

ACTS 18:1-11  
HOW TO GROW A CHURCH?

How to grow a Church? I googled that and came up with "How to grow a church in 8 steps – with pictures!" There are all kinds of answers to that question today; some people have made a business out of "how to grow a church!" Some of these answers try to turn the church into a successful business and pretend that what works for Starbucks works for the church – I'm not sure that it always does! Some of these answers are all very superficial – "paint your church building a brighter colour and your church will grow" – call me a cynic, but I'm not convinced by that one! You can take you pick of stories and examples and theories from the USA about how to grow a church and we're not convinced that it translates; so we look to England and see what the Church of England is doing and we try to import theories from south of the border; but there are stories of growing churches in Scotland and we say we will learn from them! But then, we look at the culture around us and can think that it is not possible to grow a church in this culture, because everything is going away from the Church; the Church in Ireland this morning is talking about reconnecting with a generation that seems to want different things.

There's a question: do we want our church to grow? Growing churches mean two things: firstly, growing a church means new people, people that we don't know, perhaps, or people who don't conform to our standards; they dress differently, their children run around, they ask awkward questions and sometimes churches don't want that; they want to be settled and secure and if growing means new people, then we're not sure we want it. Secondly, growing a church means people growing in faith, developing, learning new things, serving in new ways, learning things about faith and Church we didn't know before and we might have to change ourselves and we're not sure that we want that either, not sure that we want to change our ways because we're comfortable the way we are. Churches that don't want to grow will wither away and die; they will become an aging religious club for people who like it that way; no-one else will join, and nothing will change till all the club members die off and the church shuts its doors forever.

Corinth was an established city in ancient Greece. It is towards the south of the country, not all that far from Athens; it was famous as a seaport, a crossroads for sea communication from North to South down the Adriatic and from East to West across the Mediterranean avoiding a hazardous trip round the south of the country. It was a city of 250,000 free people with as many as 400,000 slaves. It was not as religious as Athens, but there were still lots of temples and Greek gods; the city was famous for its immorality – there were so many prostitutes in the temples and in the brothels that the name of city became a by-word in the ancient world for sexual immorality. The Church in Corinth was to have a troubled time: you only need to read Paul's two letters to the Corinthian Church to see that it often was a church divided and at times led astray, but today we see Paul arrive in Corinth, his first visit and we see him showing us how to grow a church? There are five principles.

**1. Work together:** Aquila and Priscilla, husband and wife, were to become good friends of Paul. He arrives in Corinth from Athens, moving on in his journey on God's mission. They arrive in Corinth in very different circumstances: they are Jews who have been thrown out of Rome. They have been living in Rome and the eccentric emperor Claudius has ordered all the Jews to leave the city; so they left, probably already Christians. What a disaster! Being forced to leave your home to go anywhere, but certainly somewhere strange! But God uses that disaster for good; they meet Paul and a lifelong friendship begins. Then "*because he...*" (Acts 18:3) they work together in Corinth as tentmakers, but they also work together as people

on a mission, telling people about Jesus. Paul comes along and they join forces, they support one another and God is at work in them and through them. They learn to work together, partners in the gospel. There are two parts to that phrase “work together”: first, there is something for each of us to do in the life of the church, so let’s find out what that is; secondly, we do it together, as partners, working to the same end, pulling in the same direction. His people working together, so God grows His Church.

**2. Preach Jesus** – *“Every Sabbath...” (Acts 18:4ff)* Tentmaker ministries are still a missionary strategy today, with people who go to work overseas as engineers or doctors, Christians who seek to reflect Jesus to the people they meet, but they don’t go as preachers. They get their name from Paul’s first strategy in Corinth: he preaches, but only part-time because for the rest of time he works as a tent-maker to earn money for his food. But then money comes, we think from Philippi, and Paul is able to become a full-time missionary in Corinth. Either part-time or full-time his ministry is same – he preaches Jesus. In his first letter to Corinth we get a flavour: *“I resolved...” (1 Corinthians 2:2)* His message is all about Jesus and Jesus crucified at that. In the synagogue and to the Jews, he is trying to persuade them that Jesus is the Messiah. Don’t get hung up on the word ‘preach’ – that’s what I do and the centre of the message that I preach has to be Jesus and the cross has to be central to that. The Church needs to know the certainties of our faith today; there are so many people outside the church who question and challenge us, that the preacher’s job is to tell us about Jesus and our faith. Our job as Christians is to pass on these stories to others; so we tell others the stories of Jesus so that they might believe Him as well.

**3. Accept one another** *“Crispus...” (Acts 18:8)* Here is the new Corinthian church. We look for clues about how this church starts: one man is mentioned by name, Crispus. What is his job? He’s the synagogue ruler, the man who runs the synagogue in Corinth. What does that mean? Well, means that he’s a Jew and this prominent Jew has been converted, has become a Christian and joined the new church. Who else is there? Well, we don’t know other than *“Many of the...” (Acts 18:8)* There is a fair chance that lots of these other people were Greeks, Gentiles, non-Jews and yet Paul says that all of these people together believed and were baptised. They were accepted into the church and they accepted one another and became this new church together. Being accepted and loved by Jesus, they accepted and loved one another. This is a huge challenge for the church today: we pride ourselves in being a welcoming church and by-and-large that’s true, though I do still sometimes see visitors or new people standing on their own in the coffee room with no-one speaking to them; please watch out for that. But this is about more than being welcoming; this is about accepting one another, differences notwithstanding. Some might come with a lifestyle of which you might not approve; a dress sense of which you might not approve; a background, with people not knowing how to behave, with all kinds of things that make people different from us, but the challenge is to accept them; God loves them and accepts them, so we must learn to love and accept them too.

**4. Trust God** – Growing churches is demanding work; Paul feels the stress and strain and maybe feels that his ministry is achieving nothing in Corinth. God takes him in hand by a dream. *“One night...” (Acts 18:9f)* He was afraid; he was on the point of giving up, we presume; maybe he even felt that God had gone away. But God speaks to him in a dream and challenges Paul to trust God. There are three reassurances: firstly, God says *“I am with you”*; then secondly, *“No-one is going to harm you”*; and thirdly *“I have many people in this city”* God is still there; Paul will come to no harm despite his fears; his ministry will continue to be fruitful and effective. Paul has a choice: to remain in his depression and let his stress get the

better of him, give up and go away; or to trust God for the future and go back to work. Many of us look at the church today and wonder what the future holds; we consider that the Church is dying out and will cease to exist in XX years time (enter a number!) We might even feel that God has gone away from the Church and from our lives. The challenge for us is to learn to trust God: to trust God for our personal life stories and to trust God for the life of His Church. The Church in 30 years in Scotland will look quite different from way it looks today, but there will still be a church and God will still be here and Jesus will still be our Saviour and the Spirit will still live in us. We have a choice: to give up on Church now because of these fears; or trust God and go back to work. Let's trust God and get on with our work!

**5. It takes a long time** I've sometimes described growing a church to sailing an oil tanker. When the command to stop an oil-tanker is given, it takes a long time for it to happen and then when you try to turn it around and change direction, it takes even longer. Growing a church doesn't happen overnight; it takes years. Here's Paul in Corinth: "*So Paul...*" (*Acts 18:11*) Was this the longest Paul had stayed anywhere up to that stage? 18 months doesn't seem a long time to us, but for a travelling preacher it was an age to stay there. Yet, he needed that time to build up and grow the church. He stayed 18 months teaching them the gospel, growing their faith, building the people up as disciples. This would be a church divided later, a church with problems later, so perhaps it was wise that Paul stayed there for a long time and this grounding in the gospel served them in good stead. It takes a long time to grow a church: there are struggles involved in growing a church; there are no quick fixes for growing a church; if there was a quick fix there would be no weak churches, but every church would be growing. There are no quick fixes for reaching people, but we need to earn their trust, to listen to what they want or need, because the pattern of church life and the worship with which we are familiar and comfortable doesn't suit people in other generations. It takes a long time to grow a church: to persuade people that reading the Bible or praying is a good thing or that it is a good thing to tell other people about Jesus and to do a little personal evangelism. It takes a long time for people to gain enough confidence to join in the mission of God in this place.

Do you want your church to grow? Paul grew a church in Corinth: he, Priscilla and Aquila worked together; he preached about Jesus and the cross; the Christians accepted one another and saw themselves as the family of God together; the church learned to trust God; it took a long time to grow this church. Growing churches is not all about apostles and preachers; it is also about the Priscilla's and Aquila's, people who give themselves to be part of a growing church alongside, in partnership with the apostle and the preacher. Growing churches are about the whole people of God ready to be partners together in the mission of God, everyone of us playing our part, reading the bible, praying, serving and loving people, accepting one another in grace, telling people the stories of Jesus. This is not a theory to learn from a book, but a way to live. Do we want the church to grow? We all have part to play; let's learn to trust God and go to work!