

New Roots Review

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Can the Church Grow, like Amazon?

by Fred Wilgenburg

There is much growth in the Sioux Falls area. I recently visited some large dairy farms which have been built in our region. They are impressive, with some operations having thousands of cows housed under one roof in a massive building that is quite comfortable. At milking time, some dairies have their cows standing on a slow moving carousel which can hold 80+ cows, all being milked at once. That's necessary to milk thousands of cows 2-3 times each day.



This is a new dairy barn in South Dakota.

Amazon is building a five-story distribution center with 3 million square feet—by far the largest building in Sioux Falls.

In the early 1990s, there was one Walmart Supercenter in Sioux Falls. Now there are four.

Why all the growth? For Walmart, it is partly because Sioux Falls has been growing, from 81,000 people in 1980, to 101,000 people in 1990, to 125,000 people in 2000, to 153,000 people in 2010, to 196,000 people presently, and everyone needs a Walmart, right?

For Walmart and Amazon, some of their growth is to please their shareholders. More growth should mean bigger profits. As well for Amazon, they are riding the wave of consumers increasingly buying online. For the new dairy farms in our area, they are seeking to keep up with a growing cheese market, as big cheese factories have been built in the last several years. Economy-of-scale is part of the growth, too.

I appreciate the giving-spirit of many of these growing businesses. At their groundbreaking in Sioux

Falls, an Amazon spokesperson was quoted, "Amazon leverages its scale for good and makes investments to support communities." Walmart gives much support to non-profits within the communities in which it is located. As I have family in the dairy industry, I am well aware of the generosity of many of them.

One of our programs is preparing bilingual chaplains to serve at commercial farms. That's how I have become acquainted with some of the large dairy farms. They care about their employees,



Ernesto Alfaro serves as the chaplain at Dakota Plains Dairy.

including their spiritual and emotional health, which is reflected in them having us provide chaplaincy.

Personally, I am most interested in, and perplexed by, growth of the Church. I am interested in this, as I know many of you are, because it is arguably the most important of growth. If we believe the offerings of the Gospel—a new life of peace, hope, and fulfillment available for each of us human beings—are true, and we believe that eternity—both heaven and hell— is real for every person, then numerical growth of the Church through new people personally receiving God as their Savior and Lord is hugely important.

I am perplexed by growth of the Church because it is not occurring much within most churches in the US and other developed countries. Even though the Gospel is the most marketable of all undertakings in —>



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Fred Wilgenburg
Director & Pastor
1915 E 8th St, Suite 104
Sioux Falls, SD 57103
phone: (605) 376-6330
sfnewroots@gmail.com

www.sfnewroots.com

[Facebook.com/SFNewRoots](https://www.facebook.com/SFNewRoots)

church growth is challenging for them, too. For the Nepali churches which are made up mostly of former Hindus and Buddhists, one reason is that when they become Christian, they often limit much their cultural engagement with their people because the Nepali culture overlaps some with Hinduism. But, if one is no longer as culturally engaged, an important bridge is eroded for connecting with the non-Jesus-followers.

Do we struggle with that too—finding a healthy balance of living out our faith in a God-honoring way, and at the same time, befriending those who are not Jesus-followers? Does our Christian culture cause us to speak too much in “Christian-ese?”

I have recently begun doctoral studies at the local seminary, focusing on researching and practicing Gospel dialogue among a variety of non-Jesus-followers through a variety of means, in order to answer the following: 1) what is motivating to Jesus-followers to more actively and consistently share the Gospel? 2) how can cultural engagement and application of biblical truth be helpful and proper for Jesus-followers as they reach out with the Gospel? 3) how is the Gospel and Truth perceived as relevant to non-Jesus-followers?

I would welcome conversations with you as well as hanging out together in doing this, if that interests you.

We would probably agree that it starts with nurturing and stoking our own faith in God. It’s hard to “market” something about which we are not feeling passionate. I have learned that various practices help me personally in stoking passion in my faith and love for God, which can ebb and flow. It even happened to the best of them;....take a look at Peter and Paul. They were passionate evangelists because they personally opened their lives to experiencing and knowing the wonders of God. However, they had their off-days and styles which didn’t always work well. Thankfully, we’re just the nursing staff and the Holy Spirit is the non-failing Heart Surgeon. But beyond passion for God, besides having some tools, techniques, and understandings to help in Gospel dialogue, the main thing is offering authentic love and kindness, and time and intention.

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that it is totally free, life-changing, fulfilling, peace-giving, and it has the largest salesforce, the Church, especially in developed countries, struggles to grow. (Fortunately, according to Pew Research, worldwide, the Church is growing steadily, mostly due to growth in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.)

Many churches and Jesus-followers try to help the Church grow, which is good, but overall, we have not been successful. As we at New Roots Ministry network with 65 churches made up of mostly new Americans, I have seen that

What is New Roots Ministry?

It’s “a springboard for immigrants & their churches.” This is done through workplace chaplaincy (both as Fred is chaplain for 16 hours/week at Smithfield Foods & as we train & place bi-lingual chaplains on commercial farms), through Timothy Leadership Training, through hosting special educational events, through empowering refugee/immigrant pastors, leaders, and their churches, through offering unique Service Opportunities—serve in, or visit, stores owned by refugees or immigrants, then hear their stories, through helping people navigate the American system and achieve their goals, like education, and through driver training for new Americans.



I enjoy Nepali festivals, especially the food and fellowship. The hosts are always fine with me observing their Hindu worship, and not participating.