

Church growth is a sham

by **Michael L. Gregg**

Church growth is a sham, and on most days I believe this to be true.

As a minister for more than 15 years in small progressive churches, I am aware that most liberal churches, especially Baptist ones, will never be considered megachurches. For me this leads to the haunting feeling that progressive Baptist and other mainline churches are declining. Maybe that's true. With that in mind, I also am aware that the terminology has changed and we tend to speak more of church health rather than church growth. And again, on most days, I still believe this to be true.

But, I have noticed that the church where I pastor is, remarkably, in a season of growth. Over the last 18 months Royal Lane Baptist Church has added more than 50 new members, along with many others who regularly attend but don't necessarily subscribe to the boundaries of official membership. With this increase in membership and attendance, I still find myself overanalyzing the process, hoping to find a proven method to continue to increase the number of people joining the church's vision of inclusion and justice.

I am increasingly convinced, however, that there isn't a magic strategy for growth in progressive Baptist circles. Each church is different, with a variety of unique people with distinctive identities in distant locations. That being the case, rather than coming up with a five-step plan for church growth, it is important for me to lean into the stories of my community and the people who attend Royal Lane. Their stories add to the character and purpose of Royal Lane and, wonderfully, change and grow our church for the better.

As I think about members who have joined recently I am reminded of their journeys and what brought them to Royal Lane. These stories reveal what is important to my particular community and what "church growth" strategies will work for our church in the future. The first and most prevalent reason for the addition of members to Royal Lane has been a desire for inclusion. Royal Lane, an Alliance of Baptists' congregational partner, has always been a church that emphasizes and celebrates diversity. In fact our slogan is, "Diverse People United in Christ."

We are multicultural, multiracial, broad in orientation and gender identity, diverse in educational backgrounds and economic resources, and divergent in political beliefs. The new members who have joined Royal Lane recognize that the church values diversity and seeks to be a place more distinct than their neighborhoods, jobs, soccer games and gyms. Royal Lane believes that to truly reveal the beautiful mosaic of diversity, everyone is encouraged to bring their unique qualities, skills and personhood to the work of the church.

Many who have recently joined Royal Lane are people who have been hurt by their previous churches and have been away from the church for a very long time. Many of our LGBTQ+ members grew up Baptist and value the traditions and practices of Baptist life. Yet many

LGBTQ+ Christians left their churches because they could not live authentic lives and follow their callings as loved and created people. One recent attendee commented that Royal Lane was the first place he felt like he could be himself. Other new members have been hurt by constricting theologies and haphazard pastoral care that sought to minimize their deep and important stories. Our churches will grow into healthy congregations when we listen with greater intention, compassion and acceptance.

Growing churches have fun. One of the most significant questions I asked of search committees as I interviewed for senior pastor positions was, “How does your church have fun?” I knew that if a church had a sense of humor and a whimsical personality, it would have a good foundation on which to grow. Royal Lane has many intergenerational events where people young and old have fun together. On Wednesday evenings my eight-year-old and five-year-old daughters sit and eat dinner with the senior women in the church. They think that is a lot of fun.

Royal Lane also has a famous pumpkin patch where families, volunteers and patrons spend time with each other in an informal and open environment. My favorite event is our yearly karaoke night on the Sunday before Mardi Gras. Children, youth and adults share a yummy pancake dinner while belting out their favorite John Denver, Dolly Parton and Disney tunes. It is now my tradition as pastor to join in the fun and serenade the attendees with a classic Backstreet Boys song. I believe that churches need to take their worship of God seriously, but not take themselves too seriously. If churches can play and have fun together, they will grow in intimacy and love for their shared work.

I also have witnessed numerical and relational growth at Royal Lane because of the congregation’s desire for justice. It is important to provide food for the hungry, homes to the houseless and freedom to the captives, but until we do the work to change the systems that keep people hungry, houseless and incarcerated, the hurting and hopeless voices will continue to increase. The Missions Committee at Royal Lane recently created a vision statement consisting of three pillars. Each pillar asks the committee to give priority to organizations and activities that decrease marginalization, poverty and prejudice. Through this increased energy around a central vision, the work of the church considers acts of social justice and advocacy imperative to a Christian life and the church’s health. If a congregation becomes increasingly internal and self-absorbed, it can often fail to hear and respond to the outside voices yearning for justice.

I still believe church growth is a sham. The landscape of the institution is changing and most churches feel the pains of an aging building, decreasing membership and waning energy. But I also believe if congregations soothe the wounds of those hurt by the institutions of their youth, value the stories and diversity that makes life bountiful and beautiful, intentionally make time for fun and play, and reach outwards to advocate for systems that build up rather than destroy, then growth can and will happen.

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