

The Church Growth Movement and the American Dream

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Introduction

After more than twenty years of ANSR and forty years of church growth influence on the Nazarene mission, we are here to consider the Church Growth Movement and the American Dream. If this exercise is just to throw stones or heap praise, it probably is not worth our time. From our point of view, a post mortem analysis of a missionary movement would not be that interesting or helpful. However if this exercise is an opportunity to think again about our mission, we see some value. Therefore, we will proceed as if our task is to provoke and participate in a discussion of our mission, its contexts, and the possibility of understanding church growth.

The Church Growth movement was a missionary initiative. Looking back on his development of the ideas, McGavran wrote, “As a missionary in India, I was putting in long days, months and years ... working at getting growth in real situations. ... ‘Church Growth thinking’ was on the back burner. Nevertheless, these convictions were gradually forming and hardening during the eighteen years from 1936 to 1954” (Donald A. McGavran in and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1977, pages 3–4).

Church Growth came to the Church of the Nazarene as a missionary resource. In 1964 McGavran’s *How Churches Grow* was required reading at the orientation for new Nazarene missionaries. As with most ideas, Nazarene missionaries vigorously debated Church Growth thinking. We accepted some ideas, rejected some, and modified others – based on our contexts, experiences, and research – so that we might more faithfully accomplish our mission.

Missionary methods have differed somewhat from methods in the American church. However, in the 1970s church leaders in the United States began to consider and apply church growth thinking to the mission of the American church. We had often talked about missions coming home to America. Now missionary methods were more consciously being considered as applicable in the American church. The Church Growth Movement began to impact the American Dream, or at least the Nazarene dream of evangelism in America. At the same time the American culture began to impact the Church Growth Movement.

In a sense we are involved in a discussion that is made infinitely more difficult by the fact that there are at least five frames of reference from which to look at the movement. We will briefly state them here and then deal with the issues and problems raised throughout the rest of the paper.

1. There are those who talk about the Church Growth Movement as though it is mostly about numbers for numbers sake and marketing the church. Some are excited by that thought and others are disappointed and/or genuinely angry, claiming that Church Growth has failed to produce the promised results precisely because it has become a marketing movement and the church is really not about marketing but about mission.
2. There are those who describe the Church Growth Movement as having been successful in “good” churches and that any church could see the same kind of growth if they would do what the “good” churches are doing.
3. There is that group of church and para church leaders who have seen the movement as an opportunity for personal gain. Their actual “mission” has been the sale of books, registrations at seminars, advancement in denominations, teaching positions, etc.
4. There is kind of an academic exchange that takes place between departments of Colleges and Universities in which scholars challenge and test each other. It is not unique to this topic but is certainly present in this topic.
5. Then there is the McGavran perspective. Donald McGavran always spelled church growth with a lower case “c” and a lower case “g” and envisioned an evaluation/research method instead of a promotional or marketing program. Had we closely followed McGavran, the process would look more like the University self study for accreditation than a series of seminars. The core question for McGavran was always related to how well we were accomplishing our divine mission.

The American Dream

The first three of these frames of reference seem most influenced by the American culture. So, we are discussing them under the heading of The American Dream. The fourth and fifth frames of references seem more representative of the missionary and academic roots of church growth. Therefore, we will consider them under the heading of The Church Growth Movement. Each of these frames of reference raises significant issues and problems.

I. Numbers for Numbers Sake

The church growth movement coincided with the American Dream that when good “products” are effectively marketed, they will succeed. Some Christian leaders have been excited by the possibilities of marketing. They see the need to present the church in the most favorable light. They would never manipulate people, but they would use the best we know to improve the visibility and image of the church.

However, the idea of marketing the church raises the important issue of authenticity. It is possible to cycle large numbers of people through a congregation that fails to be faithful to the authentic mission of the church. Some of those who have identified themselves with the church growth movement have substituted marketing the church for real evangelism and church growth. Numbers at any cost has sometimes been accepted and rewarded. Even most of the leaders who misuse marketing in these ways probably want an authentic church, but some do not appear to understand much about authenticity.

The marketing approach to church growth has led to notions that would not even be accepted by marketing professionals. These have included ideas like:

Every church could grow every year
Every market is strong
Growth is sustainable anywhere
Bigger is always better

Those people who are most disturbed by the church growth movement may be most offended by the lack of an understanding of an authentic church.

A recent exchange in the Religious Research Association listserv illustrates the problem. Someone wrote “I have a request from a pastor for a name of a workshop she could attend on church growth also for books to read.” One response was, “if you want to see your church pull in people, then go with the Church Growth stuff. If you want committed disciples of Christ, who will know what they believe and why they believe it, I say stay away from the church growth material. The book of Acts tells us that the disciples, met to listen to the preaching, broke bread, prayed and fellowship. This is how the church grew during the first and following centuries. Christ, crucified for your sins was preached and the church grew.”

The respondent wrote what many seem to believe – church growth is just marketing and manipulation. In contrast, what the church needs is authentic evangelism and nurture. If the Church Growth Movement were mostly about marketing the church, many church growth thinkers would also be offended.

II. Reproducible “Good” churches

The second perspective from which to examine the movement is that any church could see the same kind of growth if they would do what the “good” churches are doing. If pastors of typical churches would just do what the pastors of super churches are doing, their church would surely thrive and grow.

The church growth movement shifted from a missionary enterprise to the American church at a time in the American culture when the value that bigger is better ruled. We were consolidating schools into larger units. We were building the biggest malls in the world. Although McDonalds and 7-11 have thrived with many small, neighborhood

stores, we were convinced that small organizations were a relic of the past. In this context, it was easy to believe that surely larger churches were superior too.

In fact, some of us seem genuinely unable to separate the two, distinct questions: “Will we be faithful to the Great Commission?” and “How will we organize the new converts into communities of faith?” Many seem to assume that if you answer the Great Commission question in the affirmative, you must inevitably have larger and larger congregations. Conversely, if members actually prefer a smaller, more intimate community, many seem to assume that they must be answering the Great Commission question with a carnal, “No”. There are a variety of economic, organizational, sociological, and personal reasons for arguing that larger or smaller is better. Personal preferences and the models we use in ministerial preparation suggest that one church of 150 is better than three churches of 50. Still, many members prefer the intimacy of a small church and faithfully find ways to prevent its loss.

In fact, as the super church was glamorized, there seems to have been a corresponding demoralization of the typical church. If self-image of typical churches was affected, this was probably a significant church growth factor for these churches. The limited research available in this area indicates that members' “Satisfaction with church worship and program is clearly the strongest of the many institutional factors” which influence church growth, at least among Presbyterian churches (Roof, Hoge, Dyble, & Hadaway, “Factors producing growth or decline in United Presbyterian congregations,” *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-1978*, 1979, pages 212-217). Therefore, to the extent that members of smaller churches began to perceive their church as just a little church without much to offer, expansion growth in these churches became less likely.

Perhaps as a result of this fascination with the super churches, church growth research and thinking has tended to neglect those thirty to forty year old existing churches that find themselves in stagnant or declining communities. It may be that finding practical ways to the apply church growth theory to these churches is so difficult that the best church growth thinkers have focused on more manageable situations. Whatever the reason, leaders with the least church growth training have been left with the task of devising strategies in these particularly challenging circumstances.

III. Personal Interests

The third group associated with church growth is made up of church and para church leaders who used the movement as an opportunity for personal gain. At their best these church growth leaders exemplify what O’Dea described as the dilemma of mixed motivation, which typically accompanies the institutionalization of religion (Thomas F. O’Dea, “Five Dilemmas in the Institutionalization of Religion” in *Sociology And The Study Of Religion*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1970, pages 240-255). Selfless service is mixed with “the quite prosaic wish for the security of a respectable position in the professional structure of the society” (O’Dea, page 244).

The “mission” of some who claimed to be leaders in the church growth movement has actually been the sale of books, registrations at seminars, advancement in denominations, establishing themselves in teaching positions, and in other ways mixing the ideal of selfless service with personal gain. This group is not unique to the church.

In a book trying to separate the good from the bad management ideas in business, the authors of *The Witch Doctors: Making Sense of the Management Gurus* remind us that the conflicting and frequently changed management theories are often destructive, creating anxiety in leaders and weakening institutions. “The real problem with management theory is that it is pulling institutions and individuals in conflicting directions. ... One moment, companies are urged to agree upon and then follow a single strong 'vision' the next, they are being warned that they live in an 'age of uncertainty'; where following any single vision can be suicidal” (John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolridge, New York: Time Books, 1996, page 15).

In business, as in the church, there is a large market for ideas that might make the organization more productive. Micklethwait and Woolridge argue that “Ever since *In Search of Excellence*, the guru industry has boomed. Some \$750 million worth of business books are currently sold in America alone every year, and the market for audio and videotapes, courses, and seminars is even bigger” (page 6).

While these authors are critiquing management theory, much of what they say seems to apply to some of what has been promoted as church growth theory. In explaining the problem, they also explain their use of “witch doctors” in the title for the book: “Management theory, according to the case against it, has four defects; it is constitutionally incapable of self-criticism; its terminology usually confuses rather than educates; it rarely rises above basic common sense; and it is faddish and bedeviled by contradictions that would not be allowed in more rigorous disciplines. The implications of all four charges is that management gurus are con artists, the witch doctors of our age, playing on business people’s anxieties in order to sell snake oil. The gurus, many of whom have sprung suspiciously from the 'great university of life' rather than any orthodox academic discipline, exist largely because people let them get away with it. Modern management theory is no more reliable than tribal medicine. Witch doctors, after all, often got it right—by luck, by instinct, or by trial and error” (page 12).

“Humble businessmen trying to keep up with the latest fashion often find that by the time they have implemented the new craze, it looks outdated. The only people who win out are the theorists, who just go on getting richer and richer. Indeed, it is not hard to construct an Oliver Stone movie out of the available evidence for a concerted conspiracy. Established gurus, with jet-set lifestyles to support, are always looking for ways to update their arguments; would-be gurus, be they overworked management consultants dreaming of spending some time with their families or underemployed business professors dreaming of first-class travel, are always trying to invent the revolutionary ideas that will establish their reputations; and everybody in the business is desperate to keep the wheel turning” (page 15).

The church also has established “gurus” always looking for ways to update their arguments and would-be “gurus” trying to invent the revolutionary ideas that will establish their reputations. Keeping their personal enterprise going may be destructive to the church and its leaders.

IV. Academic Exchange

The fourth perspective is the intriguing academic world including our own Colleges Universities and Seminary.

Both Ray Hurn and Bill Sullivan recognized that for an understanding of Church Growth to really have any long term impact on the denomination, it would have to be established in the Colleges and Seminary. Many connections between the Church Growth Division and the schools have been created. Early on, Ray Hurn created the “Church Growth Scholars Symposium” and more recently the academic interchange has been taking place in the Breckenridge Conferences on Ministerial Preparation initiated by Bill Sullivan.

Most, if not all, of our schools now have at least one class in “Church Growth” being offered as part of their ministerial preparation program.

A very interesting transition has taken place in our approach to the core subjects that make up our ministerial preparation programs during our lifetimes. In most areas we have shifted from what could be called deductive truth to what we are generally calling inductive processes.

Paul Leedy gives us a particularly succinct description of methods used to discover truth or information about the previously unknown. Two methods work. In fact he suggests that we only have the two methods of deductive logic and inductive reasoning or the scientific method. (Leedy, Paul D., Practical Research. New York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989)

Deductive logic is very valuable and allows us to develop answers to problems and questions for which there is no readily available answer. The rules of logic were first suggested by Aristotle and give us a basic system for moving from a generally accepted belief to the beliefs that can be derived or deduced from it.

Leedy says: "Up to the time of the Renaissance, insight into most problems was sought by means of deductive logic, a methodology identified with Aristotle. It relied upon logical reasoning and began with a major premise. This was a statement, similar to an axiom, that seemed to be a self-evident and universally accepted truth: Man is mortal; God is good; the earth is flat." (page 79)

Leedy suggests that the “terror that gripped Columbus’s sailors was a fear supported by deductive logic. To them, the world was flat. That was their major premise.” And we might add, it was a premise shared by virtually all people not long before. Their reasoning followed the rules of logic from flat surfaces eventually having boundaries or

edges to the belief that by sailing across the flat surface they would eventually come to the edge and fall off. "At this point" Leedy comments, "they posited a second premise. The earth is afloat on Chaos." They would be lost!

"The logic was sound; the reasoning, accurate; the conclusion, valid. Where the whole proposition went wrong was that the major premise was incorrect. The reasoning began with a preconceived idea that seemed to be true. But such was Aristotelian logic. It provided answers to problems for which no other answer existed: What is the nature of God? Where are angels found? How many of them can dance upon the point of a needle? It satisfied those who started their quest for knowledge from a dogmatic premise and pursued it to a logical conclusion. (page 80)

It was in the Renaissance that we began to see a new approach to the discovery of knowledge. The fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries were filled with exciting advances in nearly every field. The fifteenth century gave us the printing press which forever changed communication. The sixteenth century not only gave us the reformation, but was also the century in which the scientific method began to provide dramatic advances in knowledge through the work of men like Galileo, Copernicus, Leonardo, and many others. Their work was based on an intense interest in the world around them and the information that could be gathered by observation.

This was the era of the rise of the scientific method. Leedy writes: "Its basis was a way of thinking known as inductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning begins not with a preconceived conclusion — a major premise — but with an observation. In the Renaissance, people began seeking truth by looking steadfastly at the world around them. They asked questions of Nature. And Nature responded in the form of observable fact. But fact is fact, and those who seek it must translate it into meaning. During the Renaissance, people soon found that when facts are assembled and studied dispassionately, they frequently suggest hitherto undiscovered truth. Thus was the scientific method born; the words literally mean "the method that searches after knowledge" (scientia = L. knowledge, from scire, L. to know." (page 80)

When we (the authors of this paper) were attending college and seminary in the sixties nearly all of our religion classes were taught from a deductive perspective. For example we were taught "a" theology and we were taught "an" interpretation of the Bible. Today, we are teaching "theological method" and "Biblical interpretation."

We have intentionally shifted from delivering predetermined "truth" to students and have begun to teach them a method of interpreting the Bible that starts with observations from reading the Bible. Instead of starting with a theological premise and going to the Bible to find support for that premise we are teaching them to go to the Bible and let the Bible speak for itself.

Unfortunately we have not made that transition in all of the subjects related to ministerial preparation. We still seem to want to believe that there is "a" program that will

accomplish our divine mission in every church and in every situation. Not unique to the Church Growth class, it is a particular risk in every Practical Theology class we offer.

In schools where the “Church Growth” class has been perceived by other professors and students as being a promotional and marketing class, with an implied promise of continuous expansion of every congregation that did things “right,” it is not unreasonable to find those other professors and students disappointed with the lack of results.

Just as we have shifted from deductive to inductive methods in our teaching of Theology and Bible, we need to make the same shift in our teaching of the practice of ministry. Just as the Bible must be allowed to speak to the reader, the community that is the local church and the community in which that local church ministers must be allowed to form the basis of how that local church community develops its own program.

Inductive processes beginning with observation and moving on to development of understandings of how to proceed with the task of developing an effective church program can be taught. McGavran was teaching that very process to missionaries long before Fuller invited him to move his Institute to Pasadena to become the Fuller School of World Missions.

V. McGavran

The fifth perspective from which to examine the movement is in the work of the person generally accepted as the founder, Donald McGavran, who was deeply missional long before the word was coined at the turn of the twenty first century.

McGavran didn't begin researching how churches grow in order to found a movement glorifying organizational success. In fact, his own writing focuses on the work of bringing men and women into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ and into fellowship with a community of believers. His early question seems not to be how can we get a church to grow but rather what bridges does God seem to be using to draw people to himself. His earliest books give us a hint into his search for truth. *The Bridges of God* (1955), *How Churches Grow* (1959), and *Understanding Church Growth* (1970) are not about how to market the church, but about how to research the subject of how God is working in particular situations.

For McGavran, the quest was always about “understanding” growth. In conversation he would regularly say; “when you understand how growth happens; whether it is numerical or organizational or spiritual, then you are in a position to repeat it and multiply it.” “And” he would say, “you don't have to do it by trial and error, you can discover what is working by doing research.”

McGavran was primarily concerned about the task of understanding how churches grow. In his monumental work, *Understanding Church Growth* he says: "Hundreds of missionary societies write into their constitutions that carrying out the Great Commission is their foremost aim. Why, then, is so very little known about church growth? Why is it

so seldom seen? Why has it not been understood long ago? We have discovered so much about how plants and animals and human beings grow — why do we know so little about how churches grow? When we devote enormous sums to teaching agriculture and to research in that field, why do we spend so little in learning about or teaching church culture—the planting and care of self-propagating churches?" (Understanding Church Growth, 1970, page 67)

Like current ecclesiastical writers, he held a very high opinion of the church and congregations or communities of faith. His personal and professional focus was particularly on researching the processes which God was blessing for winning people to become active participants in those communities and starting new communities.

Perhaps the best model we have for understanding McGavran's approach is the self study conducted by Colleges and Universities for accreditation. It is the most obvious application of scientific method to gain an understanding of the mission of an organization and the success or lack of success they are experiencing in carrying out that mission. Few of us would even consider working for an unaccredited school but oddly enough we get uncomfortable about applying the same process to gain an understanding of how well the mission of the church is being carried out.

McGravan He describes the lack of statistical analysis of the processes and results of mission activities as producing a "universal fog" of misinformation and misunderstanding. "Those who believe that a chief and irreplaceable purpose of Christian mission is to proclaim Christ and to persuade men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church should systematically dissipate the fog that envelopes the missionary enterprise. It might cost 2 per cent of their annual budget to accomplish this task. Cities do not have to tolerate smog, nor do Churches have to work in frustrating uncertainty as to the degree to which they are faithful to their Master in propagating the Gospel. It is easily possible for any branch of the world mission month by month, to see clearly the degree of church growth which has been achieved and to feed this knowledge back into the administration of the enterprise. It is entirely practical to understand very much more about the complex processes which God blesses to the increase of His Churches; but to do so, Christian mission must recognize the fog that swirls around its head and take steps to dispel it." (Understanding Church Growth, 82)

In this fundamental task outlined by Donald McGavran, the Church of the Nazarene has been remarkably and wonderfully successful. We now have available much of the fog lifting data and the research personnel that McGavran dreamed about in the sixties.

The degree to which data and the analysis of that data is used to inform decisions made by church leaders no doubt varies greatly from one denomination to another and would be conditioned by the training and interest of the particular leader. However, a similar statement could be made about the use of the results of a self study by leaders of academic institutions.

Largely through the leadership of Dr. Bill Sullivan the Church of the Nazarene has emerged as a leader in denominational research. One of the strengths of the Evangelism and Church Growth Division is Dr. Sullivan's continuing commitment to research. The Research Center serves as a resource to decision-makers by conducting descriptive and evaluative research studies to provide critical information. Carl Dudley has observed that fewer than ten denominations have an established research center. The Church Growth Research Center has recently been moved into a position to more directly influence information management in the Nazarene headquarters organization.

Conclusions

The Church of the Nazarene is a missional church. The Church Growth Movement in the Church of the Nazarene, especially through the work and leadership of Bill Sullivan, has made some noteworthy contributions to the mission of the church:

1. The church size strategies – recognizing the unique strengths and challenges of various sized congregations
2. Multicultural mission strategies – strengthening our ministry to minority populations
3. Academic exchange through the Church Growth Scholars Symposium and the Breckenridge conferences on ministerial preparation – involving the religion scholars of the church in valuable dialogs regarding the preparation of congregational and denominational leaders
4. The ANSR Poll – providing another way for leaders to listen to the grassroots
5. Demographic Analysis – providing districts and congregations convenient access to demographic descriptions of the communities to which God has called them
6. ANSR – making McGavran's ideal of a corps of researchers a practical reality for the Church of the Nazarene

If our commission is to make disciples incorporating them into a community of believers, and if some adaptation to culture is necessary in order to join God's work in those cultures, and if there is a legitimate role for social scientific research in the service of the church, there are some significant challenges ahead:

1. The church needs a "Bill Sullivan" whose heart is not satisfied with just gathering data, but who consistently seeks an understanding of the church informed by the data. We need someone who, like Dr. Sullivan, will have a passion to understand, an openness to research that challenges assumptions, a theoretical foundation for interpreting research information, and a deep commitment to the mission of the church.

2. The church growth movement and groups like ANSR need to better understand and support faithful ministry in typical churches – smaller, older congregations in communities with stable or declining populations.
3. The practics departments involved in ministerial preparation need to provide research methods for evaluating the appropriateness and accomplishments of programs. Ministerial preparation now includes methods for doing theology and methods for Biblical interpretation. Practics still too often teaches programs rather than methods for evaluating current programs and developing new programs within each local church and specifically for that local church.
4. Local church leaders and leaders in preparation need better help in understanding the social contexts in which they minister. In important ways the church is always a colony of aliens in a foreign culture. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God. We must not adapt to significant aspects of their culture. However, the church is also always located within a particular social context, communicating the gospel and helping Christians live their faith in that context. Leaders need better help for exegeting their community.
5. There is still a need for more appreciation of the various forms of the church. Super churches and small, neighborhood churches both have particular advantages and disadvantages.
6. ANSR should continue to have a role in discovering the bridges God is choosing to use to draw people to Himself.

Before Donald McGavran articulated the positions in the fifth approach to church growth, the abuses of the first (numbers for numbers sake marketing), second (reproducible “good” churches), and third (gurus working for personal gain) approaches existed and were already a problem. Furthermore, if, or when, we are able to eliminate “church growth” in favor of “mission,” “evangelism,” “spreading the faith,” “spontaneous expansion of the church,” “church health,” or some other new language and ideas, the abuses of the first, second, and third groups will persist, adapting to the new language but continuing the same abuses and problems. Therefore, solving the problems is, and will be much more difficult and important than stamping out the church growth movement, changing the language, or eliminating church research.

We believe all of us who care for the church must help to expose and repudiate the abuse and the problems it creates. Together we must find ways to identify, expose, and correct those ideas and programs that ultimately interfere with bringing men and women into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ and into fellowship with a community of believers.

We must also find ways to affirm commitment to our divine mission. There is a great need to combine our energies to more clearly understand from scripture, our tradition,

sensitive awareness of culture, theory, and appropriate research the bridges God is using to draw people to himself.