

Rethinking Growth in Singapore Baptist Churches

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Abstract

This article briefly highlights some positive signs that are currently happening among Baptists in Singapore. It then attempts to articulate a more biblical understanding of church and church growth. With this in perspective, the article concludes with some insights as to how Baptists in Singapore should respond to certain prevailing issues so as to move toward a healthy church growth.

1. Signs of an Upbeat Mood

There is an upbeat mood among some Baptist pastors these days. They are enthusing about doubling the membership of the Singapore Baptist Convention churches by 2010. This desire for growth has recently become a hot topic among the pastors at many of their monthly fellowship meetings. Some from the bigger churches are availing themselves to help and share their resources with those from the smaller churches. Some of the smaller churches are working at doing things together to capitalize on the benefit of synergy. In short, there is a growing awareness among our Baptist pastors that if we are to “grow and go for Christ,” each church needs to look beyond its congregational autonomy and exercise a higher level of co-operation with others.

There is also an open acknowledgement amongst the lay leadership that pastors need to be encouraged and challenged to lead. Thus, lay leaders these days are more positive toward supporting their pastors in developing and enhancing their effectiveness in pastoral ministry. Consequently, the Baptist Lay Leaders Network (BLLN) and Pastoral Development Institute (PDI) have been formed and well accepted by many lay leaders.

Many Baptist churches are praying that they will experience spiritual revival. The desire to love and serve with one another is an unmistakable mark of revival. Dr. Roger Capps, retired IMB missionary who served here

for many years, had this comment when he returned recently for a short assignment at the Baptist Theological Seminary (BTS):

Are there signs among the Baptist churches showing promise of co-operation that may lay the foundation for a responsible unity? I think so. I've heard that the theme of many 2006 church retreats will emphasize unity, love, and bonding. There is a growing interest in missions, personal evangelism and discipleship. The consensus of the churches in electing Brother Peter Tang as the Executive Director of the Baptist Convention indicates a readiness of the churches to cooperate. The excellent response to the proposed Pastoral Development Institute (PDI), sponsored by BTS, indicates the readiness of pastors and churches to grow and work together. These actions reflect the kind of co-operation that can nurture a unified plea for revival.²

Are Baptists in Singapore then on the verge of experiencing significant church growth? In order to answer this, it is important to understand with some clarity what “church” and “growth” means.

2. Understanding “Church” and “Growth”

2.1 Church

We often use the word “church” to mean a building. But a church can be defined this way: The church is the body that consists of the universal and local gathering of believers under the headship of Christ, meeting regularly in orderly manner for the purpose of exalting God, edifying one another and evangelizing the world.

There are at least three images of the church in the New Testament. One is the image of Body (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4). There is much stress on inter-dependence, spiritual gifts, love, and allegiance to one another. In summary, the following characterize the church as a Body:

- Different functions for different members
- Spirit-empowered gifts for ministry
- Each member’s contribution is essential
- Body grows and builds up as each does his/her part

- All things done in the relational context of love and fellowship
- Church functions together, not just comes together

A second image of the church is that of Family (Ephesians 3:14; 1 Timothy 5:1-2; Galatians 3:26). The idea is derived from God's nature as Father. As believers, Christians become children of God and are to relate to one another as members of the same divine family. One important feature is this—we may disagree or even fight one another from time to time, but as family, we ultimately stand by and with one another in our worship, work, and witness for Jesus Christ.

The third image is that of Temple (Ephesians 2:21-22; 1 Peter 2:5). The church is the dwelling place in which God lives by His Spirit. This carries the imagery of the Holy of Holies in the Jewish temple. This image of the church as temple signifies that the church must uphold a high view on:

- Holiness
- Reverence
- Worship
- Consecration
- Service
- Accountability
- Prayer
- God's Will
- Obedience
- Thanksgiving

- Unity

The above-mentioned three images of the church in the New Testament collectively have three implications:

- Christians are to live as a people called out of the world to be together. There is no glory here in being individualistic. Christians glorify God not when they function individually apart from the church community, but when they function as a community together. When one rejoices, all rejoice. When one is hurt, all are grieved.
- The church is not just called to seek the salvation of the lost, and thereafter abandon them to their own living and dying. Rather, the church is to reach them for Jesus Christ, and then integrate them into the community of faith so that they can grow and serve together with others. It is in church that believers learn that they belong not only to God, but also to one another.
- Church helps us to be family-centered. We may be able to worship God at home on our own, and feel that we do not need others. But church is not where we go merely because of what others can do for us, but also what we can do for others. If our presence, words, and actions can encourage another, then this is pleasing to God and edifying to others in the same divine family.

Church is a Spirit-formed community, one that is formed by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, not by the personality or gifts of any one person. The success of a church is tied to human ego and self-esteem when the performance of man, not the works of God, becomes the focus.³

In a performance-based church, success is in terms of measurable or tangible results. Every one wants to look successful. This does not encourage authenticity in relationships, and hurts remain unhealed.

If the church is to be a Spirit-formed community through which God's love and grace can touch the lives of people, there needs to be authenticity in relationships. Otherwise, no community is possible as true community begins with a willingness to admit weakness and to cry for help.

James White rightly adds that authenticity requires an environment of safety—that is, it is safe to be human with no fear of being betrayed, condemned, and judged if one does take off his mask.⁴

And if we value such a community, we need to work at conflict resolution, truth telling, and sacrificial love. No Christian needs to lament, “If the church is a community of God’s people worshipping, working, and witnessing together, why am I feeling so lonely?”

2.2 Growth

The growth of a church is often defined in terms of the size of people, the size of budget, and the size of building. Hence, a church with a large number of people, abundant money, and extensive building facilities is often labeled a growing church—that is, the size of numbers. While numbers is an indicator of church growth, it is not the definitive measure for church health.

In fact, church growth is about growing not just numbers, but growing people. In other words, it is about believers maturing in the faith. It is first about helping believers to be more like Christ and to live more obediently to Him. And when this happens, numerical growth will result, budgets will increase, and ministries will multiply.

To work toward growing numbers, there must be the work of growing strong disciples. Hence, church growth can be viewed as teaching and training the people of God in church to become what He wants them to be so they can do what He wants them to do, including going out to the lost and adding them into the church. Qualitative growth should bring about quantitative growth in due time. Put in another way, a small church can be growing spiritually, but such a church cannot remain small numerically. Numerical growth is a natural by-product of spiritual growth. It is naïve to think that by adopting the methods of a mega-church, one can reap the same result of numerical growth. What is more meaningful is to analyze the practices of growing churches of all sizes, identify the transferable principles, and view them in qualitative terms.

Christian Schwarz comments that his research has shown that “the lack of quantitative growth in most cases indicates a qualitative problem.”⁵

The qualitative elements that can bring about quantitative growth are:

- Empowering leadership
- Gift-oriented ministry
- Passionate spirituality
- Functional structures
- Inspiring worship
- Holistic small groups
- Need-oriented evangelism
- Loving relationships⁶

Schwarz further asserts that expressing a goal in quantitative terms is inadequate in motivating one to achieve growth. On the one hand, a quantitative goal such as “To increase the number of regular worshippers in our church by the end of the year to 5,000” is hardly motivating. On the other hand, a qualitative goal such as “To have 80 % of all regular worshippers know their spiritual gifts” is more motivating because the person can relate to an area which he can influence or control.⁷

In summary, there is wisdom in first working on the qualitative aspect of growth, and expect this to then stimulate quantitative growth in due time.

3. Toward Healthy Church Growth

3.1 From Maintenance to Mission Mode

A good number of Baptist churches have big buildings. Whilst such facilities are blessings of God, these must go beyond private consumption to become resources for others in need. The temptation facing churches which are so blessed is that they may view themselves as having properties to guard rather than a gospel to proclaim, material assets to hoard rather than

resources to share. In other words, with a comfortable building, the church can become inward-looking and keep everything for private consumption.

Jesus spoke of the destruction of the temple and its replacement with the temple of His own body (John 2:19-21). Jesus in His physical body became the “tabernacle” in which God dwelled among men. After He ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit came to dwell in believers, making them God’s temple (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

During the era of the early church, believers met in homes. In times of persecution, they even met underground in the catacombs. It was during the reign of Constantine that a holy-place building became iconic of the church. Subsequently, there emerged a subtle idolatry of buildings, and this is still very much alive today when we think of the church as more of a building than as a people.

The church is not to be a fortress into which believers retreat and become a conservation society. Rather, it is to be an agent of God’s Kingdom. Hence, if we are not using our buildings or sharing these with others so that the mission of the church is advanced in a fallen world, we have fallen into the idolatry of buildings.⁸

Many small Baptist churches are using rented facilities for their worship and ministry activities. If churches with building facilities can share them with these smaller churches, a certain synergy can be established as the strong help to carry the burden of the weak among us.

3.2 Respecting Traditions but Refusing Traditionalism

The idea of traditions is used both favorably and unfavorably in the Bible. For example, in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, the word “tradition” is used favorably to refer to the biblically-mandated beliefs and principles handed down to the churches by the apostles. In this regard, believers are to respect these traditions, and hence, must be “traditional” in order to be true to Scripture.

The Bible however also warns against a danger in traditions—that is, traditionalism in which traditions become the ultimate authority over God’s people. For example, Jesus confronted the Pharisees for elevating their own

traditions to a place of higher authority than Scripture, “Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” (Matthew 15:3). In this instance, traditionalism resulted in disobedience because tradition replaced the truth of God’s Word. Traditionalism is not God-given, but man-made.

Thus, on one hand, the complete rejection of all traditions is both unbiblical and unhelpful to God’s people. Constantly changing and throwing aside practical applications of biblical truth is unwise. We need to think them through with wisdom and discernment, and not toss them away uncritically.

On the other hand, we must guard against traditionalism. A tradition that began well can become obsolete if its connection to biblical principle becomes weak through time or changing cultural factors. Unless it is explicitly biblical, then it is only an application of a principle to a particular circumstance, time, and place. If the circumstance, time, and place warrant changes in the application, then our being biblical means that we too must be willing to change. Though biblical principles do not change, their application does and should change. Unlike the Pharisees in Jesus’ time, we must not allow our traditions to become on par with or greater than the authority of the Bible. We need to respect traditions but must refuse traditionalism. We must prevent our human traditions from being used to create doctrines and practices that God never intended, or worse still, contradict God’s Word.

In Mark 7:1-5, Jesus broke away from the traditions of the Pharisees concerning the issue of “clean” and “unclean.” He tossed aside the traditions of man, not of God. These traditions had put a boundary on how God should work and limited expectations about how God could work. Indeed, when we break away from some of our human traditions, we may well see and experience how God works in fresh and unexpected ways that are still within the parameters of Scripture.

Are Baptists in Singapore growing in Christian information and not Christian transformation, in Bible learning and not Bible living? Perhaps it is time to relook at some of our traditions in church.

Paul warned the Ephesians (and us today) against an infantile mentality. He said an infant is easily tossed about by “every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14). Many people have from time to time appeared on the scene to promote new religious fads and fashions in the name of Jesus Christ. And their teachings are attractive because they feature the latest thing in town. But Paul warns us that if we keep riding on the wave of every new religious fad, we can become unstable like spiritual infants being tossed about, not knowing for certain what’s right and what’s wrong.

Indeed, we need to guard ourselves against the false teaching of deceitful fakes. But there is something even more dangerous that we need to guard ourselves against—the false security we have in our own doctrinal fences. As Baptists, we often pride ourselves on being “people of the Word.” We guard the teachings of the Word and stay true to Scripture. We build up strong doctrinal fences to protect God’s commands and keep ourselves from transgressing them. Indeed, as Baptists, we believe that we know what’s right and what’s wrong; what’s true and what’s false. We can recognize sin by its real name and keep it out with all our doctrinal fences.

It is not wrong to have fences to safeguard the purity of God’s Word and guard ourselves from slipping into the ways of sinful living. The problem is that we may have these fences so high and thick that we cannot see, we cannot touch, we cannot hear, we cannot feel, and we cannot taste the reality of God in our lives. Our Christianity becomes all rules and no relationship because it is all about “cannot do this and cannot do that.” For example, some churches rule that you cannot play drums in church; the noise is too irreverent. But God’s Word in the Old Testament (1 Chronicles 13:8 and Psalm 150:5) exhorts us to worship God with the “clashing of cymbals.” You want to know what the “clashing of cymbals” sounds like? Go listen to a lion dance!

Indeed, rigid fence-building can turn us into self-righteous and judgmental people, not Scripture-submitting and Spirit-led people. Have some of our doctrinal fences turned into something that promotes rituals rather than the relationship between God and us? Have these fences turned into something that promotes legalism rather than lordship in our walk with the Lord? As Baptists, we pride ourselves on being the “people of the Word” because we have fences to guard what the Bible says in the text. But with the

Spirit's help, we need to go beyond what the Bible says in the text to what the Bible says about God's heart and intent in the text. Only then will we move from understanding words to undertaking worship, from devotional rituals to devoted relationship. Otherwise, we end up not keeping out sin and falsehood with our fences, but caging ourselves in as prisoners of our own undoing because we have mistaken legalism as love for God. Are there any high and thick fences we need to tear down today?

Indeed, when we look at the experience of the Ephesians, we can see how subtle and dangerous these fences can be. In Revelation 2:1-7, we read of the Ephesian Christians being commended for all their good and right works. These are the fences they have raised to keep themselves approved by God. But the Lord has something against them—their loss of their first love for Him. Doesn't it sound strange that in spite of doing everything so good and right, the Ephesian Christians still need to repent?

Perhaps, by staying within their fences, and doing good works and right deeds, they have become mere keepers of God's law and not lovers after God's heart. Yes, we need to guard ourselves against false teachings of deceitful fakes. But there is something even more dangerous that we need to guard ourselves against – the false security we have in our own doctrinal fences.

3.3 Recovering the Priesthood of Believers

Baptists have stressed much the priesthood of believers as one of the core values of church life. But a return to what this concept really entails is necessary if Baptist churches are truly to be communities that exhibit body, family and temple characteristics.

Three biblical ideas related to a Christian as believer-priest need to be recovered and restored in Baptist church life.

First, a priest must be able to show compassion to the ignorant and misguided, for he himself is beset with weaknesses of the flesh (Hebrews 5:1-3). In the Old Testament, God graciously provided the office of the priest so that the people, cut off from Him because of their sin, could have access to Him through a mediating priesthood. The high priest interceded for the Israelites by offering gifts and sacrifices for his own sins and those of the

people. In the same way, as believer-priests, Christians cultivate mutual accountability and intercede for one another before God. They are not to see the speck in another's eye and yet be blind to the plank in their own eye. A Christian first exercises self-examination so that he can serve others in a worthy manner. Also, a Christian as believer-priest does not serve solely his own needs but those of the bigger body of God's people as well.

Second, the chosen priest is to be free from physical defects (Leviticus 21:17-21). Levites were rejected for service for any of these reasons: body blemishes, blindness, lameness, a flat nose, deformed limbs, a broken foot or hand, a hunched back, dwarfism, defective eyes, etc. The implication for today is that we must dignify the call to believer-priesthood by giving the best from us, in us, and among us. Service to God and in His church calls for the best to take up the challenge. Each believer-priest must see his service as a calling if he is to give his best. This giving of one's best is not so much an ambition as it is a response to the call of God upon one's life. God is not a "rag-and-bone" man to whom we give of what we want to dispose of or our leftovers. While the world calls people to excellence in the marketplace, even more so is God calling His believer-priests to excellence in all that they do in His name.

Third, the priest is to trust in God's provision, especially through His people. In the Old Testament, a tithe system was established to provide for the priests and their families (Deuteronomy 18:4; 14:28-29; Joshua 21; Numbers 18:8-18; 31:25-47; Leviticus 27). Christians as believer-priests are to trust in God's provision by exercising contentment with holiness, not with laziness. In the Old Testament, God used His people to provide for His priests. In the same way, God's provision is demonstrated in our caring for one another as we give to and receive from one another in the Body. We learn to give generously and receive gratefully so that we can all learn to live by faith, not by charity.

3.4 Setting up a Structure that Promotes Morale, Effectiveness, and Unity

The usual form of Baptist church governance is dominated by committees and majority rule. This is not necessarily wrong. However, in the case of committees, people who sit there are mostly not engaged in real ministry. They sit in meetings and help make decisions.

The question is whether such a structure serves to drive the church in mission mode. There are two concerns to consider.

First, church committees tend to take away the best people from actual ministry and move them into issues related to administration and organization. Hence, these people are separated from ministry. They become heavily involved in administrating the ministry, but not in doing the actual ministry.⁹ Conversely, it means that those who are most intimately involved in a ministry are often not in a position to make decisions about that ministry.

Second, the right to vote rooted in political democracy has often been exercised unthinkingly in the church. Voting in church is an act of stewardship; however, it is often politicized. The believer who votes must remind himself that he is a steward exercising his responsibility to advance God's purpose, not a politician exercising his right to advance his personal agenda. The voting system practiced in Baptist churches must uphold these responsibilities:

- To be informed
- To be prayerful and pleasing to God
- To be advancing God's agenda and the good of the Body, and not any one person or personal agenda

The exercise of unanimous decision also needs to be practiced prudently. People must learn to submit and respect those whom they believe God has called to lead them (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). These leaders are called by God to lead the people to do what He has for the church to do, not to follow the people by doing what they want them to do. In other words, leaders must lead and followers must follow. Those who are called to lead are the same as the others in that they are all in the priesthood of believers. Yet, these called leaders are different, and deserve esteem and submission from those they lead by virtue of God's call upon them.

In practicing the principle of consensus, great discernment is needed to decide if it is always necessary. The minority "negative" voice should not over-rule the majority "positive" voice. For example, the "positive" voice of

five people should not be nullified by the “negative” voice of just one if a unanimous decision is required. This will prevent a situation in which the one dissenting voice is leading, and even deciding, because his wish is carried out by default. The result is even more unfortunate if the one “negative” voice is spiritually immature.

Churches must structure themselves for growth rather than control. These structures must allow those who are called to lead, to lead; and those who are called to equip, to empower others to do the work of ministry.

3.5 Cultivating Attitudes that Unite Body Life

Some of these attitudes are embodied in Ephesians 4:1-6.

First, the text embodies the attitudes of humility and gentleness (v. 2). These attitudes view others as more important (not necessarily better) than oneself. Thus, for the good of the other, one chooses not to insist on his rights or that he is right. These attitudes encourage strength under control.

Second, the text embodies the attitudes of patience and tolerance (v. 2). These attitudes endure and bear the imperfections of others without retaliating against or condemning them. One does not try to change people to be more like oneself, but trusts God to change people to be more like Christ, in so doing, more Christ-likeness is formed in oneself.

Third, the text embodies the attitudes of diligence and peace (v. 3). These attitudes strive to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit,” and take the initiative to heal any disharmony between oneself and others. These attitudes accept personal responsibility and acknowledge one’s contribution to the problem.

To aspire for peace is not to deny that problems exist, but through an active effort in reconciliation, one recognizes that God is bigger than human differences. Hence, believers who worship the Triune God are to keep working at their unity together because it reflects the very unity in the Holy Trinity.

In the last hours of His earthly ministry, Jesus prayed for the unity of all believers (John 17:20-26). In our world where everyone does his own thing, and each person values personal independence and freedom, unity is vital. The priesthood of believers requires each believer to exercise his rights and responsibilities to build up the church together with others. The end of this is to build up God's work, not our own worth. We must not only consider how our personal ministry is growing, but also how it is fitting into the whole work of God in and through His church.

As Baptists, we often limit church to the local church, largely because of our concept of the "autonomy of the local church." Hence, our Baptist churches are generally independent rather than inter-dependent in outlook. When we apply this outlook in the context of spiritual gifts, what happens is that we have a gifted pastor-teacher in one church, but as far as that local church is concerned, that gifted person is only to serve in that church and nowhere else. This narrow outlook has prevented us from sharing our resources and gifts with one another, and depriving ourselves of the benefits of working together.

Indeed, "church" in the New Testament has a broader sense. Even when Paul was writing to the Church in Ephesus, he did not have a local congregation in mind. Rather, he had in mind all the believers in the whole city of Ephesus. To Paul, the church was the bigger body of believers in the whole city of Ephesus, not the individual congregations of believers that met regularly in different homes.

It was this broader view that challenged and encouraged the largely Gentile believers in the church of Antioch to take up a collection for the needy Jewish believers in Jerusalem in Acts 11. Indeed, spiritually gifted persons should be used not only for the growth and well-being of the local church but should move beyond to growing and maturing the bigger community of believers. Indeed, some gifted men and women in the various Baptist congregations can and should be released to serve the bigger Baptist body and beyond.

We are to guard our spiritual oneness by loving and co-operating with one another. Our differences must be expressions of our desire to serve God's agenda, not our personal preferences. We are not to be threatened by

differences. Rather, we work through them so that we can truly serve God and His church with our best collective and co-operative efforts.

3.6 Recovering the Art of Biblical Confession

Many church conflicts have been allowed to deteriorate because the church has lost the art of biblical confession. Such confession is character-forming. It is the first step to commitment to change. It is the start of a transformation process. It allows the body to forgive, to guide, and to hold accountable the one who confesses publicly. It takes time, prayer, and a commitment to work out the process together. In this sense, confession also helps to build community. The church learns to be an agent for reconciliation and a place for forgiveness.

Jim Van Yperen says it beautifully:

This is what makes the Gospel so alarming: that there is room in our pews for rapists and murderers who repent, but no room for their victims who refuse to forgive. Why? Because refusing reconciliation is an affront to the Cross. It says, “My pain is greater than the sufficiency of Christ.”¹⁰

4. Closing Thought

Indeed, Baptists in Singapore are far from perfect. We struggle with many issues and we grieve the Lord in the way we mishandle some things. But the good news is that we can still grow because God has redemptively allowed us to try again with and for Him. And as He deals redemptively with us, He expects us to deal redemptively with ourselves and with one another.

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² Roger Capps. “Is the Spirit of Revival Moving Among Singapore Baptists?” *Baptist Herald*. May – June 2006, 1.

³ Jim Van Yperen, *Making Peace* (Chicago: Moody, 2002), 74.

⁴ James E. White, *Rethinking the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 131.

⁵ Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (IL: Church Smart Resources, 1996), 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

⁸ Martin Down, *Building a New Church alongside the Old* (Eatsbourne: Kingsway, 2003), 107.

⁹ White, *Rethinking the Church*, 115.

¹⁰ Van Yperen, *Making Peace*, 241.