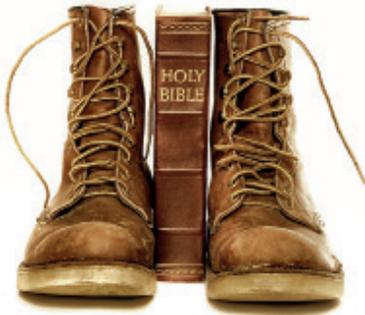


# WE WANT TO GROW!



## bring Jesus

### Making sense of mission

by Rev Dr Steen Olsen



Steen also blogs at LCA eNews. To sign up to his newslist go to [www.lca.org.au/enews](http://www.lca.org.au/enews), insert your email address and tick the box next to 'bring Jesus'. He would also love to hear your thoughts and stories about mission in your context.

You can email him at [steen.olsen@lca.org.au](mailto:steen.olsen@lca.org.au) with 'bring Jesus' as the subject line.

#### Is your congregation on autopilot?

Maybe it is time to pause and reflect on why your congregation does what it does. The fundamentals of what we do don't change. It is still all about God giving us his love and grace through his Son Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work through the word, the water, the bread and the wine. But how effectively that happens in, and through, your congregation might need some work.

Over the last three years the Church of England has conducted a rigorous research project on the effectiveness of their mission in the United Kingdom. The report, *From Anecdote to Evidence*, was released earlier this year.

When it comes to questions of faith, Australia and New Zealand are more like the United Kingdom than they are like the United States. Our cultures and contexts have more in common. Reflecting on these findings from a mainline denomination in the UK has the potential to help us in our congregational and local mission initiatives.

While recognising that there are different kinds of growth, including 'growth in holiness, transformation and commitment', this report is about increasing the number of disciples of Jesus Christ in Church of England congregations and other faith-communities. They ask how effective their various strategies and approaches have been.

'Church growth' is a phrase that has had some bad press over the years—and there are reasons for that—but let's not forget that when we are talking about numerical growth in the church, we are talking about people coming to faith in Jesus. Every page of this report quotes St Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:6: 'I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, **but God made it grow**'. This is not

about techniques for church growth, but about **bringing Jesus** to our families, friends and workmates.

We need to be intentional in prioritising that sort of growth. And when people join us, we need to be intentional about nurturing them as new disciples of Jesus. In fact, **intentional** is a word that is used again and again in this report—in particular, in being intentional about bringing Jesus to those around us who do not know him.

The research found that 'there is no single recipe for growth; there are no simple solutions to decline. The road to growth depends on the context, and what works in one place may not work in another. What seems crucial is that congregations are constantly engaged in reflection; churches cannot soar on autopilot. Growth is a product of good leadership (lay and ordained) working with a willing set of churchgoers in a favourable environment.'

In another place they say that 'growth is not mechanical but results from deep reflection and commitment, a desire to experiment and a desire for renewal'. Knowing **why** you do what you do is more important than what style of worship you adopt. 'Vitality comes with reflection and choice; the particular style is less important than the fact that it has been considered and embraced rather than adopted by default.'

Here is another discovery: 'A church where volunteers are involved in leadership, and where roles are rotated regularly, is likely to be growing—especially where younger members and new members are included in lay leadership and service.'

So how is it going in the UK? Cathedrals and large churches are growing overall. As part of this study



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the researchers also investigated 477 new faith communities (often called fresh expressions of church or 'fxC') that had been established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church. To be included, an fxC needs to have come into being through principles of listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples, and to have the potential to become a mature expression of church, shaped by the gospel, the enduring marks of the church and its cultural context.

The total attendance of these fxCs is now the equivalent of one medium-sized Church of England diocese, or 21,000 people; with an average attendance of 44. Of these people, just under half had not attended church before and around another third were

lapsed Christians who had attended church sometime in the past. Only about a quarter were active Christians when they joined an fxC. More than half of these communities are led by lay people, most of whom have not had any formal training for this role.

That is impressive, especially since this is happening in the post-Christian, post-modern West. Why not also in Australia and New Zealand? Our LCA Board for Local Mission's church planting program is learning from their experience.

What is God calling you to do?

**Steen Olsen serves as the SA/NT Director for Mission and as a member of the LCA Board for Local Mission.**

Read *From Anecdote to Evidence* in full at [churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/report](http://churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/report)



As a church where love comes to life, we identify, support and learn from 'centres of excellence' and establish ways to ensure that the lessons are shared and applied.

LCA Strategic Direction 2013-2018, p14.  
[www.lca.org.au/sd](http://www.lca.org.au/sd)

