

## **Growing Healthy Churches? Part 2 Counting Sheep**

In the “Growing Healthy Churches” (GHC) plan of  
Paul D. Borden, numbers override faithfulness

An analysis by Tim Matsis  
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## **GHC and Big Churches**

Evangelism is a good thing. However, foundational to GHC's mandate for "change" is the belief that "all healthy churches grow".<sup>1</sup> This article contrasts GHC's measure of a "growing healthy church" with the Adventist model.

## **Thinking Big with GHC**

"Small congregations... are consumers of products, services and pastors."<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to the repeated calls of Ellen White to get out of big churches and go to work in the highways and byways, GHC emphasises big churches and big church thinking.<sup>3</sup>

In the writer's experience, the primacy given to big churches in the GHC programme has the effect of authorising pastors to grow the church "at all costs". After all, "What does it matter how faithful people apparently are, if the church is not getting bigger?" According to Borden:

. . . many leaders in various positions in church life say that God is primarily interested in faithfulness. We begged to differ with that theology. We wanted to communicate that God is equally interested in fruitfulness along with faithfulness.<sup>4</sup>

Note that Borden's "fruitfulness", is not the fruit of the Spirit (such as "love, joy, or peace").

Rather, it is "fruitfulness" that can be measured with numbers. He states:

What we count we value . . . Accountability is a basic requirement for change and must be based upon objective measurement.<sup>5</sup>

GHC then, is designed to change churches and make them more numerically "fruitful". The stark reality of this all-consuming priority is that biblical standards such as "faithfulness" cease to become paramount in church life. In GHC ideology, "[f]aithfulness is important and valued if the faithfulness is producing fruit."<sup>6</sup> This attack on biblical standards stems from

Borden's belief that in many cases, valuing faithfulness, is essentially an excuse for a lack of success.<sup>7</sup>

**The measures of success.** In GHC, "fruitfulness" is measured in two ways. The first measure is the number of new attendees. According to Borden, if a congregation increases its attendance by 5% per year, it is "growing".<sup>8</sup> A church that does not grow by 5% is "unhealthy" and requires change.<sup>9</sup>

The second measure of growth is financial contributions. Borden writes:

. . . we want pastors to know how to increase giving, how to do financial stewardship well, and become responsible for raising the dollars to support the missions and visions being developed.<sup>10</sup>

If a church has increased its attendance by 5% and financial contributions are on the rise, it is "growing". If it is "growing", it is by definition, "healthy".

**Similarity to secular business models.** Such bold references in GHC to measurable productivity at the expense of "faithfulness" are not entirely surprising. Borden does not hide the fact that he has made use of secular business models to develop GHC.<sup>11</sup> In most business models, social and environmental measures only have real significance when they can be measured in financial terms. Borden's view that "faithfulness is important and valued if the faithfulness is producing fruit"<sup>12</sup> is a striking echo of this reality.

**Responsibility for success.** GHC is leader focused.<sup>13</sup> It rewards the conference officers and the local pastors for good results and purports to hold them accountable for lack of church growth. In Borden's churches, this played out as follows:

We informed [conference officers] that their future employment with the [conference] would depend . . . whether the seven to ten congregations they would work with intensely for a year grew in average worship attendance by a minimum of five percent. If most of the seven to ten congregations grew, they would get a raise. If however the majority failed to grow, they would need to find new employment."<sup>14</sup>

Likewise with church pastors:

Pastors of non-growing congregations . . . who left that current congregation would not receive [conference] assistance or endorsement in locating another congregation in the [conference]. We promised them that we would help them find a congregation in another [conference] but not this one.<sup>15</sup>

Thus the responsibility for church growth rests with the local pastor and then with his conference “employer”. This “carrot and stick” approach runs counter to the Adventist belief that ministry is a “calling” not an “employment for wages” and that our officers are administrators rather than taskmasters.<sup>16</sup>

### Consequences

The consequences of making faithfulness a non-issue, and granting centre place to numerical increases in return for financial bonuses, are dire. Once faithfulness is relegated to second place, and measurement is limited to the number of new attendees and increases in offerings, other aspects of faithfulness will cease to have any real meaning at all. In such a situation, churches are likely to be pressured to adopt the policy of “doing whatever works”. Or, as one person put it, adopting the policy of, “the end justifies the means”.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps recognising this frightening reality, GHC attempts to cure the problem by allowing churches to create “boundary policies” that define how far a pastor can go when leading the church to “grow”.<sup>18</sup>

**Small churches abandoned.** With primacy given to big churches and big church thinking, small churches will increasingly be seen as a drain on the conference. They either need to get big, fast, or they will need to be abandoned and eventually closed so that the conference can use resources to support larger congregations. This is what happened in Paul Borden’s church.<sup>19</sup> (This may not become a dominant theme in a smaller conference.)

**Premature baptisms.** While GHC promotes measuring the increase in the number of *attendees*, Seventh day Adventist administrators typically record the number of *members* in official statistics. As a result, pastors may be under pressure to join people to the church as members without them being joined properly to Christ.<sup>20</sup> Similar to a loan shark's scheme offering "buy now—pay later", "baptize now—teach later" becomes the church's policy. Unfortunately, half-converted and biblically illiterate members are a source of weakness to the church, especially when important decisions are being made. Rather than knowing their Bibles, in many cases they may find themselves surrendering their conscience to those in official positions whom they trust to "know" the right answers.

**Worldly evangelistic programmes.** In other cases the writer has observed, GHC results in activities undertaken by churches which are little less than bizarre. Things such as playing "spiritually themed" popular movies in church on Sabbath afternoon and running live secular rock music during evangelistic efforts. The bottom line seems to be, "Use whatever will bring them in".

Such strange and worldly occurrences often cause sensible, secular people, to scratch their heads wondering, "Who are these Christians trying to be?" The sad thing is that these secular people might have otherwise been interested in the truth, had it not been so unfaithfully represented to them.

**Money talks.** Since the pastor is responsible for church growth, he looks to means of conducting evangelism that he can control. Instead of evangelism being premised on witnessing followed up by reaping events, numbers-driven leadership has the tendency to try and "buy" a larger congregation. Churches and even conferences are thus commended for draining the church

finances to pay for glamorous evangelistic ideas. Prestigious locations, celebrity appearances and lavish catering, all backed by copious amounts of advertising. The Bible order of sowing and reaping is exchanged for costly, high powered events followed by the inculturation of instant converts.

**Loss of members.** Contrary to the claims of some promoters of GHC in the Adventist Church, GHC has a negative effect on church membership. In an Adventist context, the shift in focus to counting converts and money can drive biblically-focused members away from the church. Some of these will never be recovered. GHC considers this loss to be acceptable because it will ultimately help to grow the church.<sup>21</sup>

**Loss of finances.** In the writers' experience, as people leave the church or lose confidence in the church and its local leadership, many send their money elsewhere. Independent ministries do very well financially as a result of GHC. The reasoning of disaffected members is, "If the minister is running a circus instead of preaching the Adventist message, I'll send my money to someone who is preaching it!"

### **The Adventist "Healthy Church"**

**The primacy of faithfulness, not popularity.** Faithfulness is integral to Adventism.<sup>22</sup> That is, the coming of Jesus does not depend on people accepting the message, but on the message being preached "as a witness".<sup>23</sup>

Further, in the light of Bible prophecy, Adventists are preparing for a time when almost the whole world will stand in opposition to the unpopular truths we are commissioned to present.<sup>24</sup> Such expectations allow no manoeuvring to accommodate popularity as a measure of success. We are happy if others choose to join with us in sharing the last message to the world,

but we are ever conscious that popularity can be an indication that we have failed to carry out our commission faithfully. We are a remnant!

Further, God does not promise that we will always see the returns of our labours, even in our lifetime. In the biblical model of sowing and reaping, some just plant, others just water; it is God who imparts the life that determines when the seed will germinate, emerge from the ground, and become visible to the human eye. Elijah counted only himself faithful in Israel, but the Divine eye counted 7000. Man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart.<sup>25</sup>

**Biblical examples.** The Bible faithfully records the lives of heroes who lived and died in faith without seeing the promises. Men like Noah, who after 120 years of preaching took only eight people into the ark, would be unemployed under the GHC model! Abraham, who never saw his great multitude of descendants except with the eye of faith, might have been led to believe by his “GHC Conference President” that he should go back to Babylon. Christ Himself, might have been let go after His career crippling sermon in John chapter 6, after which, “many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him.”<sup>26</sup>

**Responsibility for church growth.** Stories like the feeding of the 5,000 and of the 4,000 indicate that human faithfulness combined with divine power is the key to true success. Paul, who was ever conscious of his need of divine power in his work for God, made it clear that the worker simply cooperates with God. He says:

Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.<sup>27</sup>

The GHC model fails to acknowledge that it is a divine act which reconciles the human to God. The Book of Acts records that after Pentecost, “the Lord added to the church daily such as

should be saved.”<sup>28</sup> As God’s stewards, we are instructed to “go and work” in the Lord’s vineyard, and God’s promise is that His Word will not return to Him void.<sup>29</sup>

**Financial success.** Adventists do not subscribe to the “prosperity gospel”. God’s blessings are conditional, but they are not always financial or temporal. Therefore, while increased giving might indicate increased spiritual life, it also may not. Paul warns that such ideas are the “perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness” His instruction? “from such withdraw thyself”.<sup>30</sup>

In the well known story of the widow giving her two mites, Jesus commended the woman whom He said had, “cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury”.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Ananias and Sapphira gave a sizeable gift to the New Testament church, which might have recommended their pastor for a raise under GHC, but the size of their gift did not atone for their unfaithfulness to their vows. The increase in the budget of the New Testament church under the GHC regime would not accurately portray the “health” of the church, nor sustain the justice of the deaths of the unfaithful givers.

In God’s eyes:

A congregation may be the poorest in the land. It may be without the attractions of any outward show; but if the members possess the principles of the character of Christ, angels will unite with them in their worship. The praise and thanksgiving from grateful hearts will ascend to God as a sweet oblation.”<sup>32</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Throughout Scripture, the one theme that is above all others, which has been the cause of sacrifice and even martyrdom for the sake of Christ, has been the divine imperative for the Christian to be faithful. It is faithfulness, not human ideas of success, that will determine our

ultimate success in ministry and our eternal destiny. Jesus says, “be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”<sup>33</sup>

We are promised that when our work is, “conducted in accordance with His will, He Himself is responsible for the results.” “Laborers together with God” (1 Corinthians 3:9), our part is faithful compliance with His directions.<sup>34</sup>

NEXT: Watch for Part 3: Is the Church Stopping the Church From Growing?

Tim Matsis is a lawyer who lectures in law, leadership and business at the Southern Institute of Technology in Invercargill, New Zealand. In addition to serving in his local church, he has also been involved as a lay member at conference and division levels. He is currently doing further study in the field of Theology and Ministry. He is married to Leslea and has a two year old son named Samuel.

## ENDNOTES

1 Paul D. Borden, *Hit the Bullseye—How Denominations Can Aim the Congregation at the Mission Field* (Abingdon Press 2003), p. 16.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

3 For example, see Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (1905), p. 152 and *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 83.

4 Borden, p. 36.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 73.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 36

9 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 42, 129.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 35. In this passage and the next I have “Advertised” the terminology by exchanging “regional leaders” for “conference officers”. Likewise, “region” has been exchanged for “conference”.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 35. Note that local churches do not directly employ their pastors in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. They are employed by the conference.

16 See in relation to wages, Ellen G White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 65 and *Counsels on Health*, p. 302. In relation to the role of administrators, see Ellen G White *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, p. 33, where she writes, “I was charged not to neglect or pass by those who were being wronged. I was specially charged to protest against any arbitrary or overbearing action toward the ministers of the gospel by those having official authority. Disagreeable though the duty may be, I am to reprove the oppressor, and plead for justice. I am to present the necessity of maintaining justice and equity in all our institutions”.

17 Attributed to Niccolo Machiavelli (AD 1469 - 1527).

18 Borden, p. 130.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

20 “The accession of members who have not been renewed in heart and reformed in life is a source of weakness to the church. This fact is often ignored. Some ministers and churches are so desirous of securing an increase of numbers that they do not bear faithful testimony against unchristian habits and practices.” Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 172.

21 Borden, pp. 73, 78, 79.

22 For example, see the character descriptions required for church office holders in the *Church Manual*.

23 Matthew 24:14

24 Revelation 12-14

25 1 Samuel 16:7

26 John 6:66

27 1 Corinthians 3:5-7

28 Acts 2:47

29 Isaiah 55:11

30 1 Timothy 6:5

31 Mark 12:43

32 Ellen G White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 566.

33 Revelation 2:10

34 Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 138.