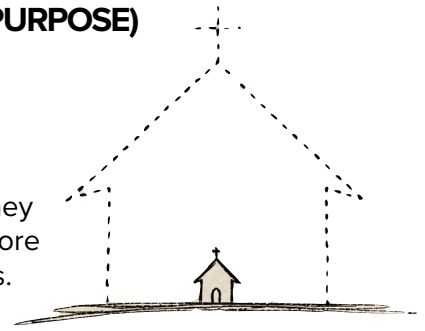


THE CHURCH THAT SHRINKS (ON PURPOSE)

Why Release, Not Accumulation, Is the True Measure of Fruitfulness

Most churches have been taught to recognize growth by what they accumulate. More people attending. More people participating. More people serving. More people giving. More people joining groups. More people returning the following week.



Attendance rises, programs expand, facilities grow, and the increase is celebrated as evidence of fruitfulness. This way of measuring appears so natural that we rarely stop to question the paradigm beneath it. We assume that if more people are gathering around a church, more Kingdom activity must be taking place through that church.

But a church can grow dramatically without ever increasing the Kingdom.

A church can increase its attendance by attracting Christians from other churches. It can increase participation by creating more programs for the people who already attend. It can increase giving, expand its facilities, add services, strengthen its staff, and become widely known. Every visible measurement can move upward while the number of disciples entering the plentiful harvest remains unchanged.

The church grew. The Kingdom did not.

This is the fundamental weakness of accumulation as a measure of fruitfulness. Accumulation tells us how many people have gathered around a church. It does not tell us whether Jesus is becoming visible through those people beyond it.

What If the Paradigm Were Reversed?

What if the Church was never intended to accumulate people? What if it was intended to gather people in order to form them, empower them, and release them into the plentiful harvest?

That reverses the prevailing paradigm.

The accumulating church continually asks, “How do we get more people here?” The sending church asks, “How do we prepare more people to go?”

One measures how many people remain connected to the organization. The other asks how many people are becoming present to Jesus and others wherever they live. Instead of concentrating people, gifts, and influence around the gathering, it releases them into the places where Jesus is already at work.

Church growth concentrates people around a gathering. Kingdom increase releases people into the harvest.

The problem is not that churches gather. Gathering is deeply biblical. The problem begins when the gathering becomes the destination rather than the place from which disciples are sent.

Jesus did not accumulate disciples around Himself indefinitely. He called them, formed them, and sent them. He sent the Twelve into villages and homes. He sent the seventy-two ahead of Him into the places He intended to go. Before His ascension, He commanded His followers to go and make disciples among all nations.

In Antioch, the church released Barnabas and Saul, two of its most significant leaders, because the movement of the Kingdom mattered more than retaining its strongest people.

Release is not an unfortunate consequence of discipleship. Release is the purpose of discipleship.

The Question That Reveals the Paradigm

What if the most fruitful person in your congregation eventually stops attending because the Kingdom adventure you released them into takes them somewhere else?

They may begin gathering people around a dinner table. They may develop deep relationships in a neighborhood. They may become present among international students, migrant families, hospital workers, artists, Disney Cast Members, or people who would never enter a church building.

They may discover a Kingdom Expression that does not carry the sending church's name, increase its attendance, strengthen its programs, or appear in its annual report.

Would the church consider that person lost, disengaged, or successfully sent?

That question reveals the paradigm. If our measurements depend upon retaining people, their departure will feel like a loss. But if the purpose of discipleship is release, their departure may be evidence that formation has done its work.

Is your church forming people to strengthen the gathering, or gathering people to strengthen their presence in the harvest?

The distinction is enormous. Many churches treat Monday through Saturday as the space between their gatherings. A sending church recognizes those days as the primary territory in which its people follow Jesus.

The nurse does not leave the Church when she enters the hospital. The teacher does not leave the Church when he enters the classroom. The Cast Member does not leave the Church when she walks through the gates of EPCOT.

The Church is already present because they are present.

The task of leadership is not to bring all those people and relationships back into one place. It is to help followers of Jesus recognize the Kingdom potential of the places where they already are.

A Different Understanding of Increase

A church of five thousand can grow by gathering another five hundred Christians into its building. A church of one hundred can release twenty disciples who begin expressing the Kingdom through hundreds of everyday relationships.

Which church experienced the greater increase?

Our measurements immediately answer one way. Jesus may answer another.

Those twenty disciples carry the life of Jesus into schools, hospitals, businesses, neighborhoods, universities, cafés, and communities throughout the week. Some may form Kingdom Expressions that the sending church never manages or counts. Others may relocate and carry what they have learned into another city or country.

The original church remains small enough to overlook. Its influence becomes too expansive to measure.

The accumulating church becomes larger by keeping people. The sending church becomes larger than itself by letting them go.

This is the paradox at the heart of release. The size of the gathering and the reach of the Church are not the same thing. A large gathering can have a limited Kingdom footprint. A small sending community can carry the presence of Jesus across cities, cultures, and continents.

A community governed by release will often remain relatively small compared with the reach of its influence. It refuses to retain everyone it develops. People are continually formed, empowered, and sent. Its visible attendance may never reflect its actual reach.

If we count only those who remain, the church may appear stagnant or even declining. If we follow the relationships, disciples, and Kingdom Expressions that continue beyond it, we may discover multiplication that an attendance report could never reveal.

The Cost of Letting Go

Release sounds inspiring until leaders recognize what it may cost.

A church committed to release may send some of its most curious, relational, and adventurous people beyond its programs. It may release people who could have strengthened its staff, increased its giving, filled its volunteer positions, or improved its Sunday experience.

Churches often direct the gifts of their most capable people toward strengthening the gathering. But those same gifts could reveal Jesus among people the church itself may never reach.

That means leaders must be willing to lose what could make the organization stronger in order to multiply what could make the Kingdom visible. They must bless work they cannot manage, celebrate stories they cannot claim, and trust disciples they cannot supervise.

This is where release becomes more than a strategy. It becomes an act of trust.

Leaders trust the Holy Spirit to guide people beyond their oversight. They trust ordinary followers of Jesus to pay attention, form relationships, make mistakes, learn, adjust, and continue. They trust that Kingdom fruit does not require institutional possession to be real.

A sending church does not become careless about formation. It becomes serious about forming disciples who can follow Jesus without depending upon the church to prescribe every next step. It does not abandon community. It prepares people to cultivate community wherever they are sent. It does not treat departure as disloyalty. It recognizes faithful departure as evidence that formation has done its work.

The true test of a sending church is not whether it talks about sending. It is whether it can celebrate when sending costs something.

The Fruit We Cannot Control

The accumulation paradigm prefers fruit that remains visible. Attendance can be counted. Participation can be tracked. Giving can be reported. Programs can be evaluated.

Release produces fruit that is far more difficult to measure.

A conversation in a break room may never become a ministry statistic. A friendship formed across a dinner table may unfold over years. A disciple sent to another country may influence people the original church will never meet. A Kingdom Expression may remain small, relational, and almost invisible while transforming the lives of the people within it.

None of this fits neatly into an annual report. That does not make it less fruitful.

Jesus repeatedly described the Kingdom through images of life that exceeded human control: seed scattered in soil, yeast working through dough, and a tiny mustard seed becoming something unexpectedly expansive. The activity was often hidden before it became visible. Its growth could not be manufactured, centralized, or controlled.

The Church does not exist to expand its own visibility. It exists to make Jesus visible.

A church shaped by release pays attention to what Jesus is doing beyond the gathering. It asks where relationships are forming, where trust is deepening, where people are encountering Jesus, and where disciples are multiplying His life among others.

Its greatest fruit may be growing somewhere it can no longer see.

From Attendance to Kingdom Influence

If accumulation is no longer the primary measure, leaders will need different questions.

Instead of asking only how many people attended, they can ask where their people were present. Instead of asking how many people joined a program, they can ask what relationships are becoming sacred. Instead of asking how many volunteers filled church positions, they can ask how followers of Jesus are expressing His Kingdom through their everyday lives. Instead of asking how much activity returned to the church, they can ask how much Kingdom life moved outward from it.

These questions do not produce the same tidy answers.

Kingdom influence is relational, dispersed, and often slow. It moves through friendships, tables, workplaces, neighborhoods, and ordinary moments. It can cross cultural and geographic boundaries without expanding the original organization at all.

Cast Member Church offers a living, imperfect example.

Its visible gatherings have always remained relatively small. Yet relationships formed around dinner tables in Orlando have traveled across continents and languages as Cast Members returned home.

If the ministry were measured only by who remained in Orlando, it would appear to shrink continually. But leaving was never the end of the fruit. In many cases, leaving was how the fruit traveled.

What began around a table in Orlando now lives through relationships across six continents and twelve languages. The sending community did not need to become enormous for its Kingdom influence to become massive.

That is what release produces.

A New Vision of Fruitfulness

A pastor of a small congregation does not need to apologize for the size of the gathering. The better question is whether the people gathered are learning to recognize Jesus, enter the harvest, form relationships, and multiply disciples wherever they already live.

One hundred people released into ordinary life may carry the presence of Jesus farther than thousands gathered around a platform. Their influence may never be centralized. Their stories

may never be fully collected. Their Kingdom Expressions may look nothing like the community that sent them.

That is not a failure. It is the fruit of release.

The future of the Church will not be determined by how many people it can gather and keep. It will be revealed by how many people it is willing to form and release.

The question is not whether your church is growing. The question is whether the Kingdom is increasing because your church exists.

Would you rather lead a large church that accumulates people or a small church that releases disciples who multiply far beyond anything it could accomplish by keeping them?

The accumulating church becomes larger by keeping people close.

The sending church becomes fruitful by letting them go.