

CHURCH GROWTH: SPRINGBOARD FOR CONFLICT?

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This has been a decade in which there has been a great concern for the health of churches. Among other noteworthy resources, the Association of Nazarene Sociologists of Religion came into being during the eighties. Insights of the Church Growth Movement became more widely known and applied. Still, at the close of the decade most Nazarene congregations remained smaller than seventy-five members and many had failed to grow at all during the period.

Why? The traditionalist critics, who knew social science had no place in the church, have an easy answer. To use the harvest analogy, they know we shouldn't have been trying to find out whether corn pickers were the best method to harvest wheat anyway. We should have been praying more fervently that God would bless and use the corn picker. This convenient theory is difficult enough to refute that church growth critics can rejoice, concerned denominational leaders may weep, and saintly sociologists are inclined to despair.

Easy answers, however, are rarely adequate. Machines designed specifically to harvest ripe wheat might be more effective in wheat fields than machines designed to pick corn even though other conditions masked their superiority. The ripe harvest may have been lost for a large number of other reasons, including, perhaps, the faithlessness of the critics. Indeed, my short-list of explanations for the declining churches in the midst of tremendous need and rich resources has a dozen entries.

Among these is the possibility that in our training of ministers and in our programs for the churches we have not given enough warning about, and help for, the conflict which often accompanies growth. We have probably recognized that there is a negative relationship between conflict and growth. The more conflict, the less growth. We may have been less aware that church growth itself tends to provoke conflict, and around rather predictable issues. When we assure churches that they can grow if they want to and are willing to pay the price, we should probably help them to understand that conflict will be part of the price.

Perhaps church growth would be facilitated by identifying typical conflicts which arise when churches grow. Paul Wehr argues that effective intervention to resolve conflicts rests on proper analysis (1979: 1). His framework for analysis is a "conflict map" which includes the conflict history, context, parties, issues, dynamics, preferred routes to solution, and resolution potential. This approach could, it seems to me, be useful to pastors and others who intervene in specific church growth conflicts. Its use is illustrated here in the process of examining inherent church growth conflict issues suggested by the sociological literature, conflict dynamics, and the communication and decision-making aspects of the Nazarene context of church growth.

FACTS-BASED ISSUES

Facts-based issues provoke conflicts over what is. "Judgement and perception are the primary conflict generators here" (Wehr, 1979: 20). Conflicts around these issues may be more amenable to resolution than those around other types since a mutually trusted source of facts can often be found.

Issue: Potential for Growth. Projections and plans of pastors or enthusiastic lay leaders may seem unrealistic to other members. Wasting the resources of the congregation on impossible dreams would not be good stewardship, so one side rejects the possibilities. Failing to act in faith would not be obedience, so the other side argues for their dream.

Resolution Strategy: Since the basic question is whether or not unreached people need the ministry of this church, resolution may be found through careful, honest, empirical, community research.

Issue: Effective Methods. Another example of a church growth related fact-based conflict issue is the question of which evangelistic outreach methods are most effective. Even if both traditionalists and innovators agree that church growth is possible and desirable, they may be expected to disagree over the effectiveness of methods.

Resolution Strategy: Denominational research may be a helpful resource in resolving conflicts which arise around this issue, since the question basically is: What works? County agricultural agents used a strategy of model farm plots to demonstrate the relative value of various practices.

Issue: Consequences of Increased Size. Many members believe growth will change their organization into something more like a bureaucracy than like a family. And, their experience with bureaucracies makes them reluctant to pay that price. Few ministers would dispute the fact that increased size brings change. While they might not be familiar with Georg Simmel, they probably would agree with his observation that, "a group upon reaching a certain size must develop forms and organs which serve its maintenance and promotion, but which a smaller group does not need. On the other hand, it will also be admitted that smaller groups have qualities, including types of interaction among their members, which inevitably disappear when the groups grow larger" (1950: 87). Therefore, whatever conflict arises here is probably provoked by one side's desire to openly discuss a clear-cut reality and the other side's desire to avoid this question because they perceive it to weaken their case for evangelism.

Resolution Strategy: The factual answer to conflicts regarding the consequences of increased size is that characteristics like intimacy and accountability are inevitably weakened by increased size. However, conflict might be resolved by deciding both to grow and to create and maintain strong sub-groups. Both Weber (in Gerth & Mills, 1946: 316) and Simmel (1950: 102) point out that the strengths of small groups can be retained if larger churches develop effective sub-groups on the order of Wesley's class meetings. Another strategy might be for pastor and people to decide to periodically create a "daughter church" in order to win the lost while retaining the ideal size. In either case, until this issue is satisfactorily addressed, it probably will be an inhibiting factor for church growth.

VALUES-BASED ISSUES

Values-based issues provoke conflicts over what should be (Wehr, 1979: 20). The church is more suited to resolving value-based issues than most institutions. Values are her domain. However, since local leaders may be perceived to have a vested interest, denominational leaders may need to have a key role in assisting resolution of value-based conflicts by clarifying and reinforcing values.

Issue: Negative vs. Positive Nature of Growth Consequences. The more serious issues regarding the consequences of growth are whether size changes are important and whether they will be positive or negative. Both questions are values-based. The literature provides support for those conflict parties who see growth changes as important and as potentially negative. Max Weber emphasizes the impossibility of spiritual rigor through mutual accountability in larger groups (in Gerth & Mills, 1946: 316). Ernst Troeltsch says "voluntary churches" are necessarily small since they intend to have "direct personal fellowship," to be "united on a basis of personal intimacy" (1931: 331, 337).

Resolution Strategy: As noted above, the sociological literature suggests that it is possible to retain the sect-like characteristics of intimacy and mutual accountability if the church is willing, and able, to develop strong sub-groups. Strong, small groups are so difficult to establish that many larger churches fail in the attempt. But, such groups would resolve the inherent conflict between maintaining small size in order to have intimacy and accountability, which are essential for sect-like groups, and obeying the great commission. Or, a church which decided that its ideal size was under fifty members could seek resolution through church planting. In either case this conflict probably needs to be brought to the surface and considered prayerfully together. Until it is church growth probably be prevented as pastors and members experience latent conflict over the probable negative consequences of growth.

Issue: Separation vs. Outreach Evangelism. Bryan Wilson (1959: 11) identifies an important value-based issue in the tension between the command, "come out ... and be separate" (II Corinthians 6: 17 NIV), and the command, "go and make disciples" (Matthew 28: 19 NIV). These commands appear to be in a continual, necessary tension through which we work out the reality of Jesus prayer that we would be in the world but not of the world (John 17: 15-16). The tension tends to provoke conflict. And, the issue is at the core of evangelism and church growth. Wilson explains that "Evangelism means exposure to the world and the risk of alienation of the evangelizing agents. It means also the willingness to accept into the sect new members" both of which tend to increase transition from sect to church. Resolving the tension in favor of separation alone results in "evangelism" without winning the lost (Bibby and Brinkerhoff, 1974: 199-200). Resolving the tension in favor of evangelism alone results in rapid loss of sectarian distinctives.

Resolution Strategy: Maintaining this tension may be the Biblical ideal. Therefore, resolution of conflicts around this issue might emphasize the importance of maintaining the tension. Advocates for both extremes might be trained to appreciate the legitimacy, in fact, the necessity of the other.

INTERESTS-BASED ISSUES

Interests-based issues provoke conflicts "over who will get what in the distribution of scarce resources" (Wehr, 1979: 20). Scarce resources would include power, privilege, economic benefits, respect, and love.

Issue: Control vs. Trust. Writing from his experience as an Anglican missionary to China in 1895 through 1903, Roland Allen said, "Spontaneous expansion must be free: it cannot be under our control; and consequently it is utterly vain to say, as I constantly hear men say, that we desire to see spontaneous expansion, and yet must maintain our control" (1962). He perceived an inherent conflict between organizational control and spontaneous revival. As he saw it, control and trust are not compatible. Those who place highest value on protecting the orthodoxy of the faith will, it appears, inevitably conflict with those who give a higher place to outreach evangelism. Jesus seems to have experienced conflict with the Pharisees at this point. From their point of view, he too easily forgave and accepted sinners. From His perspective, they cared more about rules than about people in need.

Resolution Strategy: I am the grandson of a holiness preacher. With that heritage and a personal commitment to the church, I find it easy to be among those who place a very high value on holiness orthodoxy. I will not easily surrender my conflict to those who would casually accept everyone into the church. But, perhaps I could be taught to understand that control and trust are ultimately incompatible, that orthodoxy demands my trust in the Holy Spirit's willingness and ability to work in sincere, new believers' lives like He has worked in mine. Resolution of conflicts in this area is vital to church growth. Denominational awareness of the value conflict and training toward balance might reduce the conflicts.

Issue: Power. Thomas O'Dea (1970: 240-255) identifies five dilemmas which are, he believes, inherent in the institutionalization of the church. One of these seems to be an important illustration of interest-based issues which arise especially when churches grow. O'Dea describes the early days of a religious movement as characterized by the single-mindedness of the circle of disciples who gathered around Jesus. But, charismatic leadership is inherently unstable so transition to a stable institution is essential. However, when it begins to emerge, "there arises a structure of offices--of statuses and roles--capable of eliciting another kind of motivation, involving needs for prestige, expression of teaching and leadership abilities, drives for power, aesthetic needs, and the quite prosaic wish for the security of a respectable position in the professional structure of the society" (1970: 244). Selfless service tends to become intermixed with selfish interest. Since self interested members may perform more effectively as selfless ones, "it may develop that the self-interested motivation will come to prevail" (1970: 244). O'Dea's observation that selfless service tends to be replaced by self interest is confirmed by experience. While the overt conflict will probably not focus on church growth, outreach evangelism will be effectively prevented by leaders in power since new members would threaten their position.

Resolution Strategy: Fortunately, most congregational leaders have strong spiritual commitments. For most, the problem is probably one of weak understandings of the spiritual issues around power. Therefore, clear teaching and preaching on holiness as it relates to self

sacrifice vs. self will should be an important part of the resolution. An effective holiness revival may be needed. And, Jesus' model of leadership should be raised up as the norm in contrast to currently popular leaders focused on their own prestige and power.

CONFLICT CONTEXT

Nazarene congregations communicate through both formal and informal networks. Formal communication takes place in public worship, business meetings task groups, study groups, and printed materials. Informal communication networks often form spontaneously based on such things as family ties or shared heritage.

When church growth conflicts arise, they, like other conflicts, are dealt with both formally and informally; officially and unofficially. The informal networks appear to follow the pattern of issue proliferation Coleman (1957: 10-12) identified. Parties on opposite sides of the issue tend to stereotype each other. In fact, conflicts are carried out very much as if they did relate to the church. However, the formal networks tend to ignore or minimize the conflict. Conflicts that are open and manifest in informal groups are often suppressed within the formal communication networks.

Similarly, the formal and informal decision-making processes differ considerably. For example, coercion is more freely possible in the informal setting than it is officially. The ultimatum that if new people are elected to office some dire action will be taken is usually not legitimate in a board meeting but may be fairly effective in the unofficial process.

Unfortunately, in smaller Nazarene congregations decisions tend to be made by consensus in the informal networks. The official representatives appear to have authority to ratify the consensus already formed but not the authority to initiate action contrary to, or without prior consideration by, the informal groups. When disagreement occurs between official action and informal decisions, formal decisions tend to be modified or rescinded.

Since parties on opposite sides of conflicts tend to communicate and make decisions within informal networks but not between networks, formal communication and decision-making channels need to address these latent conflicts.

CONFLICT DYNAMICS

Nazarenes appear to share the common American belief that conflict is pathological. In addition many may understand conflict as sinful. Therefore, our conflicts tend to be latent rather than manifest. Periodic eruptions may occur, but the conflict is generally suppressed. It is real. Informally and covertly the lines are drawn. But, on the surface the illusion of tranquil peace and brotherly/sisterly love must be maintained.

Because the conflict is latent, there is no occasion for official communication or decision-making. It doesn't appear on the agenda of the church board because that group is formal and officially there is no conflict. On the other hand, in the informal networks of communication it is fairly legitimate to discuss both the various issues and the parties to the conflict. Informal

decisions which may reduce conflict without directly addressing issues also seem to be legitimate.

Church growth conflicts have the additional problem that most Nazarenes really believe evangelism and church growth are Biblical. They have internalized the idea that reaching the unsaved is God's will. This is not legitimate ground for conflict. Therefore, unrelated, but more acceptable issues may become the focus of any acknowledged conflict, whether covert and only informally recognized or overt and directly addressed. For example, in one congregation which I have observed, church growth success is normally countered with a fairly open, emotional conflict over the church nursery. Mothers' concerns for their babies' welfare are perceived as legitimate while their reluctance to expand the fellowship to include new converts is not as easily reconciled with their faith commitments. Transferring the focus of the conflict allows a release for the strong, but suppressed, emotions over the real issue. The process, which seems to be repeated as needed on a cycle of about eighteen months, has been quite effective in preventing church growth as well.

Most churches need to develop the ability to bring important conflicts to the surface. However, both widely held beliefs and long established habits make this very difficult. Ministerial preparation, education of youth in the church colleges, adult training programs, denominational publications, and other opportunities should be utilized to correct these destructive beliefs and habits.

When it is possible for pastors and people to openly discuss together the conflict issues which appear to be raised by church growth, they will be much more likely to find creative, Spirit-led ways to fulfill the mission of the church while retaining our highest values.

CONCLUSIONS

Important conflicts may be expected when churches grow, or even attempt to grow. While many issues may provoke these conflicts, six predictable ones have been considered here: Potential for Growth, Effective Methods, Consequences of Increased Size, Separation vs. Outreach Evangelism, Control vs. Trust, and Power.

Two of the inherent tensions identified here should remain. Preserving them, however uncomfortable that may be, is essential. If the Nazarenes are to retain the strengths of their sect-like heritage, our congregations must increase the size of the fellowship by making disciples while also preserving the small group size necessary for intimacy and mutual accountability. If we are to be effective agents of change in our world but also separate from it, we must retain the tension between the command to separateness and the one to evangelism.

Some conflict may be made more positive in its conduct and results merely by making concerned members and leaders aware that church growth raises some important issues around which conflict normally develops. Anticipated problems are usually more manageable.

Social scientists surely have a place in the church. Better harvesting methods are surely possible. Insights into the factors which help or hinder the effectiveness of congregations are

valuable, But, in our training of ministers and in our programs for the churches we probably also need to include some preparation for dealing with the conflict which often accompanies church growth.

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