

Why Churches Grow in a Free Society - Part 1

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The Core Values of Healthy Congregations

I write this as an evangelical Unificationist. I believe that it is the believer's responsibility to bring the world to True Parents and that God works through our imperfect selves and congregations, which are "vessels of clay."

Our True Parents and our international president have placed church health and growth as the highest priority. It makes sense, therefore, to examine why churches grow. It is true that mainline Christianity is declining in numbers and vitality. But it is equally true that other sectors of Christianity are expanding rapidly and with great creative energy. Let us look at what those churches are doing.

The churches that achieve numerical growth in fact do not focus on numbers. They want to serve God and save people. Their core values reflect this, and that's what we'll examine here. My main resource is Mark Mittelberg, Director of Evangelism at Willow Creek Community Church. He analyzed the spiritual foundations for church growth enjoyed by his church and came up with seven core values.[\[1\]](#)

Value One: People matter to God

The first point is also the simplest. Evangelism begins with knowing in our hearts that each and every person matters to God. Because God loves everyone, we should love them as well. "This belief - that all people matter to God - is the hardest one to fully absorb into our value system," Mittelberg writes. We say we agree with this value, but we don't practice it. What we do with every other concept in his book, he says, will depend directly on the degree to which we own and apply this first value, the reality that people matter to God, in the very core of our being.

Rate yourself, says Mittelberg. Look at your calendar and checkbook. They will tell you where you are investing your time and money. Are you investing your time and money trying to reach people outside the family of God? Or are you doing everything but that? One is reminded of Jim Collins's conclusion in *Good to Great*, that the "stop doing" list is more important than the "to do" list. In order to spend more time with unchurched people, one needs to spend less time with church people. So healthy churches invest in getting their members out into the community, to rub shoulders with new people.

When you start to rearrange your life, or your church's life, the priority of saving lost people will be tested immediately. The question naturally arises, whether aloud or below the surface: What is really important to my church? Other values start competing with and crowding out witnessing. Some of the most difficult ones to deal with are the habits of one's own church, the church activities that we think by themselves will get us to heaven. The problem is, these happen inside church walls and do nothing to reach new people. Growing churches minimize demands on members' time so that they can get out into the community and meet new people.

Few young people are aware of Rev. Moon anymore. Back in 1976, I introduced myself to people in parking lots as "Tyler," and one gentleman deep in the West Virginia coal country responded, "Tyler Moon?" Rev. Moon was a presence in the world back then, because we were outside the church walls. When I asked a Jehovah's Witness why his church is growing, his answer was simple: "We're out there."

People matter to God, so they should matter to us. Cain did not matter to Abel. If Abel had loved, valued and served Cain, would Cain have killed him? Esau mattered to Jacob. Reverend Moon teaches that Jacob spent his twenty-one years in Haran longing to reunite with Esau. All people, the poor, the outcast and the lame as well as society's leaders, mattered to Jesus, and they matter to True Parents.

Value Two: People are spiritually lost and God is suffering

In Luke 19:10, Jesus said his mission was "to seek and to save what was lost." Lost is not derogatory or

an insult; it is just stating a fact about life without God. Jesus was saying that there is a deep chasm between fallen human beings and God, the chasm of sin. The world is not at all as God intended it to be, and government programs, education or medical services cannot fix it. Sin is a radical problem, deep in the root of human existence. In Jakob Dylan's words, evil is alive and well. Divine Principle is more specific: "there is one social vice that human efforts alone can never eradicate. That is sexual immorality. Christian doctrine regards this as a cardinal sin. What a tragedy that today's Christian society cannot block this path of ruin!"

Reverend Moon teaches relentlessly that there is a huge chasm between human beings and God, and it has to do with the spiritual dimension of human sexuality, the relationship between man and woman. No matter how "good" people are, if they do not have this resolved, they are caught in the satanic blood lineage, "children of your father the devil" (Jn 8:44), and will be unable to access God's deepest love in eternity. No matter what the occasion, this is Rev. Moon's message.

To generate energy in the direction of sharing the truth and love that saved one's life from degradation and despair, one needs to penetrate the superficial appearance that everyone is okay, that people are doing well, and grasp the insight of Paul when he wrote, "There is not one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." Divine Principle states that people "have become like refuse, fit to be discarded."

So the second spiritual value is to be fully aware that people, no matter how ship-shape we appear, are spiritually lost, far away from where God created us to be. Dr. Bruce Wilkinson gives a sterling example. As a result of his "Jabez prayer,"^[2] God guided him to approach a well-dressed businesswoman in an airport terminal and ask her, "What can I do for you?" He persevered through her attempts to brush him off, and then she disclosed that her marriage was on the rocks and she was about to file papers for divorce. Through his counseling in the terminal and on the plane (where God intervened to put their seats together), "she was still hurting, but she was at peace, determined to give her marriage the commitment it deserved."

We should be sensitive to human pain and even more to God, who is suffering in loneliness. God is in the wilderness with men and women, crying out for His lost children, enduring agony separated from us. Unification evangelism begins with Reverend Moon's heart of the 1940s to comfort God in the midst of prison. His motivating energy came directly from his contact with the Father's lonely, loving heart, knowing that people are suffering and God is suffering. Mittelberg tells us we need to clear away the curtains that conceal from us the suffering of others and the suffering of God, and to be vulnerable to this aching need in the world.

Value Three: People need God's intervention

Forget relativism, Mittelberg says, the view that every path is the same, that every religion is okay. For him, every person needs Jesus. Unificationists agree and add the news that Jesus sent True Parents and that everyone we know needs to receive and own the blessing. In the words of Divine Principle, "fallen people [need to] restore their heart toward God through God's life-giving word, [be] saved both spiritually and physically, and inherit God's lineage."

Christians who are growing their churches are preaching an equally confrontational message. "We have an unpopular message, and we have been commissioned to present it boldly," says Mittelberg. This desperate attitude is necessary for effective evangelism. Unificationists attribute to True Parents the power of God's salvation. We proclaim that True Parents are the bridge across the gap separating fallen men and women from God, and that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are working on earth for complete salvation through True Parents. There is no doubt about this; it is not one truth among many, one path among many.

From a sociological viewpoint, Kirk Hadaway's^[3] research shows that churches whose members are clear about their mission and purpose and have a plan to recruit new members grow, whereas the members of dying churches respond that they are not clear about their church's mission and purpose and lack such a plan. Moreover, churches with a strong conviction in their faith grow, while churches with a middle-of-the-road theology do not.

In his mud hut, True Father did not design a social movement or self-help society. When people joined, he called them to offer their lives, their schooling, their careers, and their marriages. Through him, God intervened in people's lives decisively. True Father's following grew as all religions grow; he offered a radical vision of what it means to be fully human and on that basis empowered people to solve real problems in their life and in the world, as well as find inner peace. Growing churches include this life-changing faith experience as normative.

Value Four: People need cultural relevance

The fourth value has to do with strategy - strategy not for its own sake, but for the sake of expressing heart and love effectively, and clarifying that what we represent is the pure, unadulterated love of God and not our own cultural tastes.

Mittelberg writes about a man named Jim, who had a passion to reach people for Christ. The people God called him to reach were not like the normal people of his church, so he decided that he would have to change to fit their culture. He shaved his head, except for a ponytail that he grew. Then he dyed the ponytail. He gave up business attire and dressed like this crowd of people. He ate their food and learned their street vocabulary, read their papers and got to know their points of view. He moved into their neighborhood, although they didn't seem interested at all in what he had to say.

Jim's church associates were upset. They maligned Jim for giving up the true gospel, watering it down and changing it just to make it convenient for these strange people who nobody cares about anyway. But today, countless people from those neighborhoods now know and serve Jesus Christ. Jim - or as he's more widely known, James Hudson Taylor - is the man who more than a century ago built the China Inland Ministry. More than anyone else, he is credited with bringing Protestantism to China.

What James Hudson Taylor did was bridge a cultural gap. He didn't wait for the people to come to the Gospel; he took the Gospel to them in a way they could get it. What are today's gaps?

Between unchurched people and the truth are walls of secularization - anti- or unreligious narratives, explanations, solutions, entertainment, diversions and values. New York City has barred church congregations, and them alone, from using public school buildings outside school hours. The Supreme Court of Iowa in 2009 ruled that the view of marriage as one man-one woman is a religious viewpoint and for that reason unconstitutional. These are formidable competition to the message of any church, including ours. Contemporary culture rejects many godly values. We live in a post-Christian age.

How do we reach people in this culture? First, we have to come to grips with where the vast majority of people are at. Next we have to determine to make our message understandable. To do so, we need to speak in a language the hearer can understand. Listen to Elijah Waters, of "Generation Church," a campus ministry in Seattle.^[4] His sermons are a lot like our Founder's - earthy, honest, in-your-face and totally from the heart, and his following is in the thousands.

My experience with an activist neo-Buddhist movement illustrates the value of cultural relevance. I encountered the group in 1969, when Japanese women speaking broken English physically pushed me into a car to take me to a lecture. An American gave the lecture, but all the other members I saw were Japanese. After the lecture they gathered around me and pushed me to buy a prayer scroll, which I did. I won't continue the story except to say that I didn't join and not many others did either. This particular movement has a negligible presence in America to this day. Why? Because they never adapted to this culture. Pushing people into cars and selling them prayer scrolls does not make it in this country, even in Berkeley.

In the Unification context, too, members in the past associated church growth with standing on the street trying to strike up a conversation. Reverend Moon himself has tried to revise this concept. He told members in the 1980s that church growth will not happen by witnessing on the streets.

If you witness to someone on the street, it has only the significance of that individual. ...it is a one-to-one relationship that does not go beyond that level.

Do not witness so much in the street because you don't know anything about the people you meet. You may meet many people in the parks but most of them do not stay and those who do often have many problems. You know that people [with potential] are always busy and don't hang around parks, while those who have nothing to do go to the park all the time.^[5]

To succeed in America, a group from another culture needs to translate its message and practices into forms that Americans can relate with and become part of their world. This is called "contextualization," and it is necessary because secular America is a foreign culture and speaks a different language. Before people can even get a glimpse of our theological message, we need to cross the "culture chasm." How do we cross the culture chasm?

In the words of Bill Hybels, senior pastor of the Willow Creek Community Church, this means to "crack the cultural code." Mittelberg discusses language (make what you say easy to understand), clothes (wear the same styles as your target audience) and music (use the style they like - which probably is one you like as well). For example, when I encountered the Unification community, I heard music with which I could relate. I remember Phillip Schanker singing a Cat Stevens song with an acoustic guitar before the message was given. This went down well with me. If I had heard a fifty-year-old playing "How Great Thou Art" on a pipe organ, I would have been out the door.

Mittelberg counsels us to utilize cultural points of reference that are familiar to the audience. We cannot expect new people who do not know or care much about us to cross the culture chasm from their side. We have to cross it from our side. Bridging the chasm of sin is God's responsibility. Bridging the culture chasm is our responsibility.

Value Five: People need community

More and more families are broken. Even intact families spend less and less time together. "The Annenberg Center for the Digital Future at the University of Southern California is reporting this week that 28 percent of Americans it interviewed last year said they have been spending less time with members of their households. That's nearly triple the 11 percent who said that in 2006."^[6] People are scattered far and wide from their loved ones. People need friends, community and cultural identity. When I visited neighbors in Barrytown in June of 2010, I asked what they would like to see in a local church, and everyone's first response was, community.

If the Unification Church is to grow, it must provide meaningful community. Mittelberg states, "Our responsibility is to build churches where true community can flourish." When I joined, I did not join a book; I joined a community. I joined because of the love and value I felt from the people and from a strange warmth (to borrow John Wesley's term) within my heart. This was love from a community plus spirit world, the community on earth and in heaven. So we need to build community that welcomes and offers a place at the table for new people. We should note well that the most successful evangelism in America was done where our family organized as the Creative Community Project. In a recent survey of members of my church, the provision of community life for one's self and one's family was the most important point.

Communities have general characteristics. One, they are local. You see people regularly; you don't need to make a great effort to get together. Two, the community offers an identity that people want to share. Three, communities provide personal enrichment. Four, communities embody implicit or explicit values, norms and ideals. Five, communities are more about friendship than beliefs. Six, communities are fun. Seven, communities, at least healthy communities, are transparent, open and inclusive. They contain windows for people to enter and exit. Churches today are realizing that more than teaching truth, they need to help people make connections and form community. Hence successful churches provide comfortable coffee shops, gathering places and other venues for people to connect. One reason for the success of Starbucks and the thousands of independent coffee houses is that they provide space for community life.

In Taylor Clark's study of what makes Starbucks attractive to customers, "the interviewees talked very little about the coffee itself, but quite a bit about feelings and atmosphere....they craved a sense of relaxation, warmth, and luxury, all within the safe coffeehouse social sphere. 'The coffeehouse, when it's as good as it gets, is much like a public living room.'"^[7] A good coffeehouse is "a quintessential 'third place'" between home and work. Churches are advised to pay heed: Growing churches, seeking to become that third place, often install comfortable coffeehouse environments. In January, 2010, Jason Mitchem, author of *Revivify: Restoring Failed Leaders*, disclosed to the author his team's strategy to plant a new church in Augusta, Georgia. They are going to conduct Bible studies in coffeehouses, six evenings a week. Patrons who are interested in the subject are welcome to sit in. Some will be invited to join their celebration worship on Sunday morning.

Value Six: People need answers

There are thousands of evangelical books that make the Gospel clear and simple for Christians. Unificationists need to do the same with their core text, the Divine Principle. The Divine Principle not only has to be declared, but it has to be made easy to understand.

We have to remove the intellectual roadblocks. People are programmed in school to question everything, especially God and traditional values. So we have to learn what the questions are and how to answer them. Even with the finest theology, if one doesn't know how to use it to answer people's questions, it is of no value. The great American evangelist, Charles Finney, got his start in the small towns of upstate New York, where people said that "he doesn't preach; he explains what the other fellows are preaching about." So we need to slow down and get into the listener's shoes. To love the enemy, we need to know their questions and respect them. Everyone has simple, basic questions, such as "Does God really exist?" "Why is there so much evil in the world?" and "What is the purpose of my life?" The Divine Principle has answers, including to the biggest one of all: "How can I be happy?" These are the same questions that drove the teenaged Sun Myung Moon to God and Jesus. His ministry is one of answering these questions.

The most successful Unification evangelism in America proves the point. The introductory presentations were simple to a fault, laced with humor and common sense. One great virtue was that they gave the listener nothing with which they could possibly disagree. They called it "conscientious common sense,"

and it talked about the truth being something that holds at all times, in all places, in all cultures and is practical and useful. It talked about human responsibility and freedom being the reasons that God could both be loving and suffer the existence of evil. It resolved profound theological dilemmas that block people from faith in God. They made it very simple and returned constantly to the issue of individual responsibility. Then they opened people up for prayer and people met God.

Value Seven: People need time

Mittelberg's culminating value is a simple one: Effective evangelism allows people to move ahead at their own pace. Society in America today is far more structured and confined than it was in the 1970s. He writes, "Pressing people to take steps for which they're not yet ready will backfire. In some cases it can even short-circuit the whole process." Conversion of one's life is a process. It is not accomplished through one event, but rather by deepening trust and understanding over time. During this time of patient support, the church community is desperate in prayer and fasting. Churches do prayer walks, fasting, vigils, counseling, outreach, service, Bible study - spiritual disciplines. Unificationists in our periods of growth did the same.

I recall the testimony of a young man who joined in New York City in the mid-1970s. His spiritual mother one evening brought him seven rice balls and encouraged him to enjoy them. He was a student living by himself in an apartment in the city. When he had finished eating, she informed him that those seven rice balls represented a seven-day fast she had just completed for him. The emotional love this ministry inspired in him brought him to True Parents.

Conclusion

Willow Creek outlines a seven-step path for members to trace as they walk the way of heart with newfound friends who might like to become part of their church community. The first step is to build a personal relationship of trust. This can take months and years in itself. Once that trust and personal rapport is established, the second step is to share a verbal witness. Willow provides seminars for members to help them overcome their shyness about this and develop skills to help people turn a horizontal relationship in a vertical direction. If the friend responds positively to the verbal witness, the third step is to bring them to a seeker event, a program guaranteed to be designed with the new friend in mind who doesn't know anything about the church or its teachings.

This leads to (fourth) a step-by-step process of education, ultimate acceptance of Christ and a joyful, public celebration of baptism. The next steps bring the person into a deeper walk with God, entailing (fifth) joining a small group, (sixth) discovering one's personal gifts for ministry and finding a way to apply them by doing ministry, and (seventh) supporting God's work in His church through tithing.

Generating a world-transforming movement, the Unification Church has owned these core values. It has activated the spiritual values that all people matter to God, are lost without Him and need His intervention in their lives in a language they can understand. We have been a supportive community that gives people the time and respect they need to make up their own mind. As we focus on these values, we will energize our families beyond generation and convey God's blessing to our community.

[1] See Mr. Mittelberg's book, *Building a Contagious Church: Revolutionizing the Way We View and Do Evangelism*. I have shifted the order in which Mittelberg presents these values.

[2] He is the author of *The Prayer of Jabez*, which derives its title from 1 Chr 4.9a "Jabez was more honorable than his brothers."

[3] C. Kirk Hadaway, "Facts on Growth," based on the "Faith Communities Today 2005" Hartford Seminary national survey of 14,301 local churches, synagogues, parishes, temples and mosques. fact.hartsem.edu/products/index.html

[4] thecity.org/

[5] *Home Church*, pp. 12, 412 ff, 411.

[6] From an article by Barbara Ortutay, Associated Press; The Seattle Times ran it on June 16, 2009 as "Study: Family time down, Internet use up."

[7] Taylor Clark, *Starbucked: A Double Tall Tale of Caffeine, Commerce and Culture*, pp. 90 - 92.