



McIntosh

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P.O. Box 892589 Temecula, CA 92589-2589

www.mcintoshcgn.

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Five Views of Church Growth: Part 2

The Core of Church Growth Principles

The essential church growth principles, as developed by Donald McGavran, can be summarized in three statements.

First, the essential conviction of mission/church growth is to realize that God wants his lost children found and enfolded. Church growth explodes from the life-giving nature of the Eternal God. Jesus Christ gave his disciples the Great Commission, and the entire New Testament assumes that Christians will proclaim Jesus Christ as God and Savior and encourage men and women to become his disciples and responsible members of his church.

Discovering the facts of church growth is the second essential of Church Growth thinking. Responsible research into the causes and barriers to church growth must be completed. God has given us a Great Commission and we dare not assume that all is going well, or that we are doing the best that can be done. The Lord of the harvest wants his lost sheep found and we must be accountable to his command. Discovering the degree of growth or of decline and stating such facts meaningfully is crucial to faithful ministry.

The third essential is developing specific plans based on the facts that are discovered. Taking the initiative to set goals and develop bold strategies to win people to Christ and plant new churches must be the practical results of meaningful conviction and research. These three essential ideas form the core of Church Growth Thought, although several other principles were developed in conjunction with these three essentials.

Thus, according to Donald McGavran, Church Growth is effective evangelism.

Five Views Today

As the Church Growth Movement reaches its fiftieth year in 2005, interest and debate about the movement remains high. There are five basic views regarding this movement.

#1: The Effective Evangelism View holds that the Church Growth Movement effectively confronts and penetrates the culture with the gospel. This is the classic Church Growth viewpoint that grows out of theology, applies sociology, and determines strategy.

#2: The Gospel and Our Culture View holds that the Church Growth Movement lacks a sufficient ecclesiology, which hinders it from being able to effectively engage the culture. This is an antithetical Reformed approach that sees the church's mission as building an alternate community of faith as a witness to the Kingdom of God.

#3: The Centrist View holds that the Church Growth Movement is based on an evangelistically focused and a missiologically applied theory. This is classical Church Growth but with more theological reflection.

#4: The Reformist View holds that Church Growth assumes theology but ineffectively employs it to analyze culture, determine strategy, and perceive history. This view is appreciative of Church Growth insights but believes the movement needs to be more theologically and historically reflective.

#5: The Renewal View states that the Church Growth Movement must be based on a biblical vision of the church as the vital community of the kingdom of God in order to be effective. This view holds that the church must focus on being a revitalized community of faith before witnessing to the world.

Agreements and Disagreements

Each of the five views noted agrees that the Church Growth Movement has been, and continues to be, extremely influential. No other movement in the last few decades has driven the agenda of the Church and missions more than the Church Growth Movement. Of course, some believe this influence is positive, while others see it as somewhat negative. But, each viewpoint admits Church Growth cannot be ignored.

There is agreement that the missionary nature of God, and His Church, results in an expectation that the church should grow. Whether this is expressed as "church growth" or "growth of the church," the very nature of God's Kingdom, assumes that it will expand.

Flowing from the missionary nature of the Church is the agreement that the Church (and churches) must focus on ministry rather than maintenance. The priority of the Church is not for itself, but for the world. Christ died for the world, and as Head of the Church, it is expected that the Church will sacrificially give itself to the world also.

In addition each view agrees that the Church needs to do research to remove the "fog" (McGavran's term) so that we may discover the facts of where the church is growing and declining, as well as why it is doing so. Thus, the social sciences are useful tools, when used wisely, to better understand and minister in God's world.

The contributors disagree on a great number of issues, but perhaps the major one is over what is the mission of the Church? Is the mission of the Church to proclaim the gospel of salvation to people and persuade them to become followers of Jesus Christ and responsible members of his Church? Or, is the Church's mission to proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom and form an eschatological community of faith to be a witness to the world? Or, is the Church's mission a combination of both? How one understands "mission" will determine to a great extent whether he or she accepts or rejects the Church Growth Movement.

While all the contributors agree that the Church should grow, there is disagreement over how much initiative believers should take to assist in such growth. Is it proper for church leaders to make bold, optimistic growth plans based on research? Or, in contrast, is it more appropriate for

leaders to focus on a church's spiritual health trusting that a healthy church will grow? Or, perhaps a combination of both?

In a similar way, there is disagreement as to the measurement of church growth. Are numbers an adequate assessment of church growth? Or, are there other measures that are more helpful, such as the church's assistance of the poor? In short, what makes a church healthy? Faithful? Biblical?

Finally, disagreement is apparent over an understanding of contextualization and culture. The basic question is how much can a church adapt contextually to its culture without accommodating to the culture? Where does a church draw the line between being "in" the world but not "of" it? To what extent should pragmatic decisions drive the agenda of the church as it seeks to communicate to people in the various cultures of the world? These are questions that create disagreement and misunderstanding about church growth.

Summary

Obviously, the few agreements and disagreements just mentioned do not cover the entire issue, but these are themes that seem to keep rising to the surface in the overall discussion.

From my perspective the Church Growth Movement does need to reflect more intentionally on its theological, epistemological, and hermeneutical foundations.

The fact that the proponents of Church Growth Thought have primarily been practitioners v. theologians no doubt has pushed the movement toward an emphasis on strategy rather than theology.

Additionally, Donald McGavran did not want to develop a theology of Church Growth, but instead hoped each theological tradition would develop its own. For the most part this has happened, but left the Church Growth Movement without a fully developed theological foundation.

For a full discussion, see . . .

Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views
(Zondervan 2004) edited by Gary L McIntosh.
Available from your local bookstore or by calling
toll free 1-877-506-3086.
\$16.99 (US Funds) plus shipping and handling.