.

Pastors and church leaders should endeavor to train their church members on how to carry out person to person evangelism effectively.

Theological colleges could also consider including church growth strategies in their curriculum and training manuals for their students since most of them end up being pastors.

Explore the most effective strategies that can contribute to church growth and use them since no single strategy can cause it all by itself.

12.4. Areas of further research

This research was carried out in Thika West District. A similar research can be conducted in other areas locally; particularly within central region of Kenya to establish authenticity of diverse strategies as a means of effective Church growth.

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