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In the second chapter of Acts, St Luke ends a description of the early church by saying: And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:47b)

For some years now the Archbishops' Council has spoken about spiritual and numerical growth as something that the Church should encourage and work towards. It holds this goal together with re-imagining ministry and contributing to the common good.

But in my experience, uniquely among these goals, the numerical growth of the church is contended. Not everyone believes that the Church should grow intentionally. For many evangelism has a bad name, associated with manipulation and with particular styles of Christian faith and worship. I remember an American cartoon from some years ago, which can be applied just as much here. A clergy person is standing by the door of the church, looking a bit forlorn. A parishioner looks sternly at the priest and says "But you must understand, rector; everyone who should be a member of this church already is one."

This sense that evangelism is somehow a bit vulgar and untoward is accompanied by the reality that to share one's faith with others takes a small step of courage, as we overcome the fear that the things we hold very dear – our love of God, our affection for our church community – that these things may be rejected or refused by the people we know. This means that even people who in principle don't mind the intentional growth of the church would really rather not think about it when it comes to brass tacks.

So numerical growth has been a difficult goal to embed in the fabric of our discipleship or our church life. I regret this. Because I think the Archbishops' Council is absolutely right to advocate it as a key and an essential part of our corporate life as a Church.

The verse of Scripture with which I began indicates that the Church of Acts 2 was growing and that St Luke did not have a problem with that. It comes at the end of a passage which speaks of many things in the life of this growing church – their dependence on the teaching of the Apostles, on friendship and fellowship, on breaking bread together and rejoicing together, and on sharing food and holding goods in common. The picture is of a joyous community which had won the respect of those around it; and attractive and credible community, and a community marked too by numerical growth.

And this is my vision of the church of Jesus Christ today. A group of ordinary people, from different traditions and churches and streams, with the most extraordinary gifts to share. And because these gifts are so marvellous, that's why I want the church to grow today. Not so that we can have a bigger church, but so that we can make a bigger difference. So that we can share our knowledge of God. So that we can partake in Christ's life in worship, word and sacrament. So that we can share with one another and help feed the poor. For these reasons I want the church to grow.

And so for me the growth of the Church is a good in itself. We share the news about Jesus Christ so that people can come to know Him, and knowing Him is very good. I want the church to grow, and to connect with today's people as they are and where they are, because the Son of God wants their company. That's why in my own Diocese, and across the Church, I'm committed to the mixed economy of parish churches and fresh expressions of the church, a people who can bring from their storehouse both the new and the old, so that all might come to know the one who for our sakes became poor so that through his poverty we might become rich; the beautiful shepherd who is so ancient and so new.

This hope, that the welcome of God may be offered to all, can't flow from anxiety about the survival of the church. If it does, we're sunk. The church does not grow so that it can survive. It is not the survival of the church that matters. The church matters because Jesus matters, he who wants

everyone's company, he who built the church on a rock, he who wants a table of love and welcome to be laid in every street, so that all may be fed.

It's easy to regret that the default position of the English people is no longer "C of E". Easy to seek church growth for our own financial security or for reassurance that the world hasn't really changed too much. These motivations are understandable, but mistaken.

It seems to me that God has been gracious to us in these days. As I said in my inaugural sermon in Liverpool the other day, the Church of England used to be in a spiritually dangerous place: we thought we were in the middle of things and at the top of things. Now, in this England, we're increasingly on the edge and underneath - marginalised, not always taken seriously, sometimes mocked. That's good news for a church that wants to grow. Because on the edge and underneath is where the people are. As Pope Francis says in his wonderful exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, "The Joy of the Gospel: "An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others." The Bishop of Rome's vision is my vision for the church among the churches, for all the churches, as we gather again on the edge.

From the edge we give our gift, the knowledge of Jesus. Intending that all people might know Him, and the power of His resurrection. Man and woman, rich and poor, gay and straight, black and white, conservative and progressive, believer and unbeliever, Jesus longs for our company. His welcome is absolute. And his community, sharing that welcome, should expect and pray for people to be added to their number, and should see it.

The growth of the Church is a good in itself. But the growth of the church is also instrumental, given by God so that we can make a bigger difference, in our contributions to the common good.

Imagine for a moment the Christian you most admire. A person of prayer? One who shares the joy and lightness of faith in adversity? One who gives time in service of others, inside and outside the church community? One who struggles for justice and invests himself or herself in political and social action? The particular mix of holiness, the qualities that make such a person admirable, will vary from Christian to Christian. But we all know or know of such a person. Now answer this question; would England be better off if there were more people like that? If those contributions to worship, to prayer, to political life, to service, to holiness, were multiplied, doubled, trebled, many-fold?

For myself I pray for a church where the best of Christian discipleship is multiplied. Not an anxious church which needs to be bigger to pay the parish share and keep the roof on, but a joyful and attractive contributor to social capital, to human flourishing and to the salvation of those who are lost.

In the Kingdom of God there are no poor, there is no war, there are no oppressed people, no one is sick, no one is afflicted by evil, no one is excluded. That Kingdom comes wherever God is King. The Kingdom of God is greater than the Church, but by God's grace the contributions of mature disciples to his Kingdom are enormous and incalculable, and I long to see them increase.

All I have said here is that the spiritual and numerical growth of the Church is rightly one of our central aims. I hope you agree. I hope and pray that you will contribute to that growth, in your prayers and in your actions, by inviting your friends and by always standing ready, as St Peter says, with an explanation for anyone who asks you why it is that you are hopeful. May our Lord help and guide you – and guide us all – as we follow that road, and may he continue to add to our number day by day those who are being saved.