



McIntosh

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Five Views of Church Growth: Part 1

When you hear the term "church growth" what words or phrases come to mind? You may think of "megachurches," "small groups," "numbers," "contemporary worship," "marketing," or a host of other concepts that have occasionally been promoted as popular church growth theory.

In contrast you may identify the term "church growth" with words like "effective evangelism," "church planting," "church extension," "making disciples," "church multiplication," or other aspects of outreach that seek to win people to Christ and enlist them as responsible members of his church.

These differing perceptions of the term "church growth," and the emotions that arise from them, clearly point to a misunderstanding and disagreement regarding the term, as well as the movement. Church growth is one of those ideas that cause us to draw lines in the sand. We are either for church growth or against church growth. There seems to be little neutral ground.

Donald McGavran, the Father of the modern Church Growth Movement, recognized early on the divisive nature of Church Growth Thought in a letter to his wife written from Costa Rica on September 8, 1961. "It is clear that emphasizing the growth of the churches divides the camp. It is really a divisive topic. How strange when all are presumably disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Dr. McGavran's words still ring true today. Church growth continues to divide the camp.

Significant Contributions

There is agreement, however, among church growth critics and adherents alike, that the Church Growth Movement has made

significant contributions to the mission of the church that cannot be ignored. For instance, one early critic believes that the major contribution of the Church Growth Movement is in the "clarifying of the mission of the church and focusing mission activity on the responsive."

Other critics add that the movement has provided a "strategy and a set of priorities for mission"; "a militant, optimistic, and forward-looking approach to the missionary enterprise"; and a way to "make us all aware of peoplehood and its human diversity as a tool in world evangelization.

Another critic suggests two major theological contributions by the Church Growth Movement. "The first contribution is the theological clarification that the growth of the Church is not something that should be simply an overflow of the life of the Church. Rather, growth must be something that is *intentional* and embraced at the *purpose level* of the Church." The "second contribution is the clarification and development of the Church's understanding of the leadership qualities and characteristics necessary to catalyze and mobilize a group of Christians."

Advocates of Church Growth Thought suggest that the movement has contributed even more to the advancement of Christ's mission in the world. One church growth advocate writes, "The Church Growth Movement emerged in the service of a powerful theological vision: to fulfill the ancient promise to Abraham, and to fulfill Christ's Great Commission, by reaching the lost people, and peoples, of the earth."

He then lists twenty specific ideas from the Church Growth School that have impacted church ministry, particularly evangelism.

For example, five major contributions can be described as networks, receptivity, indigenous forms, new units, and people groups.

Church Growth has taught us that . . .

1. The gospel spreads most contagiously, not between strangers, nor by mass evangelism, nor through mass media, but along the lines of the kinship and friendship *networks* of credible Christians, especially new Christians.
2. The gospel spreads more easily to persons and people's who are in a *receptive* season of their lives, and Church Growth research has discovered many indicators of likely receptive people.
3. The gospel spreads more naturally among a people through their language, and the *indigenous* forms of their culture, than through alien languages or cultural forms.
4. "First generation" groups, classes, choirs, congregations, churches, and ministries, and other *new units*, are more reproductive than old established units.
5. Apostolic ministry is more effective when we target *people groups* than when we target political units or geographical areas.

While critics and adherents will no doubt continue to debate the specific contributions of the Church Growth Movement, most would agree that the "church-growth movement is extraordinarily influential and significant within American churches today. At its best, it should be applauded. Where it is not at its best, it requires criticism so that it might be."

A simple way to summarize the current views on Church Growth is as follows: Some people love it. Others dislike it. Many simply misunderstand it.

Understanding Church Growth, of course, is more complex than such a simplistic summary. My research has discovered at least five different viewpoints on this significant movement.

But, before looking at the differing viewpoints, it is important to understand exactly what Church Growth is and is not.

A Definition

The term *Church Growth* has three definite but separate definitions. First, the term is associated with numerical growth, i.e., the growth of the church by attendance, offerings, baptisms, membership, etc. These areas of growth involve observable, measurable, repeatable items.

The second meaning is planting churches both within and across cultural barriers. When the Great Commission is properly implemented, people are won to Christ, baptized and taught to obey Christ. This action of ministry is done in a local church and best carried out by planting new churches. Therefore, the heart of Church Growth is to plant churches that will carry out both evangelism and edification. Since the Great Commission targets "all people groups," *panta ta ethne*, then it includes cross-cultural ministry that recognizes the barriers of culture, ethnicity, and language, i.e., cross-cultural church planting.

The third aspect of the Church Growth definition is seen in its scientific research base, i.e., Church Growth is a discipline or science. But Church Growth research does not take place exclusively in the realm of the sciences that are tied to the physical world, i.e., psychology, anthropology, sociology, etc. Rather, Church Growth begins with doctrine or systematic theology. Based upon the truth it finds in the Bible, Church Growth then applies research to culture. As such, it uses the research methods of both science and theology. Thus, Church Growth is a "Bible-based ministry that is data-driven in strategy" (Elmer Towns).

While not generally recognized, the greatest influence of Church Growth is not in numerical growth or the phenomena of the mega church, but the discovery and dissemination of workable biblical principles that have led to the growth and increase of Christianity in North America and around the world.

The greatest contribution of the Church Growth Movement has been its awakening of church leaders to ask "why?" and "what?" in search of workable biblical principles for ministry.

(continued next issue)

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