

Getting Started Guide

To better acquaint you with *Grow My Church!* here's the *Getting Started Guide* that comes with each Course:

The Grow My Church! Course Getting Started Guide

Get ready to embark on an exciting journey of reflection, rediscovery, and renewal designed to help your church redevelop and flourish. This Getting Started Guide provides an outline of the course, a framework for the work ahead, and some practical advice on how your congregation can get the most out of *The Grow My Church! Course*. Before you go further you may want to either print all of the documents provided on the downloads link page (the Appendix and the Session Outlines), or have your computer nearby for quick reference, as we will be referring to many of these documents as we walk through the Guide.

While the vast majority of North American congregations are no longer growing, not one of them started out that way. At some point in history the promise and exhilaration of growth were part of their natural expectations. The church fellowship knew that evangelism, openness, and outreach would attract new members and create a thriving church that would last through coming generations. The proof was everywhere.

The challenge is far greater today and we all know it. We've all experienced it. *Grow My Church!* is about reflecting on your church's historical journey, acknowledging and learning about today's challenges, and rediscovering that first love within the context of your present ministry and within the context of our time. With this knowledge you can reconnect to your strength and values and organize in ways that will bring renewed health and vitality even in our challenging environment.

The *Grow My Church! Course* is a video-based self-assessment tool. Its ultimate value is in the work participants do addressing the issues raised and taking the action steps that result. The course is designed to prompt important introspection into nine key areas of congregational life. The questions are deliberate in number and content to bring about helpful and challenging dialog.

What the Course Looks Like

Grow My Church! is a 12-session course designed for a small group of 6 to 10 people. Your Grow My Church! Team can consist of your present church board, a separate ad hoc committee, or a combination of the two. Gatherings are set around a meal – here’s an overview of the 12 sessions:

- 1. Introduction** – Our first session introduces team members to one another and to The Grow My Church! Course. Expectations and responsibilities are laid out, gathering times and dates are set.
- 2. Landscape** – The North American church is going through an unprecedented sea change. Here we examine the tremendous challenges and opportunities that provide the backdrop for the renewal of our church.
- 3. Leadership** – Solid leadership is essential to congregational growth. But leadership is not limited to the pastor. Clergy, church board, and organizational structure play crucial roles in how congregations are led.
- 4. Purpose** – Most congregations are long overdue for a conversation about purpose. Here we discuss the importance of purpose, strategic planning and the challenge of handling congregational change.
- 5. Worship** – Providing meaningful Sunday services is essential for church growth. Here we examine our worship services and the key elements of preaching, music and prayer.
- 6. Spirituality** – Healthy churches are deeply rooted, spiritual places that emphasize God’s abiding presence at every turn. Here we consider how our congregation might firm up its spiritual foundation.
- 7. Service** – This is a core conviction for Christians and an underutilized asset for reinvigorating faith communities. Healthy congregations use their gifts to reach beyond themselves and serve others.
- 8. Fellowship** – Churches are essentially families. They need social outlets that nurture us individually and corporately. Here we contemplate healthy ways to organize the social aspects of your community’s life.
- 9. Generosity** – Many churches have inherited a budget-driven institutional culture that hinders growth. Here we look at establishing a mission-driven culture that encourages gratitude and generosity.
- 10. Hospitality** – Graciously welcoming visitors is essential to growing our church. Here we talk about best practices for our hospitality and

hospitality teams. We also discuss what visitors notice and what brings them back.

11. Invitation – Once we discuss how to welcome visitors we must become more active in enlarging our church family. Here we look at some time tested and innovative ways to invite people into our fellowship.

12. Congregational Growth Plan – This session is devoted to drawing up a list of recommendations for our church. Recommendations are specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and include a timeline to assure follow up.

In addition to these 12 sessions your *Grow My Church!* Team is encouraged to undertake two outside projects.

- The first is a field study component called Church Hopping! that is designed to open the eyes of team members to the vibrancy and variety found in other congregations.
- The second is an exercise called The Mystery Worshipper, where non-members, who are unknown to the congregation, are invited to visit your church and evaluate what they see. You can read more about these exercises in document A1.

Each *Grow My Church!* session is 3 hours long and includes a meal. There is no assigned homework; the majority of coursework is done in your small group.

The Grow My Church! Course is designed to stimulate introspection and growth in congregations by translating the sage advice of leading congregational development experts with an easy-to-use format for evaluating your church and take steps to making it a more welcoming place. *Grow My Church!* is intended as a low-cost alternative to consulting firms. Once congregations have completed this course they usually have a much better idea of where their growing edges lie and are better equipped to take action that is focused on their church's strengths.

First Steps: Are Your Leaders Supportive?

The first step is to introduce *Grow My Church!* to your congregation's leaders. We must start at the top. If you are not the pastor, go to your minister or your church council. Allow them to review the materials and

explain why you believe this course can help you take positive steps forward. Their support is integral and care should be taken to present *Grow My Church!* in a spirit of kindness and humility, not as a judgment on leadership. Your desire to implement *Grow My Church!* should be seen as a form of service, a practical way to take more ownership of your congregation and to help accomplish what nearly every church member says they want – a flourishing faith community. Once your leaders lend support you are ready for the next step.

Does Your Congregation Want to Grow?

Once you have reviewed the *Grow My Church!* materials you should do your best to answer this important question: does your church want to grow? As you may suspect, for a variety of reasons, many congregations don't. Renewing declining churches is hard work that, done correctly, may lead to some families leaving, ministries ending, and strained relationships. These are healthy signs. We cannot grow without change, and we cannot change without friction.

Congregational renewal calls for a clarity of purpose and mission that attracts those who desire to deepen their relationship with Jesus and fulfill Christ's call to make disciples of all nations. This may come in serious conflict with members who hold different ideals and may not be inclined to grow. The large number of stagnant and failing churches in North America testifies to a lack of will and clear direction to doing this difficult work. Theologian Mike Regal speaks starkly about many congregations when he says the North American Church will either die because it refuses to change or chooses to die in order to live.

But while congregational renewal is difficult, it is not impossible. There are many, many stories of churches that have come close to folding, but have used the challenge as a springboard to bounce back and become better than ever. They have been open to change and have reaped positive results. This may be the case with your church. To help you discern this we've included the '*Readiness for Change*' questionnaire, labeled A2. You're invited to give copies to your leaders and evaluate the results before you begin the course in order to gauge your church's readiness for change. Before you proceed, you should feel at least somewhat comfortable that your congregation is open to growth.

If there are questions surrounding the main assumption of *Grow My Church!*, namely, that churches are meant to grow, check out a more detailed theological response on the website, simply click on Why Grow? It is crucial that those involved in this course understand that your church was created to grow and that most congregations have the potential to do so. The church is a living, breathing organism intended to flourish and will most often do so on its own when major impediments are put aside.

Choosing Team Members

Grow My Church! is designed for a small team of 6 to 10 church members who receive a formal charge from your leaders then report back with their findings. This group could be your church board (e.g., Vestry or Bishop's Committee). It could also be an independent ad hoc committee. Or it could be a combination of the two. It's important to note that ad hoc committees have proven to be extremely effective at handling important issues like congregational growth. They tend to be goal-oriented and open to new ideas. They tend to be good at meeting deadlines and attract activists, doers, optimists and change-oriented individuals.

Selecting your team members should be done both carefully and prayerfully, paying close attention to diversity, include different ages, races, those with varying lengths of church membership, and other interests. It is recommended, but not obligatory, that your pastor or church leader be a member of the *Grow My Church!* Team.

Before you begin recruiting, you may want to design a brief job description for prospective team members. Feel free to work off of the sample job description provided and labeled A3. You may also want to include documents A4 and A5, which are explained below. Let potential team members review the materials, commitments and expectations. Refer them to the website, www.growmychurch.com, and give them a copy of this Getting Started booklet (a digital copy is included in the download files).

What is important is that participants want to be included, commit to prayer and authentic conversation, and make a covenant to work together for the good of the congregation. It is more effective to have a small team of very committed people than a larger one that is less committed. Also, just because people want to be included does not mean they will be a good fit.

A good rule of thumb is not to look for volunteers, but to look for leaders.

Team Member Covenant

Once your Team Members have been identified they should make a covenant with one another. You should be in formal agreement about matters of attendance, communication, respect, and other group norms. A4 is the *Grow My Church!* Team Member Covenant, which outlines group norms. A5 details the Respectful Communication Guidelines, which help direct conversations. Feel free to edit these to better suit your context. While these should be included with your Team Member job description, they will also be formally signed at your first gathering detailed below. What is important is that your Team Members are in agreement regarding group norms and will pledge to uphold them.

A Formal Charge

Once your *Grow My Church!* Team has been established your church leaders will deliver a formal charge. You can have your church board do it, your congregation do it, or have both deliver the charge.

Your church board should issue this charge after the Team has been selected but before it begins meeting. This charge should be delivered at an official church board meeting and take the form of a formal resolution. Here's what a charge might look like (a digital copy included and labeled A6):

Resolution: We, the leaders of _____ Church formally charge the members of the newly formed *Grow My Church!* Team, which includes (list individual names here) to help us learn more about our congregation. We commend to you the *Grow My Church!* course and ask that you exercise all diligence in prayer and study, and return to us with recommendations. Therefore, in the course of your study we formally charge you to develop a Congregational Growth Plan to help reinvigorate our church and better live out our role in The Great Commission. We pledge to review your recommendations, intending to fruitfully apply your work as the Holy Spirit guides us. We expect to hear back from you in ____ months and we pledge to keep church members involved in our prayers.

This resolution should be read into the formal board minutes and made available to the congregation.

Your church can also charge your Team within the context of Sunday

worship, calling participants forward and concluding with a prayer. This allows your whole membership to participate. Feel free to work off the sample ceremony provided as Appendix Document A7. During this ceremony each participant is given a lapel pin as a symbol and reminder of their work. This pin should be worn during the course of the *Grow My Church!* study to help the congregation identify participants, and to remind Team Members of the serious nature of their work.

A formal charge is critical because it builds an element of accountability and expectation, and keeps this work out in the open before the congregation. You should seek adequate publicity and prayer support at every step along the way, from the formal resolution through the presentation of your church's Congregational Growth Plan.

Your First Team Gathering

Your first gathering will be centered on relationship building, administrative work, and discussing dreams and expectations about your church and the work before you. It is here that the Team Covenants will be signed. Make sure Team members bring their calendars and planners so you can coordinate schedules. Subsequent gatherings will be devoted to individual topics as we reflect on the crucial elements of congregational renewal.

You will notice that the course is conversation-based. Questions are intentionally open-ended in form and few in number. They are specifically designed to get your Team focused and centered for reflection and discussion about particular aspects of congregational growth. There is no assigned homework. Instead, the course asks for faithful attendance, a prayerful attitude, paying attention, taking notes and substantive participation in the discussions. The presentation materials and subsequent questions are designed to invite the Holy Spirit to work through these conversations and help you make important connections that will lead to the renewal of your congregation.

How Each Session Works

Each session comes with an Outline. Each Team Member receives a copy at the start of each gathering. The Outline serves as a session guide, suggesting time cues for meals, prayer, introductions, viewing of the video

presentation and questions for your conversations. You should supply pens and pads of paper as well. Plan on 3 hours per meeting, including the meal.

Here's what you'll find in each Outline:

Sessions begin with Grace and a Light Meal, something easy to prepare and serve, nothing heavy. This is important because church groups often get carried away with elaborate meals, desserts, and food preparation, taking energy and focus away from the more important work at hand. What's more, a heavy meal can lead to drowsiness and shorter attention spans. While fellowship and nourishment are important, the main thing is the renewal of your church. A Team member should offer grace before the meal. You will find a suggested prayer in each session outline.

Following the meal we get started with the program. It is suggested that your group include a song or hymn. Please choose one in advance of your first gathering. You will have additional time to choose songs during this first meeting. Singing sets an appropriate tone of worship and openness to God's presence.

Next we proceed with the Introduction included in each session Outline. It can be read aloud by a single group member or by the whole Team. The Introduction is designed to promote Team focus and set the tone for the session including the video presentation and subsequent conversations. As mentioned, each session will be devoted to a particular aspect of congregational life and these opening words are intended to center the group on the session topic, providing a jumping off point for the gathering.

Each session features three video presentations that run 7-12 minutes. Note taking is encouraged. After each of the three presentations you will be asked to pause the video and answer the questions provided, taking time for reflection and conversation. Sometimes your group will speed right through them, other times these questions will command long deliberation. There is no right or wrong way to decide which questions to answer, skip, or return to. What is important is to pay attention to how the Holy Spirit is working through unfolding events and conversations, and steering you toward important challenges and insights.

Since conversation is at the heart of *Grow My Church!* here are a few suggestions to help your group get the most out the course. Grow My

Church! Teams are made up of a variety of people, both the outgoing and talkative, as well as the shy and reserved. Since the former tend to dominate conversations, wield great influence, and take more time than others, it is important to find a way to give equal time and consideration to the more soft-spoken and reserved in your midst. Consider using a timer, which can be a neutral, non-defensive way of helping your team do what it wants to do: stay on track and listen to everyone's voice.

However, limiting time doesn't guarantee every voice will be heard. Your group may want to consider a dynamic tool to guide your conversations called 'Mutual Invitation.' It was developed by Eric Law and is marked as document A8. Mutual Invitation is a way to facilitate conversations between people of different cultures, encouraging the soft spoken to contribute and limiting the more extroverted in their dialog. Review this document and use it if you believe it can be helpful. Finally, document A5 contains 'Respectful Communication Guidelines,' also by Eric Law. Review these as soon as possible. They provide a framework for courteous discourse. We will also discuss these guidelines during the first session.

Every session ends with a segment called Recommendations. During this period group members will decide on three recommendations based on their discussion. We will use these recommendations during our final gathering as we formulate a Congregational Growth Plan, which will be presented to our church leaders.

Who's In Charge?

Grow My Church! sessions are not led as much as they are facilitated. It is recommended that Teams share facilitation, allowing each member to take a turn or two at coordinating a session. This shared responsibility builds community and spreads the weight of leadership to the whole group. This means that besides naming a Team Secretary, who will take notes at each gathering, the organizational work doesn't have to fall on any one person's shoulders.

The only leader who will have to be named before you begin the course is the facilitator of the first session who simply needs to review the materials before your initial gathering. During our first meeting we will take time to decide who will facilitate our remaining 11 sessions. Facilitators can find instructions for running each gathering at the bottom of each session

Outline in a brief section called Facilitator Notes. These provide the facilitator with instructions for each gathering.

Can the Rest of the Congregation Participate?

Absolutely. As your *Grow My Church!* Team works through the 12 sessions you may find it helpful to keep the congregation informed, and even solicit feedback. For example, as you prepare for each session, you may choose to post a white board in a public area and solicit opinions from church members on the topic you will be covering. You might also do this after you've finished a session. Conversations can be arranged at convenient times to solicit feedback. Some groups choose to write newsletter or website updates. Your Team might find congregational input a helpful vehicle for your work.

What Happens When We're Finished?

A high point of *Grow My Church!* comes when your Team has finished it's work and assembled practical recommendations in the form of a Congregational Growth Plan. Team members have spent months thinking and talking about challenges the congregation should address. The presentation may be to the church board, to the congregation, or to both. The form these presentations take runs the gamut from panel discussions to written reports to PowerPoint presentations. Team members will decide exactly how they want to structure their report.

Team members should be recognized for the work they've accomplished. A sample de-commissioning and commendation ceremony for a Sunday worship service is provided and labeled A9.

What your congregation does with each recommendation is subjective. The work may have to do with reorganizing a committee, establishing a commission, calling in a consultant or engaging in a book discussion – there are many options. What is important is that leaders take the recommendations seriously, acknowledging the work that went into them, and looking for ways the Holy Spirit is moving to renew your congregation. Once your Team has been officially de-commissioned and your church leaders have pledged to review their work you may desire more follow up. Former *Grow My Church!* Team members may want to reconvene, in an

unofficial capacity, six months later for dinner, discussion, and to talk with congregational leaders about the implementation of the recommendations.

Grow My Church! Teams may also want to reform as a small group interested in continuing the work of renewal. They may get together, for example, for regular book discussions using some of the books included in the bibliography (see A20).

For a chronological checklist of these items, see A23, which will be used during your first session.

The Importance of Prayer

Integral to this work is the understanding that this entire enterprise is rooted, grounded and dependent upon the Lord. We believe that the Holy Spirit, God with us, is the ultimate mover and shaker in the renewal of congregations. We don't grow the church, God does. We simply do our best to provide good soil for God's seeds to take root and blossom. You will find *The Grow My Church!* Course grounded in a traditional, Trinitarian, orthodox theology, which understands God not only as the maker, but also as the sustainer of all things. Therefore, we recommend your congregation's use of *Grow My Church!* be firmly rooted in prayer and listening to the Holy Spirit for guidance and direction. We recommend prayer days, prayer vigils, and at the very least that you either write or find prayers from your tradition that will regularly invite God into this process, dedicating this work to the Lord, and reminding everyone involved of Who is really in charge. You will find a short prayer on A10, that can be inserted in your weekly congregational prayers.

Your congregation was founded with hard work, vision, dedication and commitment to God. Your renewal will be no different. Not unlike a garden spade, *Grow My Church!* is a tool, and a spade does no good locked up in the shed. One has to push it into the dirt and exert some energy to do much good. In other words, the degree of renewal your congregation experiences in this process will likely be related to the amount of work and dedication you put in. Church consultants say the only thing more difficult than starting a congregation, is renewing one. So be prepared to roll up your sleeves and break a sweat.

Change Starts with You

Finally, this entire process is about change. We cannot grow without change. And we cannot expect our congregation to change if we are unwilling to. Central to personal change is a renewed relationship with Jesus Christ. It's been said that for years we have gotten renewal backwards. Church growth is not, first of all, about getting outsiders or 'the unchurched' in. The first people who need to be renewed – touched and transformed by God – are us, the existing congregation. We must be reawakened to a sense of God's presence and vital call to us to embrace our mission. We must open ourselves to the wave of the Spirit that is working to bring us into newness and transform us to minister in a new place and time.

Many declining congregations have come out of an 'Established Church' era in which personal transformation through Christ and the importance of nurturing a living faith were not stressed. The ability to articulate one's deepest convictions out of a consciously formed faith in Christ was a foreign concept. Thus we began reaching out with something we really didn't know very well ourselves – like sending non-gardeners out to get other non-gardeners interested in the glories of farming. Our message of renewal cannot go forth with any authenticity or credibility if we haven't experienced it first.

This is not meant to be judgmental or mean-spirited, rather it is to say we all play a part. So as you work through *Grow My Church!* understand that this process of congregational change is about changing us. Be open to the Holy Spirit moving around you through this process. Relax in the knowledge that, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28) The Lord has and will work through *Grow My Church!* to bring you to new levels of health and vitality. We find the greatest results achieved when participants are open to allowing this crucial work of individual self-examination and self-correction to be done.

A Final Word

Nationally known pastor Rick Warren once pointed out that those of us interested in growing churches often approach the exercise from the wrong

perspective. We ask the question: What will make our church grow? When we should be asking: What is keeping our church from growing? The Gospel of Jesus Christ is Good News and, presented plainly, in most cases spurs growth, multiplication, and abundance. As you have probably figured out, much of the North American church has become like an untended garden; overgrown, choked out, and unproductive. Getting back on track is not so much about trying a new trick or fad, but finding ways to identify, pull, and toss out the weeds – allowing the church to do what it naturally does. This is not to say that every church can grow – or even wants to grow – but your desire to bring renewal to your congregation says a lot about the possibilities that are ahead of you. Thank you for coming this far: Be open to the ways the Spirit is leading you to evaluate your congregation. Be on the watch and gather around the vital ministries that are alive and bearing fruit. Be aware of the newness, in energy and membership that is coming your way. Have courage to confront, honor, then close down those ministries that are past their prime and require resources beyond their worth. Most importantly, cling tightly to the hand that leads you. Congregational renewal is a difficult path, a trying path, a path most churches avoid, but a necessary one and one that offers a closer walk with Jesus who is working to bring all things into the Light of His love.

A Word about Copyrights

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