

The idolatry of growth

By [Tom Cheatham](#)

September 17, 2010

Originally posted at [The Connection](#).

Then

Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" (Matthew 16:24-26)

I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world.... In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love (Mother Teresa).

The Church is called to be Christ's faithful evangelist... to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ (Presbyterian Church USA Book of Order).

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Prompted by an e-newsletter I read, I checked out today an essay* by Jack Marcum, of PCUSA Research Services. It's all about the decline once again in the membership of my denomination. For example, in 2008, the net loss was 3.1%; in the past year, 2.9%. The PCUSA has lost more members than it has gained every year since it was created in 1983 by the reunion of the PCUS and the UPCUSA. In 2009, more than 6 in 10 of the losses were to "other," Marcum reports, a category that mostly includes people placed on the inactive roll. In other words, they moved to the ranks of the dechurched. And, as Marcum further observes, people join and leave *congregations*, not denominations. The implication is that local factors like dissatisfaction with some aspect of the life of the church account for folks heading for the backdoor exit. Both my personal and pastoral experience confirms that this is true.

Tom Ehrich, the author of the report** that led me to the Marcum piece, has some other stats for 2009 to share from PCUSA sources:

- It closed 94 congregations in 2009, most closings in a decade.
- It lost 3% of its membership.
- It only opened 20 new congregations, lowest in a decade.
- The mean size of a PCUSA congregation fell below 100 members for the first time.

- 64% of its 10,623 congregations fall below the level of sustained viability.
- Non-viability means fewer full-time clergy. One-third of its non-viable congregations have no pastoral leadership at all. Nearly half of its 13,400 active clergy have no congregational employment.
- Presbyterians continue to gravitate to larger congregations, with the largest 1,500 congregations accounting for half of the denomination's total membership.

It's interesting to read these numbers at the same time I'm working through Brandon O'Brien's wonderful book *The Strategically Small Church: Intimate, Authentic, Nimble, Effective*. O'Brien, the editor of *Leadership Journal* questions the prevailing wisdom that makes mega the norm and numerical growth the measure of success. Most churches of any stripe, he points out, are small churches. Megachurches make up a tiny percentage of congregations in the US. Small is actually the norm, then. If someone should object that 3000 were added on Pentecost to a congregation numbering 120 (Acts 1:15), O'Brien points out that many different nations or ethnicities were represented in the gathered throng to hear Peter's sermon. 3000 refers to the *total* number saved, who then dispersed to their respective homes, not to the size of a resulting Jerusalem church.

The most compelling material so far for me has been O'Brien's discussion of the church as nimble. Instead of focusing on doing everything for everybody, having programs that other churches are already doing, the small, nimble church should do one or two things well, with committed leadership in place instead of warm bodies who fill a slot but aren't really passionate about the cause. That cuts down on the amount of money, buildings, and staff necessary to keep things going. Success is faithful response to a particular need in the community the church is uniquely equipped to meet.

I tend to think that the emphasis on growth (or loss) in the PCUSA and other oldline churches is evidence of our buy-in to the idolatry of our culture, which equates big with better. Like poor people obsessed with money because they don't have it and rich people focused on it because they want even more, the PCUSA keeps wringing its hands over losses, focusing on outcomes and cultural definitions instead of gospel faithfulness and its own standards. The church, nationally and in every one of its congregations, needs to *stop*, today, this moment, worrying about what it increasingly doesn't have—members, money—and start emphasizing gospel values like building relationships, meeting incarnationally the unique needs of the communities large and small where there are congregations, living with compassion and justice, and trusting God to bring growth in his time and his way.

Behind every one of the losses to "other" (inactivity, being dechurched) is a story. Somebody got his or her feelings hurt over a matter an outsider would consider trivial. There was conflict over a pastor, a staff member or a program. Family relationships broke down, and the former husband or wife left a congregation, maybe with the kids. A misguided member ran somebody off with a hurtful comment. The congregation became irrelevant or exclusive or unwilling to entertain new ideas, and the departed member got fed up

with wasting time and energy trying to change things. *It's the reasons behind the losses we need to be concerned about and address, not the numbers themselves.*

Our congregations will not grow, the PCUSA will keep losing members, unless we focus anew on authentic relationships and committed ministry in churches large and small, until we turn our eyes upon Jesus and away from the idols of our culture that for so long have claimed our attention.

[*http://www.pcusa.org/resource/comparative-statistics-2009-introductory-essay-mem/](http://www.pcusa.org/resource/comparative-statistics-2009-introductory-essay-mem/)

***Church Wellness*, 9/16/10

© 2010 Tom Cheatham