

Barriers to Church Growth

A Church Consultation Case Study

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Author Note

All parties highlighted in this case study have consented to their inclusion in this work. Nonetheless, the name of the church, pastor, and any other parties have all been changed or omitted to preserve privacy. If anyone wishes to inquire further, however, permission has been graciously given by the subjects of this case study to reveal real names and contact information. For further information, please contact Nathan Marlette at nathan@marletteconsulting.com.

Abstract

Upon being hired by a local small church pastor to provide consulting services, Marlette Consulting conducted a thorough review of the church's leadership, programming, processes, and online presence. Two of the many findings were an organization-wide, comparison-based insecurity about the size of the church, and a concentration of almost all organizational resources into perfecting weekly church service programming – both factors of which had ceased yielding results or were even becoming counter-productive. To address these areas (and others), Marlette Consulting presented a comprehensive assessment that outlined all issues discovered, provided a rationale and theory base behind these diagnoses', and presented a series of initiatives needed for positive change to occur – centered largely around pastoral spiritual transformation and building up small group activities independent from the church building. Following this, Marlette Consulting engaged in a series of earnest, post-assessment dialogues with the pastor, conducted two church leadership workshops, and has continued ongoing, periodic engagements. After expounding on the details regarding this case study, this work concludes with a discussion of the broader need for church consulting and a call to reflection for the broader Church to engage in.

Keywords: Church Consulting, Church Growth, Church Health

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Introduction

An introduction to the world of consulting is an introduction to the world of complex and delicate problem-solving. To illuminate, when people experience repeated failures in seeing a desired outcome from their efforts, it can cause a state of immense frustration, dejection, or even obsession with perfecting what is still seemingly within their control. Unfortunately, these states can all contribute to a counter-productive narrowing of perspective and a doubling down on ineffective approaches. Certainly, there are times when focused persistence is needed, but the effectiveness of a consultant often comes from their ability to help a client step back for a moment and obtain a fresh perspective. A good consultant often must help clients reconsider the methods and assumptions behind their approach, all while also navigating the strong emotions that often surface with any such examination.

It was from a desire for such services that the pastor of a small church in the suburbs of a metropolitan area approached Marlette Consulting (MC). Pastor Jacob (name altered for privacy concerns) wanted help figuring out why his church was not growing and what he could do to remove these barriers. After a period of further discussion to ensure fit, the owner of Marlette Consulting, Nathan Marlette (hereafter referred to as the “observer”), agreed to partner with Pastor Jacob and The Pentecostal Life Center (PLC) to conduct a thorough assessment.

Method

Pastor Jacob and Marlette Consulting agreed that the PLC assessment process would proceed in four stages. First, MC would conduct a review of the PLC's website and social media presence (from both desktop and mobile) to form a first impression, like a real first-time visitor might do. Second, Marlette Consulting would send a secret observer to attend PLC's Sunday morning worship service, under the guise of a first-time guest. Third, MC would conduct a series of exploratory interviews with Pastor Jacob, his spouse, key members of the leadership team and church core, and, importantly, former visitors. Fourth, MC would write a comprehensive assessment of all issues discovered, provide recommendations for improvement, and present them to Pastor Jacob for his review. Lastly, MC would conduct two workshops with PLC leadership to discuss findings, gain deeper feedback, and chart the collective path forward.

Results

The work of these stages was successfully undertaken and many key findings gleaned. This Results section of this case study will outline a few of the most prominent themes in a similar order to how they were encountered during the actual consulting engagement. It is the hope of the author that presenting these findings narratively will invite the reader to begin to "step into the shoes" of a consultant's perspective themselves.

On an important note, given the deeply personal nature of what the following content may reveal, it is worth reiterating that details within this work have been shared with the willing consent of Pastor Jacob. These findings are also in no way unique only to him and are certainly not intended to tear this courageous leader down. In fact, his consent to have this case study shared with the public is a testament to his strength, vulnerability, and earnest desire to serve as a benefit to the broader Church. With this clear, we will proceed to examine two main findings.

Finding 1 – Comparison-based insecurity about the limited size of the church.

From the very first conversation between Pastor Jacob and Marlette Consulting, it was clear that the size of PLC was something he thought a lot about. The number of consistent attendees had hovered between 50 to 80 for many years, he explained, despite numerous pushes, guest speakers, and other efforts geared at stirring up revival. When engaging with pastors of bigger churches nearby (or when entering their large facilities), it was hard not to think of how nice it must be to have the same resources they had. In a moment of honesty and vulnerability, Pastor Jacob confided that he felt “embarrassed” by the lack of growth at PLC, to the point where even having certain guest preachers come in to speak was something he now paused at.

It was also frustrating, he explained, to go to church growth seminars and listen to presenters talk about the explosive growth they had experienced, only to find out later behind the scenes that a large portion of the “growth” had been aided by transplants from already established churches. Furthermore, attending large district or national conferences also often resulted in mainly seeing large churches highlighted, compounding the frustrated feeling that he was failing at doing the work he had been called to.

When the observer from Marlette Consulting began the assessment by engaging in a review of PLCs website, he soon discovered a series of sermons the church had chosen to highlight in their “Media” section. The very first sermon showed Pastor Jacob communicating his desire to the congregation for PLC to grow numerically one day. This felt like an odd message to highlight to potential visitors. The rest of the website was also full of invitations to visit and attend PLC. In one sense, this was completely normal, however, given the prior knowledge of how desperate for growth the Pastor felt inside, the observer began to wonder if it was possible to feel the desire for a good thing too much.

Indeed, when the observer showed up under the guise of a first-time visitor, he was bombarded by signals that only validated this concern. For example, upon entering the front doors of the church, the observer was very eagerly greeted, given a gift bag, and then immediately handed a visitor card to fill out so the church could remain in contact. “I just got here – what if I’m not sure that I want you to have my information yet?” the observer remarked inwardly as he seated himself towards the back of the auditorium.

A series of about ten handshakes followed, as numerous people came by to offer a greeting. Interestingly, most of the encounters seemed to follow a similar “script”, with the church member saying “hello”, inquiring where the observer lived, and asking what brought them to church. As the talks progressed “off-script”, however, the tone began to shift. Multiple people began to offer completely unprompted *apologies* for the church’s size, explaining that several families were absent and that usually the attendance and music were both better than they would likely be today. The observer began to think, “If all of *you* are insecure about yourselves, how are you expecting to persuade me to feel that *I* should feel happy with being here either?”

The signs of this widespread insecurity continued to manifest – literally as signs. On the wall behind the stage of the auditorium was a large poster that displayed the following message to the congregation, “We envision this auditorium one day seating 200 people.” As the observer slipped out and headed to the restroom, a sign on the bathroom door even displayed, “We envision this bathroom one day being big enough to be a family restroom.” The observer could see how these signs could perhaps be interpreted as the inspiring casting of a bold vision, but the result was also a somewhat odd highlighting of the church’s limitations. “What if I *wanted* to be a part of a small church?” the observer wondered, “And I don’t know that I would have thought about the size of the bathrooms at all until you said something about it.”

Right before service started, the observer decided to oblige the greeter from earlier and pulled the visitor card out of the gift bag. As he began to fill it out, however, he glanced up to see someone from a nearby row of chairs staring directly at him and smiling. On one level it was nice to feel welcomed, but in another sense it was a little unexpected to be so closely monitored. Later, during the middle of the song set, the observer nonchalantly coughed lightly. Within seconds, someone from the back of the church quickly approached offering a bottle of water and inviting the observer out to lunch. Although this would normally have been a very kind gesture, the preceding context instead caused this exchange to make the observer feel that they were being watched like a hawk. This feeling only built when, as the altar call began, another person from the church approached the observer and asked if they could pray with them (an offer that was gratefully accepted, nonetheless).

Following service, the door greeter returned and offered free t-shirts to the observer, complete with the church's logo and branding on them. There were even extra shirts given for the observer to take home to his family. Although this was very kind, it did feel a little forward, perhaps, for the church to expect a new visitor to immediately want to accept the wearing of PLC's branding. Either way, it was abundantly clear that the church very much wanted the observer to return, to the point where the observer began to ponder inwardly, "I almost feel like, if I don't return, that I'm going to be a disappointment to you all *personally*. Am I supposed to come back just because I can tell how bad you guys want your church to grow though?"

The many conversations with Pastor Jacob that followed this visit only brought more of the same feeling. For example, Pastor Jacob took it very hard, the observer noticed, when a new visitor decided not to return. "No, we don't have enough people to offer the same things that match what large churches can offer – I understand that," he shared with the observer, "But if

that's what visitors care about, why don't they stay and help change it?" It was clear to the observer that a comparison-based insecurity around PLC's size had spread within the church, manifesting in various forms in PLC's leaders, saints, website, and even the signs on the walls.

Finding 2 – An over-emphasis and reliance on large, auditorium-based programming

Despite the apologies from the congregation that the music and attendance were likely to be better in future weeks when a few key families had returned, the observer was actually pleasantly surprised – even impressed – by the quality of the worship service. The announcements were well done and clearly presented; the musicians were talented and made tasteful use of pre-recorded multi-tracks to bolster their sound without sounding too artificial; the singers were engaging and harmonized well; the lighting and stage set up was even at a level that might not have been expected from a church of PLC's size. The sermon was delivered well and passionately by Pastor Jacob and the congregation seemed engaged and fully responded to the altar call. It was clear that perfecting the worship service experience on Sunday mornings was something the church had invested significant time and attention into. "In terms of production, this church punches way above its weight class!" the observer remarked inwardly.

However, a few interesting patterns began to emerge – chiefly the fact that the observer could find nothing else to explore further other than prompts to engage with *more* Sunday and Wednesday services. For example, a handout in the new-visitor gift bag led with the verbiage, "Hello! We are so excited that you are here and hope you have already felt welcome. You matter to us and it is our sincere desire that you come back next week and worship with us again." There was nothing anywhere else in the church's signage, online, or in any printed material about a next step someone could take, other than returning to a Sunday or Wednesday service.

To explore and verify this, the observer also made numerous attempts to understand how easy (or difficult) it might be for a new visitor to find community or other activities to engage with. In almost every conversation the observer asked the following questions (or some close variation), “If I wanted to participate in something beyond this church service right now, what could I join?” or “Are there other things the church does besides Sunday and Wednesday services?” The observer wanted to see how the church members reacted to these prompts, with hopes that someone would see this seemingly eager-to-engage “visitor” and respond with an invitation to attend a small group, join a Bible Study, or even just grab coffee to build a friendship. “Many churches, no doubt, would likely be overjoyed to encounter visitors so seemingly willing to integrate into their community.” the observer thought to himself.

Shockingly, despite the high volume of people who were friendly enough to make an initial introduction (and who obviously wanted the observer to return), these questions elicited muted responses, obvious uncertainty, or even direct answers along the lines of, “No, Sundays and Wednesdays are pretty much the main things the church has going on – you should come back and experience them again.” The observer found it puzzling that the church congregants would be so seemingly “friendly” and eager for visitors to return, yet almost universally miss the opportunity to connect with a person who was very obviously looking for more to engage with. The only exception had been the invitation to lunch by the man who had given the water bottle – an exchange that was genuinely welcoming, yet had been “tainted” by the observer feeling like he had been the thinly-veiled center of attention.

After numerous follow-up questions (which few real visitors would likely have persisted with), the observer finally found a few people who mentioned offhand that there was a ladies group that met most weeks and a men’s group that met for breakfast “occasionally.” There were

no further invitations or follow-ups, however, about how someone might learn more or join these groups. This was a notable gap, given the seeming eagerness of the congregation to grow.

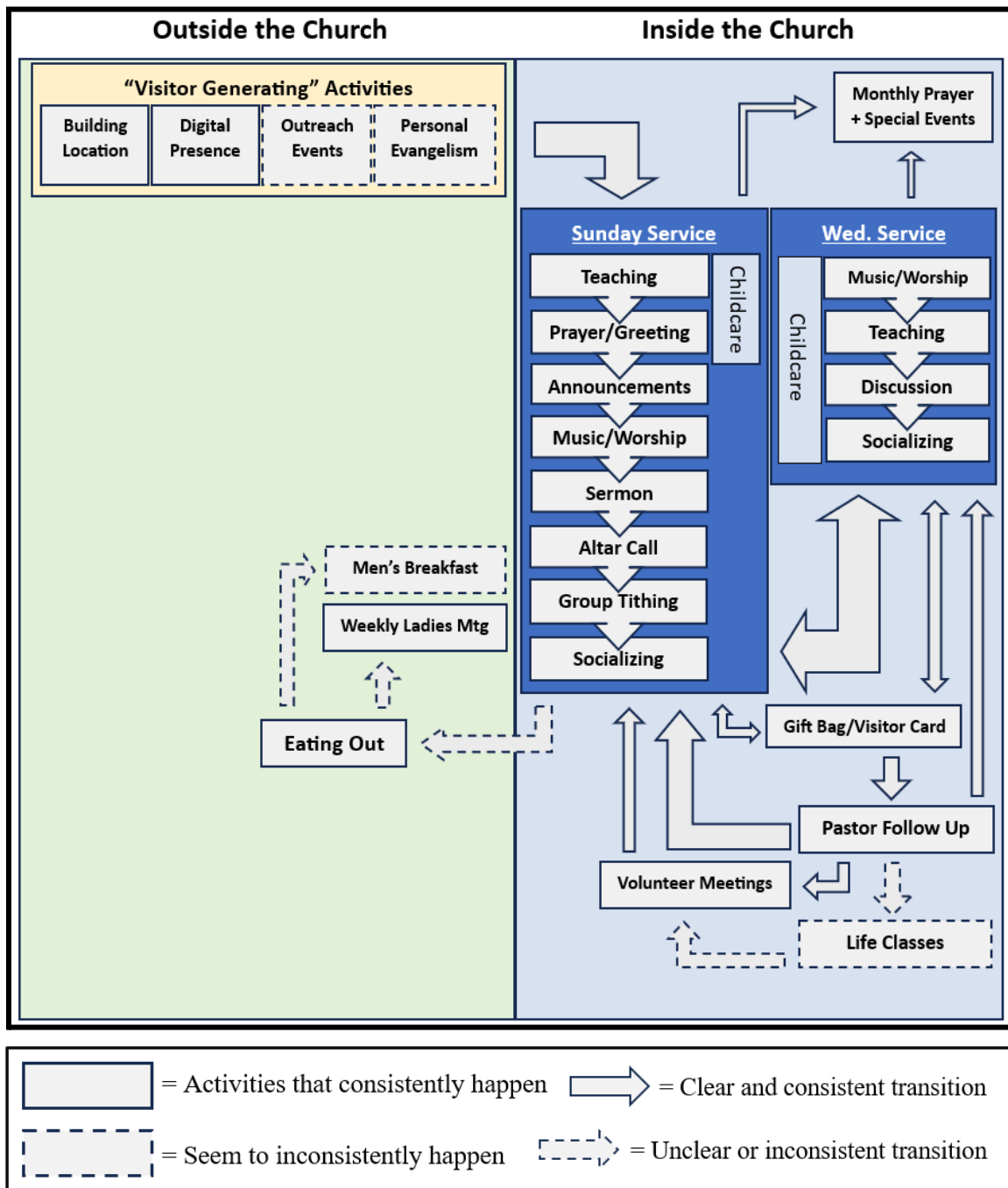
Further conversations with Pastor Jacob revealed that the church held a monthly prayer night and sometimes held volunteer meetings. If there was a desire for it, occasionally the church would also hold something called “Life Classes” – a short weekend class for recent visitors or prospective volunteers to learn more about the church’s mission, values, and basic doctrine. Other than sporadic Life Classes (and the occasional district event), eating out after service was pretty much the only other activity or gathering the church consistently did. Again, although the observer *had* received an invitation to lunch, it was notable both that there were not more readily apparent avenues for people to connect, and also that the church members had been so apathetic or unaware of how to connect a new visitor to the opportunities that *did* exist.

The observer began to feel that he had stepped into a “system.” An unexpressed – but nonetheless very real – production-style flow that the Pastor and people of PLC were explicitly or implicitly relying on to grow their church. The “system” went something like this: Step 1, wait for a visitor to arrive at the PLC facility; Step 2, maximize the speed and volume with which they are greeted; Step 3, impact them with high quality music and preaching; Step 4, try to seal the deal with an altar call appeal; Step 5, guide the visitor to repeat these steps over and over until they have committed to becoming a regular attendee and transformed from a visitor into a volunteer. Anything beyond this “system” seemed beyond the scope of the church’s main focus.

Seeing what was “behind the curtain” like this troubled the observer, and he began to chart out a diagram that mapped the PLC “system” so he could study it further. The following diagram was built based on all the preceding findings and verified by Pastor Jacob. Each box represents an activity PLC did and each arrow represents the most natural or designed transition

or next step that a visitor was intended to follow. Larger arrows represent an increased emphasis by PLC and smaller or dashed arrows represent a weak emphasis. Dashed arrows or boxes indicate steps or activities that, if they occurred at all, only did so inconsistently. The reader is invited to explore the “system” for themselves, examining PLC through the eyes of a consultant.

Figure 1. Diagram of the PLC “System”



Visualizing the “System” as a diagram made things much clearer to the observer and numerous issues worth addressing began to present themselves. For example, there was an immediate and obvious imbalance spotted between both the amount of (and intentionality behind) the activities that took place inside the church building versus outside it. There were also very few activities designed for small groups to form and bond around. Personal evangelism and outreach also seemed surprisingly inconsistent for a church so desperate to grow. It was most clear, however, that virtually everything in the life of the church pointed back towards attending, perfecting, and repeating large-group experiences in the auditorium on Sunday or Wednesday.

This reflected a conscious or sub-conscious belief from PLC that the best strategy for attracting, integrating, and discipling new converts was simply to run visitors through as many cycles of Sunday and Wednesday as possible. Although this might be effective for a small percent of visitors, the observer found this underlying philosophy unlikely to be broadly successful, and now could see more clearly some of the core reasons why PLC was not growing. With this in mind, the observer began to prayerfully form recommendations for Pastor Jacob to consider.

Recommendations and Rationale

Before exploring the main recommendations and their rationale, it is worth noting that Marlette Consulting discovered and provided recommendations for many more issues than what are presented in this case study. For example, there were several key fixes to the church’s website, internal processes, and leadership culture that were also outlined in the written assessment delivered to Pastor Jacob. This work is intended to highlight only the major points of emphasis most relevant to the broader church and academic community. On a final note, due to the inherently “faith-based” nature of consulting for Christian churches, the following findings will also include Biblical appeals as part of the rationale behind certain recommendations.

Recommendation 1 – Pastoral and congregational spiritual transformation

In some ways this recommendation might seem odd. Spiritual transformation of the heart has nothing to do with flashy org charts, leadership tips, updated processes, or other innovative recommendations that might be expected from a consultant. The honest truth, as MC saw it, however, was that part of the core of the church's dysfunction was internal insecurity, due to a comparison-based perspective of what PLC's "success" was supposed to look like. This was an inherently philosophical or "spiritual" issue, deeper than could be addressed by a consultant alone, or even by time with a counselor (although both have their place). What was needed most was something MC believed only Jesus could provide – deep internal spiritual transformation and a re-orienting of vision to see PLC through a Biblical perspective.

Of course, recommending to someone that they "spiritually transform" may be a bit too abstract to be useful, regardless of the truth of the sentiment. Although only God could enact true spiritual transformation, the observer recommended that the *environment* and prerequisites for heart transformation (which can be controlled) be earnestly sought by Pastor Jacob. With tears in his eyes, Pastor Jacob graciously listened and agreed as the observer recommended he seek the face of the Lord through a time of earnest prayer, reflection, and repentance.

The observer believed that the Lord probably ultimately wanted PLC to grow numerically as well, *but if he didn't*, for whatever sovereign reason, Pastor Jacob needed to let his direction, passion, joy, peace, and affirmation about the size of the church come from Jesus, not from other sources. If successful, this would hopefully take some of the negative "pressure" off of everything, creating an atmosphere that was actually much more conducive to growth.

Rationale

The rationale behind these recommendations was that, ironically, the church's unhappiness about its size was *itself* a barrier to growth. As an analogy, if a person was insecure about being a bad conversationalist, for example, they might think about it a lot – to the point of obsession. Imagine this driving them to check in with their friends every few minutes during a conversation and ask, “Are you having a good time? Are you sure? I really want you to feel like we’re having a good talk right now.” Ironically, these actions obviously would have precisely the opposite effect as desired, making the conversation pressured and unpleasant, and thus resulting in the person becoming a “bad conversationalist.” Although this analogy might be somewhat silly, it is intended to demonstrate how insecurity can lead to behaviors that unintentionally reinforce the existence of what someone is unhappy about. Beyond an analogy, however, there are both academic and biblical sources to draw support from as well.

For example, researcher, Christian Shwartz, analyzed approximately 1000 churches from across 32 countries. Almost 4.2 million survey responses were gathered, which allowed him to identify eight key “church quality” characteristics most associated with numerical growth. One of these eight keys was the concept of “Passionate Spirituality,” which was broken down into 13 different sub-variables, two of which were noteworthy for our purposes. The prompts, “Times of prayer are an inspiring experience for me” and “I am enthusiastic about my church” were significantly more likely to be responded to affirmatively by members of numerically growing churches than declining churches. Furthering the link between a person’s spirituality and attitude toward their church, Schwarz writes, “Enthusiasm for the faith measured in churches with a high-quality index nearly always correlates with enthusiasm for one’s congregation.” Insecurity about one’s church might be thought of as almost an *opposite* of enthusiasm, however.

Importantly, authentic enthusiasm is usually not something that can be effectively faked. Indeed, research shows that, regardless of the emotions people attempt to express, their real feelings often leak through, able to impact those they are interacting with (Pugh, 2001). The impact of internally felt emotions on the emotions of others also applies both to positive and *negative* emotions (Eisenkraft, 2010). Building on this idea, Douglas Pugh found that the emotions of employees at a customer service-oriented position significantly influenced the emotions and perceived service quality that *customers* also experienced (2001). It is likely that this finding reflects the experience of PLC that the observer (and probably other visitors) had.

This meant, however, that the way for PLC to grow was not just by hoping (and being let down) that visitors would like things enough to stay, but rather by investing into times of prayer until confidence and genuine, *infectious* spirituality emerged. Put another way, the church turning to the Lord in prayer to help them feel less negatively would likely lead to a better community climate that visitors would be more likely to join.

From a Biblical perspective, in 2 Cor. 10:12 and 17-18, the Apostle Paul writes, “...when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.... ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’ For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.” (ESV). This lends credence to the idea that a Biblical perspective is not congruent with PLC (or any church) judging their success, or lack thereof, by comparing their size, musical ability, or any other characteristic to those of another congregation. Instead, true emotional satisfaction and authentic, infectious zeal need to ultimately come from the presence of the Lord. Indeed, the birth of the New Testament church itself came out of a prayer room when the rest, power, and boldness from the Spirit was poured out (Acts 2).

Recommendation 2 – Develop community in smaller groups outside of the auditorium.

Additionally, as the observer explained to the pastor, instead of being put off by a small congregation, the reality was that many people might *prefer* a small church – seeking deeper connection and intimacy that can often be hard to come by in large church auditoriums. Even if PLC could do a good job “outperforming” what might be expected from a church their size, focusing so much on imitating larger churches’ level of production only invited visitors to start comparing them with bigger organizations, inevitably highlighting PLCs shortcomings.

Instead of looking at things through the lens of what PLC couldn’t offer, the church would be better served by leaning into its strengths – namely the customized intimacy a small church might be able to provide more readily than a larger organization could. This could be done through church activities more designed to build up interpersonal bonds, i.e. small group gatherings, instead of over-relying on traditional, auditorium-based worship services.

Rationale

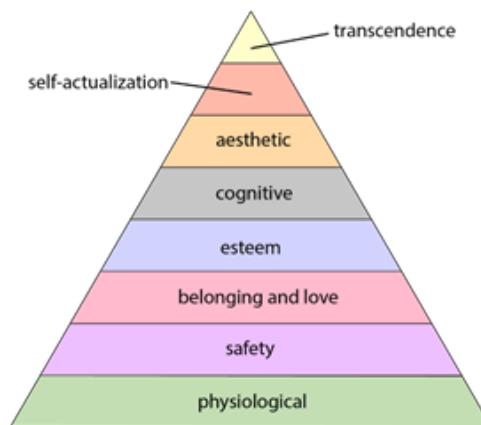
Like most Evangelical (and adjacent) congregations in America, PLC met weekly in a building and followed a Sunday activity schedule that included the elements of teaching, childcare, announcements, music and singing, preaching, an invitation to give financially, prompts to learn more about the church or volunteer, and an altar call, prayer, or reflection moment – usually at the end. For PLC and many churches, most midweek services also function as a scaled back version of the same (or similar) types of programming – a “mini-Sunday”, if you will. For many, however, investing the majority of resources into perfecting this type of programming is unlikely to be effective, because *traditional worship services are fundamentally not designed to meet people’s most basic psychological needs.*

When examining the concept of psychological needs, no theory has endured more than Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy. Despite numerous revisions, limitations, and considerable variability across contexts, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, "has proved to be a durable, if crude, psychological model." (Chen, 7) and "is the basis for other major motivational content theories." (Taneva, 222). Shortcomings notwithstanding, it is sufficient for the general purposes of supporting the recommendations this case study presents.

As an overview, the theory suggests that humans are motivated by certain psychological needs, starting first with a drive to satisfy our most basic needs, but with more advanced ones emerging as these earlier levels are satisfied. The most basic category of needs according to Maslow, was the Physiological – things needed for survival like air, water, food, shelter, etc. Following this were Safety needs, including health, personal, emotional, and financial security. Next up were Love and Belongingness needs, including family, friends, intimacy, trust, and acceptance. After this came Esteem needs, referring to the respect humans crave from others and also including things like the desires for status, recognition, self confidence, and competence. After this, Maslow later conceptualized adding in the categories of Cognitive and Aesthetic needs (Maslow, 1954) – referring to the need for learning, knowledge, meaning, etc. and need for beauty in one's appearance and the world around us, respectively. Approaching the top would be the well-popularized category of Self-Actualization – meaning the desire we have to see our own full potential realized through the utilization of our talents, and completion of our goals. For many, this also includes acquisition of a partner and undertaking the parenting journey. And finally, at the very top would be Transcendence and Spiritual needs – referencing the desire we have to give ourselves to something beyond ourselves.

Importantly, Maslow also stressed that the separation between the needs was not to be interpreted rigidly and that each level did not be satisfied completely before another need emerged (Maslow, 1943 p. 388) – implying that humans could be motivated to pursue multiple psychological needs at once. Either way, Maslow’s Hierarchy remains useful to us, just as long as we primarily understand its framework as directionally correct and do not rigidly interpret it (Maslow himself never even arranged his hierarchy into a formal pyramid).

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs



With this understanding in mind, let us turn to examining what psychological needs are most likely met within the context of traditional, American Evangelical worship services. The essential components of which being the activities of teaching, preaching, singing and music, opportunities to donate and volunteer, and a call to engage with God through prayer – including corporately at the front of the auditorium (an “altar call”).

Teaching is most likely to meet what Maslow referred to as Cognitive needs. Preaching, on the other hand, usually calls us into some sort of personal transformation or inspires us to turn our focus beyond ourselves towards the things of God’s Kingdom. This could either meet Self Actualization or perhaps Transcendent needs. For many church attendees, the music and singing

of worship services often facilitates powerful spiritual moments, and can be thought of as meeting both Aesthetic (beauty) and Transcendent or Spiritual needs again. Aesthetic needs are also somewhat addressed again by clean and well-designed facilities, high-quality graphics and colorful decor, and even the typical “Sunday-best attire” prominent in church-related culture. Being able to volunteer at church can meet people’s need for Self-Actualization, Transcendence, and perhaps even Esteem, due to the recognition and impact that often comes from being in volunteer or leadership positions. The opportunity to financially donate could arguably loosely fall into the Transcendence category as well. Last but not least, prayer responses during altar calls can result in powerful spiritual experiences that could arguably meet a person’s Esteem, Aesthetic, Cognitive, Self-Actualization, or Transcendence needs, depending on the experience.

What the reader has doubtless realized by now is that all of the needs most likely to be met by traditional Sunday worship services do not include the most basic Physiological, Safety, and Love and Belonging layers of needs. Perhaps it could be argued that socializing in the aisles or going out to eat after service can address this gap, but if so, this is likely only fulfillment that happens coincidentally or sporadically in the margins – certainly with nowhere near the same level of intentionality, consistency, and resources that are directed at all the other Sunday activities. To be clear, this case study is not implying that Sunday worship services are pointless rituals (far from it), but they also do not appear optimized to meet people’s most basic psychological needs for survival, safety, love, and belonging, resulting in a foundational gap.

This meant that PLC relying so exclusively on its Sunday and midweek worship services likely was resulting in many visitors – despite them enjoying the teaching, preaching, and music – still feeling like they had not found what they were most deeply looking for. For PLC to increase its effectiveness, therefore, it would have to begin meeting more foundational needs.

Working to meet more of the local community's Physiological and Safety needs was discussed by Marlette Consulting and PLC, however, the unique demographics of the area where PLC was located made these concerns less of an immediate priority, as most new visitors seemed to engage with the church already having these needs satisfactorily met (this is not necessarily the case for many churches, however!). This left the layer of Love and Belonging needs as the clear weakness most in need of focus. With this priority in view, MC recommended that PLC begin to invest in building up its interpersonal bonds through small group activities.

In support of this, research by Schwarz (1996) outlines two more key common qualities across growing churches – “Holistic Small Groups” and “Loving Relationships.” Provocatively, Schwarz found that pastors of growing churches were actually the most likely to affirm the statement, “It is more important for us that someone be involved in a small group than attend church [service].” Schwarz also found that, the larger churches became, the more decisive their small group principles were in respect to further growth. These findings reflected an almost entirely *opposite* set of priorities than what PLC had adopted – indeed, different than what *many* churches in the U.S. have adopted.

To be clear, there *is* a place for traditional Sunday programming. Indeed, one of Schwarz' eight common quality keys of growing churches also included the factor of “Inspiring Worship Services.” It is not a waste to strive for excellence in our systems, stages, sets, and sermons – it's just that these are usually insufficient to grow a church, if they are the main elements being invested into. Worship services, however moving they may feel, are unlikely to bond humans to one another more deeply than activities like consistent meetings in homes with long talks over dinner tables, in living rooms, or on couches. This does not make the worship service a bad tool, but simply a tool designed to meet higher level psychological needs, not foundational ones.

In contrast, research shows that small groups *are* designed to meet three types of foundational needs: Instrumental, Interpersonal, and Identity (Hurley, 2025). Instrumental needs can be roughly correlated to Maslow's Physiological and Safety needs. More importantly for our purposes, however, are that small groups meet interpersonal needs (like Love and Belonging) by giving us access to feelings of inclusion, control, and support. The affiliations we make in small groups, in turn, are often the building blocks for our *identities*, as group membership allows our minds to more easily identify characteristics that align or separate ourselves from others.

The ideal size for a small group is generally considered to be between 3 and 12 members (Hurley, 2025), with some studies suggesting that 5 to 7 member groups often strike the best all-around balance (Beebe, 2021). Traditional worship services, however, typically contain far higher concentrations, demonstrating that neither their activities or scale are optimized to satisfy humans' interpersonal desires for Love and Belonging, but are designed, rather, for higher needs.

The case for small group activities outside of the church facility was not only made to PLC on academic grounds, but was also based on Biblical patterns. In studying the growth of the New Testament Church, for example, we are brought to Acts 2:42-47 (KJV).

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

This passage shows the early church gathering in a variety of concentrations and locations, and engaging in a variety of activities designed to meet a variety of needs. In short, the early church was not a “one-trick pony” and did not appear to need to rely on excellence in centralized auditorium-based programming to grow their numbers. Rather, the Lord grew their numbers “organically” as they focused on life in the Spirit, growing their faith, and loving each other. Pointing to this example, the observer did not recommend that PLC abandon traditional worship services, but rather that they also invest themselves into meeting more foundational Love and Belonging needs through small group activities in a variety of locations beyond the church’s auditorium.

Discussion

As previously mentioned, there were many other issues uncovered during the course of Marlette Consulting’s assessment of Pastor Jacob and the Pentecostal Life Church organization. For the purposes of this case study, however, we have focused on the two most prominent issues: 1) a counter-productive insecurity about church size, founded on a comparison-based perspective of what “success” was supposed to look like; and 2) an over-reliance on traditional, auditorium-based worship services as a means to grow the congregation. To address these areas, the recommendations given by Marlette Consulting included a call for prayer, repentance, and the pursuit of a spiritual transformation that only Jesus could provide; as well as the intentional encouragement of organic and organized small group activities to better meet Love and Belonging needs within the congregation and community. The rest of this case study will focus on a discussion on why reflection is important, why church consulting, specifically, can prove particularly useful for congregations, and how the story of PLC and Pastor Jacob continued.

Why Reflection is Important

Extremely mission-driven people (like ministers) often struggle with overloading themselves with the work of good causes while not prioritizing rest and reflection. These are vital elements that contribute to effectiveness, however, and are important for several reasons. The concept of a sabbath rest is a Biblical principle (Exodus 20:8), and Jesus himself demonstrated prioritizing times of retreat, reflection, and renewal (Luke 5:16). On a purely surface level, Christian ministers would obviously be wise to have an instinct toward adapting their practices from patterns that are applicable from scripture.

Considering things a bit more deeply, however, our actions are indicative of the goals we are seeking, which in turn are indicators of what we consider to be “success.” Our conscious or subconscious vision of success (including what and how we measure) is a deeply spiritual matter, as it reflects the ultimate engrained theology behind our actions. Reflecting on our practices gives us the mental space we need to trace our actions back to our theological assumptions, allowing us to see if any of them need to be challenged.

For example, the “system” of PLC reflected an unspoken theological assumption that the best way to retain visitors and disciple saints was to prioritize getting people to attend as many cycles of Sunday and Wednesday as possible. As another example, the comparison-based insecurity experienced by the members of PLC was indicative of another engrained theological position – namely that success was best defined by how the church’s size and Sunday activities stacked up compared to other large churches in the area. There are doubtless many more churches who have shared these assumptions or others that also need to be challenged during times of reflection. It is the sincere hope of Marlette Consulting that the reflection PLC needed come to be prioritized by the broader Church as well.

Why Church Consulting is Useful

Church consulting is important for ministers to consider for many reasons. Firstly, it can serve as a vital *aid* to reflection, as it can be incredibly difficult sometimes, despite the best of intentions, to see one's own subconscious assumptions and blind spots – virtually by definition. This is, of course, why prayer and hearing from the Lord is essential, but an outside voice can provide previously unconsidered perspectives as well. A third party is also useful when seeking for a thorough and unbiased evaluation, as people closest to situations often can be hindered by their proximity. Lastly, solving problems and making progress often requires an organization to internally collaborate. Unfortunately, internal dialogues can be skewed or stymied by those inside the organization not feeling safe enough (fairly or unfairly) to express their honest thoughts. Outside facilitators can be used as an excellent tool for gathering truly useful feedback, guiding internal conversations, and making sure all parties are able to communicate clearly (and safely) with one another. Church consultants, like Marlette Consulting, specialize in providing all these services (and more) and can become incredibly useful partners for driving progress and effective problem solving.

The research of Christian Schwarz also supports the value of church consultants. In studying fifteen variables relating to leadership, the factor with the strongest correlation of all to the overall quality and growth of a church was “the readiness to accept help from the outside.” A strong 82% percent of pastors from growing churches answered affirmatively to the prompt, “I regularly seek counsel from a trusted outside source, such as a church growth consultant.” compared to only 47% from pastors of declining churches. (Schwarz, 1996, p. 23). For these reasons, Marlette Consulting strongly encourages all ministers to consider partnering with a trusted third party who can assess, advise, and walk with their organization on its journey.

How the Story Continued

Following the proposed methodology, Marlette Consulting compiled these findings and recommendations (and several more) into a comprehensive assessment and presented them to Pastor Jacob and his wife. After a week-long period of time for review, they met with Marlette Consulting for a long meeting to discuss the assessment and provide their feedback. The conversation was an incredibly vulnerable and productive one, as Pastor Jacob and his wife demonstrated a tremendously open and humble posture, where many might have been tempted to become defensive. Pastor Jacob provided some very fair feedback and additional context of his own, but remained open and teachable, largely agreeing to the assessment's findings and committing to seek the face of the Lord through a long period of focused prayer. The type of inner transformation that was needed was not likely to happen easily (or quickly), yet he committed himself to allowing the Lord to challenge and change his internal sources of insecurity. He also agreed to begin implementing more small group activities and immediately encouraged several such initiatives that elicited a positive response from the congregation.

Following this, Marlette Consulting held a workshop with Pastor Jacob and his core leadership team to walk them through a summary of the assessment results and gather their feedback as well. During the workshop, Marlette Consulting encouraged the congregation to celebrate one another and reflect with fondness on all the church had gone through together, before turning the meeting to charting the collective path forward. After a period of unified prayer, the team began to throw out several ideas for how they could love one another better and gather more through both organic and planned events. The weeks that followed resulted in several notable wins and encouraging momentum, with the church even recording its first baptism in quite some time.

Three months later, a second workshop was held to reinforce the learnings from the first meeting and carry the results into more tactical territory. Through a facilitated exercise, Pastor Jacob and the PLC leadership team identified about 25 new visitors who had recently engaged with the church, with an additional 15 established individuals identified as being on the “fringes” of the congregation. Of these 40 people, MC explained, even if only half of them could be retained, that would still be a tremendous win for a congregation of 70 people. God would doubtless continue to send more new visitors, if PLC could demonstrate its ability to properly care for what the Lord had already provided. Armed with a renewed focus on stewardship, the core team divided up responsibilities for connecting with these individuals and adjourned.

Overcoming barriers, however, is often much easier said than done, as real life has a way of throwing new, unexpected complications in the path of progress. Following another period of positive momentum, Pastor Jacob encountered something truly unexpected – the sudden loss of almost half of his leadership core. Through completely independent circumstances, several key families encountered personal situations that required them to step away or significantly step back from involvement at the church, stretching the limited resources of PLC very thinly.

As the story currently stands, MC is continuing its partnership with PLC to discern what the Lord might want to do through this unexpected adversity – including how the church might re-examine its organizational priorities, carry on with its recent discipleship efforts, and begin investing in developing new leaders. Only time will tell how the story ends as, far from being concluded, this case study is currently ongoing. Marlette Consulting is confident, however, that no matter the reasoning behind these set-backs, the Lord will guide Pastor Jacob and PLC down the path they need to go, provided they continue to seek their validation, passion, and direction from the Spirit (Proverbs 3:5-6), and persist in growing their love for each other (John 13:35).

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