

## **PRESSURISED TO GROW?**

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In the first seventy or so years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Baptists, along with other denominations, lost two-thirds of their membership. Then, which church decline was the order of the day, it was sufficient for a Baptist minister to be 'faithful'. In those days ministers drew some comfort from the second half of Isaiah 6, where God tells the prophet that people will take no notice of what he has to say. Today, however, the climate has changed. The massive decline we Baptists once experienced has stopped, thank God, and overall our churches are now just about holding our own. Indeed, some of our Baptist churches are experiencing dramatic growth. As a result church growth has become the order of the day. People expect their ministers not just to be faithful, but to be 'fruitful'. Indeed, it has not been unknown for ministers to be asked to leave their church for failing to produce sufficient new members. Church growth – for the most part quite unfairly – has become the yardstick of a minister's worth. This makes it all the more tough for ministers when their churches fail to grow. At this point let me go into personal testimony mode – indeed, the initial title given to me by the editor for this piece ('How do you handle lack of growth in your church?') calls for personal honesty. At one stage my ministry went through a lean period, and at the time I freely confess that I found the subsequent lack of growth difficult to handle. My first church had quadrupled in size during the thirteen years of my ministry there, so that when I came to my second church I had every expectation that growth would again characterise my ministry. But to my astonishment the reverse initially proved to be the case – a radical cull of the church roll together with deaths, resignations and people moving away resulted in substantial numerical decline. Thank God, over the last three years the tide has now well and truly turned: visitors abound and baptisms are up; the size of our Sunday morning congregation is now a problem; and, even as I write, some 14 people are asking for membership. But, there was a stage when I almost despaired of the church. How did I then cope? By re-discovering Christ's call to go the way of the Cross. Gosh, that sounds incredibly pious – but nonetheless, that was the truth of the matter. As a result of going on retreat I was reminded again of the call of Jesus to 'follow me', and not to allow myself to be bothered by the 'successes' of others. This did not mean that I then took no notice of what 'successful' pastors like Bill Hybels of Willowcreek and of Rick Warren of Saddleback had to say, but it does mean that I don't feel any pressure to model myself on them. Jesus, and Jesus alone, is our model – and, dare I say it without appearing too self-righteous, I have discovered again that his grace, is more than sufficient.

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