

# Introduction to Church Growth

A. Scott Moreau

Christians often take growth of the church for granted. They neither pray earnestly for it nor work systematically at it.

Donald McGavran

1. Historical sketch of church growth
  - a. Practical and theoretical foundations for the movement
    - i. The Anglo-American concept of mission
      - (1) The "three-self" concept of Henry Venn (1796-1873) and Rufus Anderson (1796-1880). National churches should be:
        - (a) Self-supporting
        - (b) Self-governing
        - (c) Self-propagating
      - (2) The concept of the "indigenous" church developed
        - (a) The "Nevius" (John L. Nevius--1829-1893) plan (Korea; 1890). The plan included five elements:
          - (i) Bible study
          - (ii) Self-propagation
          - (iii) Self-government
          - (iv) Self-support
          - (v) Missionary itineration
        - (b) Spontaneous expansion (Roland Allen--1868-1947)
        - (c) The Indigenous Church (Hodges): seeks to apply the three-self formula in a practical way to develop indigenous churches
        - (d) More recently, a "fourth-self" has been proposed: self-theologizing.
    - ii. The German mission theorists
      - (1) The peoples' churches of Gustav Warneck
        - (a) 1834-1910--generally regarded as the founder of the Protestant science of missions, though he was not the first to look at missions as a science
        - (b) The dominant understanding of mission was mission as education, which included both "extension of the kingdom" and the "founding of church".
        - (c) We do not found the church by asking people to become

members. The first stage might be conversion of individuals, but the aim was the development of peoples' churches which would result in Christianization of whole peoples and victory over paganism everywhere.

- (2) Man in community: Bruno Gutmann
  - (a) 1876-1966: of Leipzig Mission to the Chagga people of Tanzania from 1902-1938; an ethnologist.
  - (b) Stress in individual conversion seen as wrong (formed the basis for the "mass conversion" concept)
  - (c) Missions is the perfection of social orders of clan, neighborhood, age group, etc. by redirecting them into a new order.

b. The "Father" or "Dean" of Church Growth: Donald McGavran

i. His work in missions in India (1923-1954)

McGavran (whose PhD was from Columbia in education) saw that many churches in India were not growing in spite of the excellent social/development work being done by the missionaries there. His own mission had only 20 to 30 small non-growing churches after decades of missionary efforts (Wagner, "A Tribute", p. 16). He started to wonder what caused churches to grow. This was fed by the results of J. Waskom Pickett's study Mass Movements in India. He began a life-long study of travel to many countries to do research in the sociology of the growth of the church.

ii. Several of McGavran's basic principles come from the Anglo-American and German mission theories introduced above:

- (1) Responsive peoples
- (2) Group (or multi-individual) conversion (as opposed to individual approach)
- (3) People movements
- (4) "Christianization" (= "civilization")
- (5) Indigenization (contextualization)

iii. In general he has avoided extremes of both his German and Anglo-American roots, but has been accused of having a primary weakness in letting experience dictate the interpretation of Scripture.

iv. For the first fifteen years, McGavran's thinking was applied primarily in the non-Western context. Eventually it permeated the West as well.

c. Beginning of the Church Growth Movement (1955-1965)

i. The written beginning came with The Bridges of God (1955), in which McGavran put forth four key issues (summary adapted from Wagner, "A Tribute", pp. 16-18):

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- (1) **Theological:** The central purpose of God's mission was that lost men and women be found, reconciled to God, and brought into responsible membership in Christian churches.
  - (2) **Ethical:** Too many of God's resources (people and finances) were being used without asking whether or not the kingdom of God was being advanced by the programs they were supporting. There was need for greater accountability.
  - (3) **Missiological:** The "people movement" theory--there is a need, in non-Western contexts, to shift our focus away from individual decisions to group decisions. Linked with this was the HUP: "People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers"--therefore, conversion should occur with a minimum of social dislocation.
  - (4) **Procedural:** The distinction between "discipling" (generally referred to as evangelism) and "perfecting" (generally referred to as discipleship) as two discreet stages of Christianization.
- ii. How Churches Grow (1959) continued the development. It presented a critique of missions from 1925-1955. In it, McGavran critiqued five major influences in missions, none of which (he maintained) had any impact on church planting or church growth:
- (1) Turning of missions to service
  - (2) Early turning of the church over to complete national leadership
  - (3) Specialization emphasis (medical missions, etc.)
  - (4) Founding of mission agencies (IMC, WCC)
  - (5) Ecumenical movement (and the drive for church union).
- iii. In 1961, he established the Institute of Church Growth in Eugene, Oregon (at Northwest Christian College).
- iv. The Fuller School of World Mission (1965 to the present)
- (1) In 1965, McGavran accepted a call to be the founding dean of the Fuller School of World Mission.
  - (2) In 1970, he published Understanding Church Growth, which is seen as the foundational book for church growth theology
  - (3) The Church Growth Bulletin was started, and became the periodical of the movement (now called Global Church Growth)
- d. The modern movement and influence (1966 on)
- i. Today it is recognized as one of the most influential movements of the 1970s (see Wagner, "The Church Growth Movement", p. 27). It is now established as a discreet academic field of study at many major theological institutions.

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- ii. It has a strong sociological and anthropological foundation (seen in the academic backgrounds of the major proponents at Fuller)
  - iii. Throughout its history, the church growth movement has had to face accusations of theological paucity. Even with the addition of theologically trained faculty at Fuller, those accusations have not abated. The most common one is that church growth theologians discover sociological principles and then manage to "find" them in proof-texts in the Bible.
  - iv. One methodological approach which was initiated by McGavran and the church growth movement is the "people" approach to world evangelization, which has almost taken on a life of its own. From the annual Unreached Peoples directories to individual country reports on unreached peoples (such as Daystar's for Kenya), this particular strategy has had a tremendous impact on mission strategy in the last quarter of the 20th century.
- e. Wagner proposes six minimum elements of the church growth movement ("Church Growth: More than a Man, A Magazine, a School, a Book", pp. 11-12, 14):
- i. Non-growth displeases God (it is abnormal, a disease, and correctable)
  - ii. Numerical growth of the church is a priority with God and focuses on new disciples rather than on decisions
  - iii. Disciples are tangible, identifiable, countable people that increase the church numerically
  - iv. Limited time, money, and resources require strategy based on results
  - v. Social and behavioral sciences are valid tools in measuring and encouraging church growth
  - vi. Research is essential for maximum growth.
- f. Four areas of concern in the future of church growth (from Wagner, "The Church Growth Movement", pp. 32-36):
- i. Church growth research methodology needs to be systematized and standardized. To date the vast amount of research has been haphazard, and spotty in quality.
  - ii. The church growth theological methodology needs to be clarified, developed, and communicated to others. That methodology relies more on the social sciences than philosophy. It starts with the idea "this is how things are" rather than "this is how things ought to be". This approach has been misunderstood by many.
  - iii. Church growth needs to develop ways to measure church quality as well as measuring membership growth.
  - iv. Church growth needs to aim for biblical balance in evangelism and mission (by this Wagner seems to mean the debate on the relationship between the "evangelistic" and "cultural" mandates).

## 2. Principles and Church Growth

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- a. Some definitions:
- i. A **principle** is a fundamental truth, law, etc. on which other things are based. It generally deals with "Why?"
  - ii. A **method** is a way of doing anything, a process. It generally deals with "How?"
- b. My proposition: one of the danger areas for church growth theology is mistaking methods for principles.
- c. What are the larger issues involved here?
- i. Many in church growth are not careful with their terminology. In this case, they take a sociologically developed **method** and declare it to be a **principle**.
  - ii. Further, the method espoused is perfectly justifiable sociologically. Seeing the world as 'people' groups opens whole new doors to us in reaching as many for Christ as effectively as we can.
  - iii. As a method, it violates no biblical (ethical) norms and thus does not need to be proven Scripturally--nor does it need to be shown to be "the way God sees the world". Church growth errs when it feels a need to find biblical proof for sociologically determined strategies which do not contradict biblical ethics.
  - iv. Other principles advocated by church growth are developed as **descriptive** social phenomena (e.g., the HUP). All too often, however, they end up being promulgated as **prescriptive**, often after having been "baptized" by attachment to a few proof texts (as with this case). This is a dangerous way to develop theology!
- d. Bearing this case study in mind, what may be listed as principles found within the church growth movement? The following lengthy list is from Towns, Vaughan, and Seifert, The Complete Book of Church Growth, pp. 114-33; note that several proposed "principles" were actually situational facts or methods [such as arrested growth] or were simply misnamed. In those cases, we have tried to adapt the core idea faithfully and present it as a principle for the sake of this discussion)
- i. Principles of corporate body life:
    - (1) *Local church*: Believers must be incorporated into a local church.
    - (2) *Goal ownership*: For goals to be effective, they must be owned by members of the congregation.
    - (3) *Homogeneous groups*: People prefer not to have to cross social barriers in joining becoming Christians or joining a church.
    - (4) *Stability*: Without proper nurture in a local congregation, the mortality rate of new converts is very low.
    - (5) *Expectancy*: An indispensable condition for growth is fervent, expectant faith. Only churches that want to grow can really grow.
    - (6) *Exercise of spiritual gifts*: Awareness and application of the gifts within a

local body will enable its growth.

- (7) *Corporate climate*: The growth of a church is in part dependent on the corporate climate.

ii. Principles of administration and leadership:

- (1) *Pastoral leadership*: The pastor is the key human agent in the growth of a local church.
- (2) *Delegation*: If they expect their churches to grow, pastors must delegate their tasks out to church members.
- (3) *Properly placed priorities*: When the church's resources are budgeted for growth and not just maintenance, they will grow.
- (4) *Church staff*: Gathering the correct staff for the church is important in its growth.
- (5) *Graduated levels of leadership and training*: Church growth requires levels of training and service mobility within a congregation.

iii. Principles of facilities:

- (1) *Mobility*: Churches can grow when they are not prisoners of their own buildings (i.e., confining all they do within their own facilities).
- (2) *House cell units*: Churches that establish small growth groups centered on homes are able to grow.

iv. Principles of finances:

- (1) *Over focus on money*: Churches (or mission agencies) that use money to build dependency rather than foster independency will slow or stop their growth.
- (2) *Over accommodation to lack of resources*: When churches accommodate themselves too radically to shortages in funding (rather than walking by faith), they hinder growth.
- (3) *Opposition*: The "foreign feel" of a mission church is directly proportional to the amount of foreign funding it receives. When too much of the funding is foreign, an anti-foreign sentiment is likely to develop.
- (4) *Receptivity*: People vary in receptivity over time. We should concentrate our energies on the receptive peoples, not the resistant ones.
- (5) *Self-support*: The degree of self-support that can be achieved is proportional to the degree that a denomination is free to grow.
- (6) *Flexibility*: The more flexible the church is with meeting its needs through viable alternatives to self-funding, the more it will be able to grow.

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- v. Principles of ministries:
- (1) *Social obstacles to conversion:* The great obstacles to growth are social, not theological.
  - (2) *Social strength:* The church can grow more rapidly when the body of Christians is sufficient to be perceived as a significant social body in the country or community.
  - (3) *Salvation substitutes:* To the degree that churches become engaged in social action (i.e., political action; opposed to social service) they can expect growth to diminish.
- vi. Principles of Christian education (N.B. thirteen 'principles' are listed under this section, most of which are either not genuine principles or have already been covered elsewhere--we list here the 'survivors'):
- (1) *Inverted discipleship:* The more resources missionaries spend on "encampment" (developing believers at the expense of reaching the lost), the slower the growth rate will be.
  - (2) *Syncretism:* Religious relativism or syncretism will slow the growth of the church.
  - (3) *Original motivation is not critical:* The original motivation of someone who comes to Christ is not as critical to his or her continuing with Christ as is good post-baptismal training.
  - (4) *Redemption and lift:* Once a person comes to Christ, he or she is 'lifted' to a new social pattern based on Christian morals and ethics.
  - (5) *Pragmatism:* If what we do does not produce results, then we must either modify or discard it for activity that does.
  - (6) *New units:* New (smaller) units of believers grow faster and win more converts.
  - (7) *Balancing celebration, congregation, and cell:* A balance is needed among the celebration (over 400), the congregation (100 to 200), and the cell (10 to 12) if a growing church is to continue to grow.
  - (8) *Diagnostic research:* While diagnostic research will not cure problems, it offers critical insight into their nature and may suggest ways in which they can be cured.
- vii. Principles of ecumenism:
- (1) *Administrative unification is often dangerous!:* Too much focus on administrative unity with other churches/denominations will result in serious growth problems.
  - (2) *Parachurch specialists:* Parachurch organizations, when working alongside local churches, can greatly enhance growth.

## viii. Principles of evangelism:

- (1) *Decisions vs. Disciples*: Churches that focus on discipling (in the church growth sense) rather than decisions per se will grow.
- (2) *People movements*: Movement of whole peoples to Christ are a gift of God in the growth of the church, because they allow the new believers to avoid the social dislocation that comes with isolated decisions for Christ.
- (3) *Harvest theology*: We are to win the winnable people while they are winnable, and we should focus our resources in that direction.
- (4) *Mobilizing the 10 percent*: If the estimated ten percent of the members of a congregation that have the gift of evangelism are mobilized, the church will grow far more effectively.