



Sermon
12th November 2023
Pray for Growth

Matthew 13:31-33; 1 Corinthians 3:6-11

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I want to tell you of some developments which have come together recently. I am encouraged by what I see happening and I want you to be share in that same hope.

I am the Chairman of the AFFIRM Trust Board. AFFIRM was set up in the early 1990s by Don Battley and others. It is an umbrella organisation of seven New Zealand Anglican mission agencies which some of them you will recognise: CMS, Church Army, SOMA, Latimer Fellowship, Bishopdale Theological College, Nelson Diocese and the Anglican Community of St Mark. At a board meeting last month, as usual each agency reported on their news. One after another, their reports were strikingly positive. CMS has put four Maori evangelists into the field. They were sending out another three. In Waikato, after receiving one cautiously, they were asking can we have another please. You know we have been involved with three mission trips with SOMA this year - Andrew reported on five trips this year to Rwanda, Vanuatu, Tanzania and Australia after not being able to send teams overseas in the previous three years. Nelson is excited about their parish development work with City-to-City. Church Army was burgeoning with opportunities. Bishopdale College reported financial favour and increased student numbers after a long hard period. Listening to them, I felt spring had burst out after a long winter of the years since 2019.

Recently, you heard news about three initiatives Vestry has taken. We have taken part in the Church Life Survey. Thank you to those who responded. I am just getting results coming through now and it is a lot to get our heads around. But I can say that it was pleasingly positive overall. I will feed some of the results into this sermon where relevant.

The second was to send a team to the Leading Your Church into Growth (LYCIG) conference in Wellington. Helen and I and the our Church Wardens, Alison and Andrew, flew down to join in. LYCIG is a Church of England initiative to help parishes think through and adopt some good practices to allow our congregations to grow. They were not whizzy new ideas – we knew about them already - but they were put together in a plan to help us give a good emphasis and focus to our activities.

I felt there was a sea change among us. At one point we were asked to indicate the congregation size three years ago and now and then indicate where we thought we would be in three years' time. As we did that, Alison commented that numbers earlier this year were lower than they are now. The reality of that dawned on us all at the same moment. We have passed the bottom of the valley! We are already growing again. It has been a long hard 'winter' going through COVID, but at last we are seeing recovery. Allied to that, we were asked to set a bold but realistic goal for the next year. A suggestion was 10% growth of a congregation. As I thought about that I realised that at the 10am congregation, we have already seen the Berry family of four, Luba, Gayan and Lesline joined us this year. That is a growth of 17.5% already this year in that congregation! That's so heartening. The 8am congregation has grown by 50% since we came back from lockdown.

The LYCIG conference suggests seven steps:

- 1. Create a Prayerful Culture of Growth.**
- 2. Implement the 4 Ps: Prayer, Presence, Proclamation, Persuasion.**

There needs to be prayer for growth and conversions, activities which keep us in contact with non-Christians like mainly music, Messy Church, Selwyn Centre, the Op Shop. There needs to be proclamation of the good news as we do at Christmas, Easter, Funerals and other times. There needs

to be opportunities for gentle persuasion or challenge which typically we currently offer through Alpha.

3. Practise fruitful evangelism.

4. **Develop engaging worship.** Churches need to review their worship practices to ensure they are engaging to newcomers.

5. Become an inviting and welcoming church.

6. **Make a pathway for seekers to become disciples.** What stepping stones do we offer to help people progress from mild interest, through engagement, attendance, commitment, discipleship, leadership? Currently, those steps are too big for people to take, so they just don't move forward. We are currently trying to make it easier for Messy Church people to come on Sunday by having a continuation of the theme from Messy Church to the following Sunday morning. That is a good example of making a pathway. But we need to build more them.

7. Begin a planned journey of growth.

The year's programme needs to be designed to incorporate these factors to allow suitable progress and opportunities. Since the conference I have met with the wardens to decide how to apply its insights to our situation. We also have the other initiative of the City-to-City revitalization project starting next year. That will build on the ideas from LYCIG. It will involve a study of the parish with another survey designed for that purpose. There is to be opportunity for the Consultant to meet with individuals, the Vestry and me. He will look at Census results for the area to understand our local culture and opportunities and then offer recommendations for Vestry to adopt. Part of the work next year will be training in relational Evangelism.

According to the Church Life Survey you completed recently, talking to your friends about your faith is quite doable for 75% answered that you feel at ease talking about your faith. That is tremendous – well done. 12% actively look for opportunities to do so, while 61% will do so if the opportunity comes up. The training next year will equip us to be more confident and ready to have those conversations. Amazingly, 83% of you responded that you would be prepared to invite friends or relative to church – that is so encouraging to learn! Let me encourage you to keep doing inviting. A survey in Britain revealed a large proportion of the community would visit a church if they were invited by someone.

While we are on survey results 32% expect that this church will be the same size in 10 years' time while 44% expect it to be bigger.

As we prepare for the City-to-City Revitalisation programme next year, our first focus is Step One – to develop that Culture of Prayer for Growth. We also intend to adjust our services, work on our welcoming and of course plan events for next year.

So, let's come back to prayer for growth. God intends his church to grow. Jesus told his disciples to go out and make disciples of all nations in the Great Commission – that means growth. We heard the parable of the mustard seed. He said that a tiny seed will grow into a large tree. It is the same with the Kingdom of God. It grows. Do you remember "MRS GREN" in your bio lessons at school. It is an acronym for the characteristics of life. G is for growth. Jesus said he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. If he is life, his kingdom must grow. If we are not growing, something is preventing that.

The other parable was of the yeast in the dough. Yeast is tiny. You put some granules into the dough and the whole loaf is affected. It swells up much larger than the initial dough mixture. In the parable the quantity is big – really big: The large amount of dough was 3 measures which totalled 22 litres. This would make bread to feed around 100 people! The point of the parable is that the Kingdom of God will affect all people.

From the eleven apostles Jesus left at his ascension, the church grew and grew. We hear that through the Book of Acts:

Acts 2:41 (After Pentecost) "The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Acts 4:4 (When Peter and John were arrested for preaching about Jesus.) “Many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.”

Acts 9:31 (After the conversion of Saul.) “The church ... grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.”

Acts 16:5 (Paul on his second missionary journey.) “So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.”

Acts 19:20 (After the Council of Jerusalem.) “In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”

That growth has continued down the ages until the church across the world numbers 2.5 billion.¹ While we see decline in the West, worldwide the church is growing - by 2.7% p.a. in sub-Saharan Africa and 1.5% p.a. in Asia.

Psalm 127:1 “Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.”

It is God who brings things about – we have to work but we need him too. Paul wrote along similar lines to the Corinthian Church where he made the point that human leaders have a role of planting and watering, but it is God who gives the growth.

⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.

⁹ For we are God's fellow-workers; you are God's field, God's building.

The key word is perhaps that we are God’s fellow workmen. We cannot do it without God and he will not do it without us. What an honour and a privilege to work alongside God!

Paul adds that the foundation of the Church is Jesus Christ:

¹¹ For no-one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

So the first step of the LYCIG programme is to develop a culture of prayer for growth. The majority of you think that this church will be larger in 10 years time. Well, it is God who will give the increase. We need to be ask him to do.

John Wesley wrote, “God does nothing but in answer to prayer.” It is the way in which we are fellow workmen with God.

LYCIG have given us a Prayer for Growth. Vestry has agreed that we will use this consistently in our services and we want you all to adopt it into your own prayer routines.

God of Mission,
who alone brings growth to your Church,
send your Holy Spirit to give:
Vision to our planning,
wisdom to our actions,
joy to our worship
and power to our witness.
Help our church to grow in numbers,
in spiritual commitment to you,
and in service to our local community,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It would be easy to rattle it off as a formulaic prayer. But it makes some significant requests.

After acknowledging that God is the source of growth, we ask for the Holy Spirit to give us what we need:

¹ https://www.kentuckytoday.com/baptist_life/7-encouraging-trends-of-global-christianity-in-2022/article_6a1f9336-861a-11ec-aab8-dbfef19c7929.html

- vision to our planning,
- wisdom to our actions,
- power to our witness.

And we want our church to grow in numbers, but not just numerically but in spiritual commitment to God and in service to our local community.

The prayer has an upward focus towards God (seeking vision and growing in spiritual commitment), and inward focus on our fellowship (wisdom in our actions and growth in numbers) and an outward focus of service to the community and power to our witness.

I think it is a well-crafted prayer. You could use it as headings for expansion. For example, at present, we are in a planning phase. So, the portion asking for vision for our planning is especially relevant and you could expand that in further prayer. As we come near to Christmas, you might be praying about people coming to Christmas services and hearing a gospel message.

Alison has made bookmarks of the prayer for each of you to have and to hold so that you can use it daily in prayer. From the survey I see that very nearly half of us have a daily devotional. You can take this bookmark into your devotional time and develop prayer for our parish to grow again. There are many ways you could develop prayer in that general direction. Perhaps others who are not in that habit might even use this bookmark to help make a start of daily prayer.

The wardens are going to present each of you with a Prayer for Growth bookmark to take home and use.

We pray for us all as we use this prayer:

May God bless us with a spirit of grace, supplication and faith, so that we may believe and pray that grace will reach more and more people and cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. Amen.

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