

Without Spot or Blemish

by Pastor Richard O'Fill

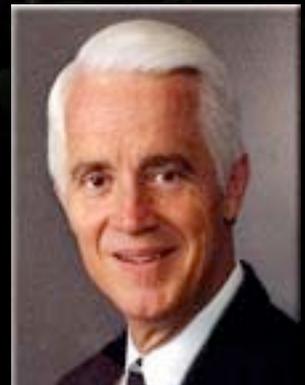
Many kinds of organizations exist—political, business, social, and of course religious organizations. A person can hold membership in several organizations at the same time. Why? Because an organization is a group of people who have agreed to do a particular activity together based on a common goal with a particular set of guidelines or organizational principles.

It's no secret that a church is an organization. Some churches are organized when a pastor goes door to door in a community, announcing that they intend to establish a church. They ask the people what kind of church they'd like to attend. When the church is finally organized, its teachings and doctrines reflect a consensus of the peoples' expectations.

Churches begun this way are often called community churches. They are basically owned and operated by the local congregation. Their doctrines tend to be generic, and often the church is not affiliated with any particular denominations, or if so only loosely. Community churches tend to keep the bulk of financial resources for use by the local congregation.

The founders of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination did not begin by going door to door, asking the people what they wanted the church to be. Early Adventists originally didn't intend to organize a new denomination. They were members of many denominations and considered themselves part of what they called a "movement." What they held in common was their belief in Jesus' soon coming. Their message was their mission, and it was to warn the world to get ready. Early on they called themselves "believers" because that was the best way to describe those who had accepted the message of Jesus' soon coming.

In the early 1860s the new denomination was organized, but even then the members continued to be message-driven. The Lord blessed their efforts, and as a result other congregations were planted and the denomination began to grow.



Pastor Richard O'Fill, currently a departmental director with the Florida Conference, also appears on Laymen Ministries Cross Talk on 3ABN. This is an excerpt from his latest book, Standing Firm.

As the years have passed the emphasis seems to have shifted. It has now become more common to speak about church growth than to speak about the message of Jesus' soon coming. At first glance it may appear that preaching a message and planting churches are the same thing. Although compatible, the concepts are not necessarily the same. When the goal is to preach the message, its integrity and practice are paramount. When church planting is the goal, the message may vary from congregation to congregation or, as in the case of our brethren of other faiths, may simply be the result of a consensus among the members.

In order to stand firm in the last days we must understand the purpose of the church. Only then will we be able to determine how to accomplish the purpose in a manner consistent with the message that the church stands for.

If you have a canary, you feed it birdseed. If you have a horse, you feed it grain. If you have a snake, you feed it mice. What we understand the church to be will determine how we relate to it and what we invest in it.

Is the church supposed to be like other organizations? Is it supposed to be like all of them, some of them, or none of them? How we answer these questions will determine what the visible church will look like in the twenty-first century.

In recent years the numerical growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been phenomenal. During the twentieth century it grew from fewer than a million members to approximately 10 million members. When we think only in terms of numbers, it's not difficult to extrapolate that if the church continues to grow at the present rate, by the year 2025 there could well be more than 40 million Seventh-day Adventists around the world.



There's nothing wrong with numbers per se. God is interested in numbers. He isn't willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. All is a lot of people! Remember the story Jesus told of the banquet? In the parable the host was so eager to have many guests that he instructed his servants, "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled" (Luke 14:23). "That my house may be filled" implies numbers. God isn't trying to see how few will be saved. He desires that everyone be saved, but He knows that it will not be that way. Although many are called, few are chosen for the simple reason that the majority of people refuse to receive the salvation being offered (Matt. 22:14).

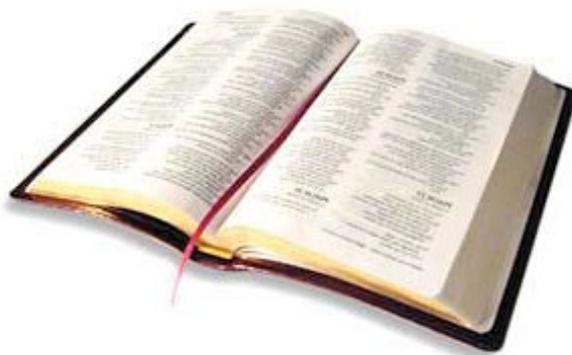
So how should we measure church growth? Should it be by the burgeoning number of members? Maybe by how many churches are planted? If the church is only about numbers, all we need to use for measuring our growth is an adding machine.

The people who become members of the church are a product of what we preach. What we preach—and these days how we preach—increasingly depends on the market we are trying to reach. "Market" is a word used by Madison Avenue. When they say "market,"

they mean the particular group of people that a product is targeted to reach. If the market happens to be young people, then the product will be crafted around what has been found to be attractive or appealing to them.

A few years ago George Barna wrote a book titled *The Frog in the Kettle*. It suggested that if the Christian church is going to keep up with the times, it will have to learn from the marketing methods of Madison Avenue. In many places the warning seems to have been taken seriously, and now in the church it's not unusual to hear such expressions as "market," "user-friendly," and "meeting needs." Many sincere people believe that the church cannot grow unless it meets the needs of the market it's trying to win. Mega-churches often design programs that appeal to those they consider to be their particular market.

And so times have changed. In the early days the emphasis was on preaching a message that was called "the truth." The emphasis now seems to focus on church growth, planting churches, and developing strategies to meet the perceived needs of people.



If numerical growth is the purpose of the church, then applying Madison Avenue marketing principles may be useful. There are certain principles of organization and team building, as well as of communication and salesmanship. When these principles are followed, an organization can have success even if the product is alcohol or tobacco. The fact that an organization is having success at what it's doing has little to do with whether what it is doing is right or even according to the will of God.

On a flight from the Midwest I found myself sitting next to a huge man with tattooed arms. His head was shaved. I asked him what he did for a living, and he replied he was a professional wrestler with the World Wrestling Federation. For the next hour we had a most fascinating conversation. He told me that wrestling is classified as sports entertainment and that it's rigged. I laughed when he told me that he and his brother, who is his twin, are the "bad guys." The crowd is supposed to boo them. The fans seem to love the ruse, and in recent years arenas where they are headliners have been packed.

The similarities between having a packed arena and a packed church can have a lot more in common than a person might think, especially if what's taking place in both places is being done to please the fans. A principle of success in business is to give the people what they want. This is relevant to the subject of church growth for the simple reason that it's possible to grow churches by simply giving people what they want. But perhaps we should ask ourselves some questions.

Is the purpose of the church to give people what they want? If church growth is only about numbers, the answer can be yes. But is church growth really only about numbers? The answer to the question depends upon whether we see the church as an organization or an organism.



While church growth includes a numerical aspect, it's more than how many happen to be present on a particular Sabbath.

The Word of God gives height and depth to church growth: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-27).

While church growth includes the number of adherents and the number of churches established, these can be appreciated only to the extent that the body of Christ is providing an atmosphere in which its members are being washed and cleansed by the Word, that is, by the message being preached.

The message given to the Seventh-day Adventist Church by the Holy Spirit is a message essential for those Christians who will survive the deceptions of the last days. God is not trying to complicate the lives of those He is saving by arbitrarily putting up a long list of difficult doctrines. History teaches that there comes a time when true doctrine can actually be a matter of spiritual life or death. "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge:



16,000 seat mega church in Houston, Texas

because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children" (Hosea 4:6).

Another current goal is to develop the church as a community. Although the church is indeed a community, and so it must be, if its purpose is only to be a community, then it would simply be a matter of applying certain community-building techniques. Just about anything can hold a group together, blending it into a community. It may be appreciation

for the Beatles. It may be a fondness for square dancing. It may be alcoholism. But these do not constitute the kind of community referred to in the New Testament. While community can easily be built around a charismatic figure or a common cause, the true church is to be built on Christ through His Word.

The devil isn't so concerned with how many attend or do not attend the services. He may even find it advantageous to grow large churches as long as he can control the agenda. That can often mean making fellowship paramount, while diminishing the importance of doctrine.

There was a time when families were attracted to denominations that they felt preached the truth. In this age of consumerism families generally are not so concerned about the doctrines as they are interested in whether or not the congregation meets their felt needs.

In recent years a key question for both clergy and members is How shall we worship? There's a growing trend to design worship services that offer something for everyone. It's felt that one style of worship is as good as the next and that we must be open-minded. One day Jesus was talking with a woman from Samaria. She asked Him, in effect, where she should worship, in her temple or His (John 4:20)?

Jesus' answer to the woman at the well is applicable to our current questions about worship. Notice His answer was not a "where" answer or a "how" answer but a "what" answer. "The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him" (verse 23). According to this text, worship is not about style or location or programs or methods. It isn't something to choreograph or script, but rather it's something that the Spirit of God must put in our hearts. True worship is not what we do to please ourselves but something we do to please God.

When we understand what the church is for, then we'll know how it must operate. The purpose of the church must not be left to guesswork or private interpretation, nor is it to be driven by the demands of contemporary culture. "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-13).



Jesus further amplified the purpose and mission of the church: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19, 20).

These verses reveal the church as an organization that is sent to all the world to preach the gospel to all who will listen. Not only is the gospel a proclamation, but it is also a teaching ministry. "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" signifies that the gospel is not only a belief system, but it is also to become a way of life.

These texts do not quantify the church; rather they qualify its mission. As the church as a whole is increasing in number and as its organization is growing and even prospering, it's

important that the message which is its spiritual backbone be kept paramount. Although the church must be organized, the church is not to be an organization like a corporation. And because of its mission, it must not use marketing practices that are inconsistent with its high calling.

While we are growing in numbers and planting churches along the way, we must not forget our real purpose, which is as a community of believers to continue to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our focus as a fellowship should be to allow the Holy Spirit to prepare us and the families we represent to be ready to meet Jesus, without spot or wrinkle, when He comes in glory to meet His bride, the church.

