

The Effect of the Church Growth Movement on the Church of the Nazarene

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C. S. Lewis, writing sixty years ago, caught the spirit of today's America pretty clearly. "[A] few centuries earlier . . . the humans still knew pretty well when a thing was proved and when it was not; and if it was proved they really believed it. They still connected thinking with doing and were prepared to alter their way of life as the result of a chain of reasoning." By contrast, Lewis said, today's thinkers regard careful, thought-out reasoning as irrelevant to real life. (*Screwtape Letters*, Letter 1)

Those of us who do research are faced with listeners who enjoy quick phrases and catchy one-line analyses. A national broadcast news agency called our office a few years ago. They wanted a quick story on how the church had abandoned the inner cities. Since the Church of the Nazarene Research Center had collected data from over a hundred religious groups, we were the right place to call. Unfortunately for the news agency, the truth was a little more complicated.

Selected Mainline Protestant Denominations	Change in Number of Churches	Change in Number of Adherents
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	-25	-43,787
Episcopal Church	-67	-55,888
Presbyterian Church (USA)	-17	-13,586
	-109	-113,261

Yes, during the 1980 to 1990 period, some large mainline denominations had lost many members in the big eastern seaboard cities. But smaller evangelical groups had increased greatly.

Selected Evangelical Protestant Denominations	Change in Number of Churches	Change in Number of Adherents
Assemblies of God	54	30,520
Church of God (Cleveland)	9	6,962
Churches of Christ	11	7,868
Seventh-Day Adventists	43	23,623
	117	68,973

In fact, the 61 denominations that reported in both decades had a net increase of 31% in adherents between 1908 and 1990. This might also have been a good story, but it was too complicated for the evening news. (See *Denominational Groupings* Attachment for details.)

But where are the people who want to know what's true? Who want to know facts so that they can act accordingly? Who change their plans when they understand new realities? Where are these people? Many of them can be found in the Church of the Nazarene, at least partially thanks to the Church Growth Movement.

The Church of the Nazarene has understood the importance of research and records since its inception. Our denominational Archives has lists of churches and pastors, addresses and membership figures, going back to the earliest days of the groups that became the Church of the Nazarene. Attendance figures, numbers of people joining each church, financial records, and other indicators of denominational vitality have been collected nearly as long.

And the denomination has a long history of analyzing that data. The author recalls seeing an extensive growth history chart, incorporating many of the principles espoused by church growth persons in workbooks and seminars. Membership and attendance were charted for several years, growth trends were noted, and reasonable conclusions were drawn about growth prospects for the future. And this study was done in the 1940s, well before the church growth movement was embraced by the Church of the Nazarene—or by anyone else in denominational North America. (See *Journal of the Twelfth General Assembly* attachment.)

Many people regard *church growth* as a series of programs designed to increase the size of local congregations. But those who have been trained in its principles understand differently. C. Peter Wagner's lectures talked about "Church Growth eyes:" the ability to see underlying concepts that indicate the methods God is best able to use to build His kingdom.

In the mid-1970s, the church growth movement found interested participants in the Church of the Nazarene. Several influential leaders from headquarters, district offices, and local churches were trained in church growth principles. In 1977, all North American district superintendents were offered this training. In 1978, the training was broadened to include pastors and other local leaders.

The church growth movement has certainly influenced the Church of the Nazarene. In 1981, the denomination was ready to name one of its restructured offices the "Division of Church Growth." Dr. Bill M. Sullivan became the denomination's Director of Church Growth. And for nearly twenty years, I was privileged to head the Church Growth Research Center.

Names are indicative of influence, of course. But today we will look at four specific ways the church growth movement, with its emphasis on empirical research and on pragmatic applications, has altered the Church of the Nazarene. Again, we are not looking for seminars or training modules that local churches purchased from Win Arn. We are looking at ways the church growth mindset changed the denomination.

In a word, that church growth mindset could be summed up as “research:” we can learn from experience. Sociological principles apply to God’s Kingdom just as chemical principles apply to His creatures. They are not the complete story of His work; but to ignore them is to blind ourselves to truths that could help us.

So, how has research influenced the Church of the Nazarene? Perhaps we can categorize that influence in four ways.

Research proves (or disproves) a point

Researchers in any field fear being asked to find data to support an already-made decision. No one is immune from the temptation to find data that agrees with him or her. Proving a point, in that sense, scarcely qualifies as research. But verifying the accuracy of premises is the nature of research. And the Church of the Nazarene has been actively checking for accuracy for many years.

When church growth authors said that new church sponsorship helped the parenting congregation, we checked it out for ourselves. We looked at churches that had been sponsors, and we looked at their growth records before and after. And sponsoring new churches did prove to be a positive growth factor.

When we were told that pastoral tenure was related to growth, we checked it out. Sure enough, churches that grew did tend to have pastors that stayed. But which was the cause and which was the result? As Dr. Kenneth Crow pointed out rather pragmatically, why wouldn’t a pastor stay if the church was growing? So we tried again. We graphed the growth of our largest churches and compared it to the pastoral changes. In most cases, the growth that made the church large began the same year a new pastor arrived. We agreed on other grounds that pastoral tenure had many advantages. But you don’t find denominational resources that promise good growth if only the pastor will stay for five years.

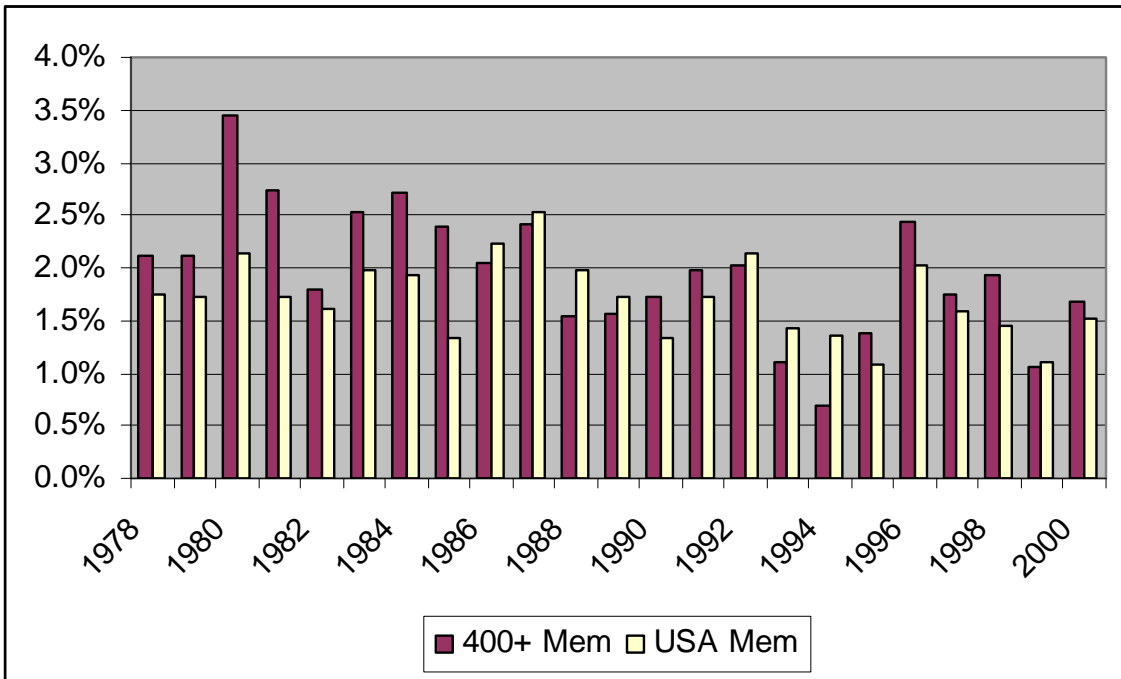
Most recently, we’ve been trying to determine the effect of neighborhood demographics on attendance and membership growth. Several studies have found that churches in growing suburban counties have larger increases in both membership and attendance. But we have found that we cannot establish a three-mile limit (or five-, or ten-) around a church to determine its potential growth. Being close to growth (within the same county, at least) does seem to have a bearing on growth rates. But that proximity cannot be defined geographically. Other factors play a larger role in church increases than neighborhood growth does. Sometimes, disproving a point is as valuable as proving one.

Research tells us of our challenges

Fifteen years ago, one of the coordinators in Pastoral Ministries opened my eyes to the importance of information. He pointed out that local churches needed to hear what I knew. That sounded presumptuous to me at first. But I came to realize that the Church Growth Research Center knew what kinds of challenges the denomination and its local

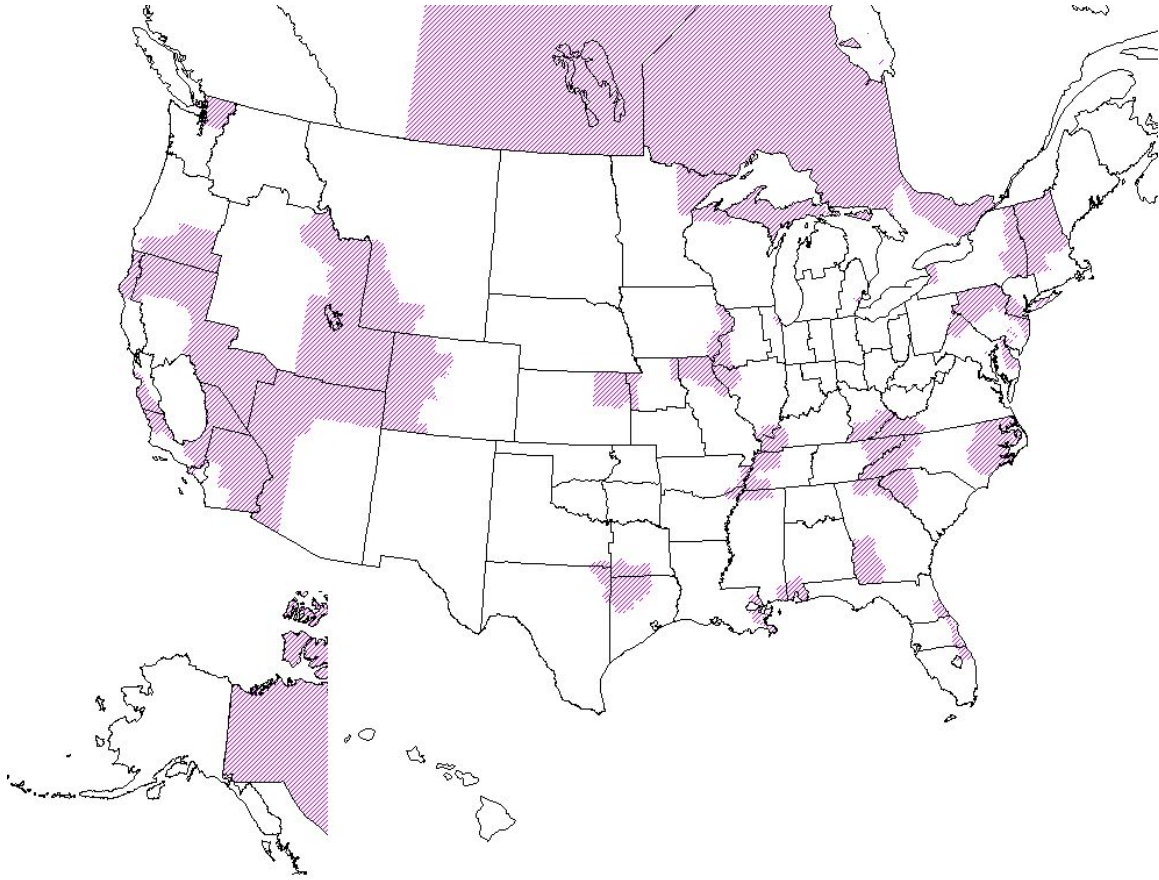
churches face. Surprisingly, to me, I found the church willing to listen. We published a monthly newsletter for a couple of years, then quarterly columns in *Grow* magazine. And these writings most often deal with issues the church is not yet aware of, but that research has made clear.

In the early days of research, we discovered that large churches were actually hindering the growth of the denomination. In 1976, the church in the United States grew 2.0%; those churches with 400 or more members at the beginning of the year only grew 1.5%. The next year, the USA Church of the Nazarene grew 1.8%, while the large churches grew only 0.6% in membership. This was not a “publishable” finding, but it was shared within the headquarters offices. By the 1980s, the trend was largely reversed. Nowadays, membership growth in the largest churches rarely falls below that in smaller congregations, and attendance growth is always above the average.



Annual Membership Growth in Large Churches Compared to USA Membership Growth

Dr. Sullivan asked the Church Growth Research Center to see if there were “under-reached” areas in Canada and the United States: areas with at least 250,000 people unclaimed by any Christian group and with relatively few Churches of the Nazarene. We found 50 such places initially. Again, this was not immediately published, but the General Superintendents were approached, and Dr. Sullivan was encouraged to share these findings with district superintendents. The Pioneer Area and Thrust to the Cities programs focused attention on these areas during the 1980s and early 1990s.



Current Nazarene District Boundaries, with 50 Identified Underreached Areas

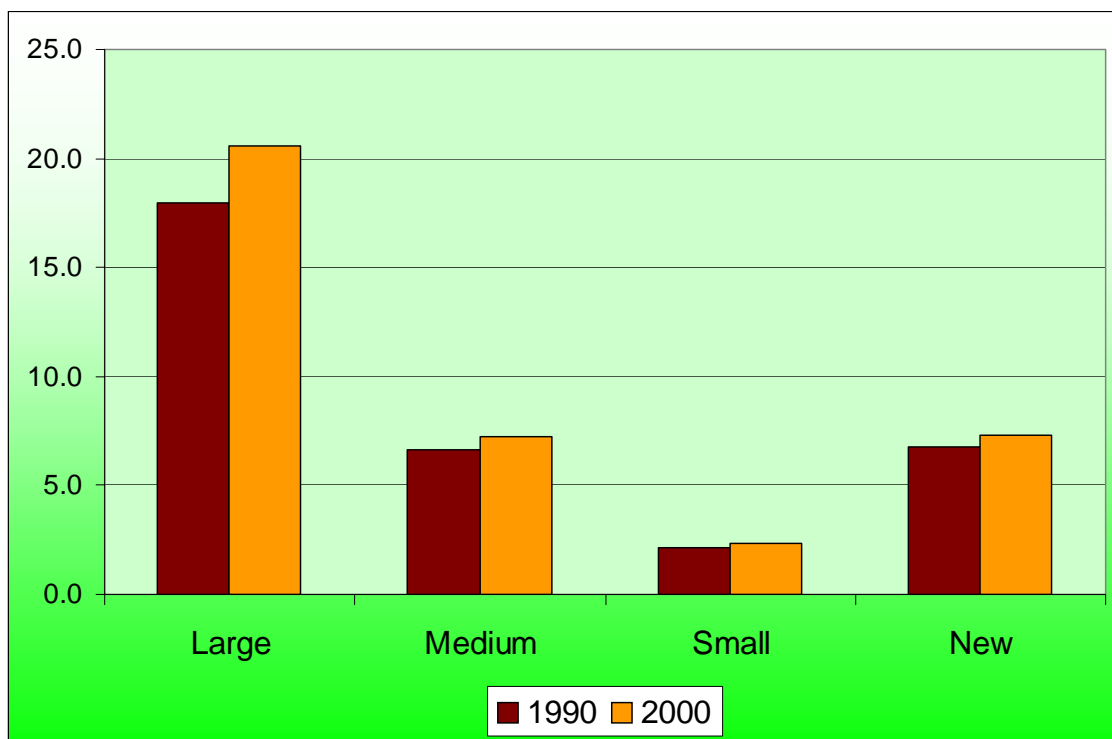
In a related study, we discovered that our larger districts do not usually grow as well as smaller districts. (The Association of Nazarene Sociologists of Religion provided assistance in this analysis.) Again, the General Superintendents were challenged with these findings. Today, with occasional talk of combining districts, we are quick to remind those involved that there are hidden dangers in size, at least as our districts currently perform.

Perhaps the most successful program involving research is the “demographic packet” the Research Center provides to local congregations. Long gone are the days of green-bar computer printouts. Now, full-color graphs and explanatory notes present the challenges a congregation faces in its neighborhood. Every year, nearly a thousand congregations obtain this information from the Research Center. (It is now available on-line at <http://map.nazarene.org>, but remains popular with those calling our 800 number.) This packet, with its accompanying color maps and local church reports, brings research data to local congregations throughout the nation.

Research tells us of our effectiveness

How does a denomination prioritize its resources? Which programs have outlasted their usefulness? Which are effective, and need to be expanded, or at least continued? With the church growth mindset, these questions will be answered based on careful analysis of the results.

Church size strategies is the collective name for K-Church, Intermediate Church Initiative, Small Church Institute, and Churches over One Thousand. These have each been designed to train pastors of churches with different needs and resources. The philosophy is simple: Large churches can largely afford the managerial training their pastors need, while small churches can't send their bivocational pastors for even a two-day workshop in the next town. So develop separate delivery systems for the various sized churches. But are the programs that have been implemented doing what we want?

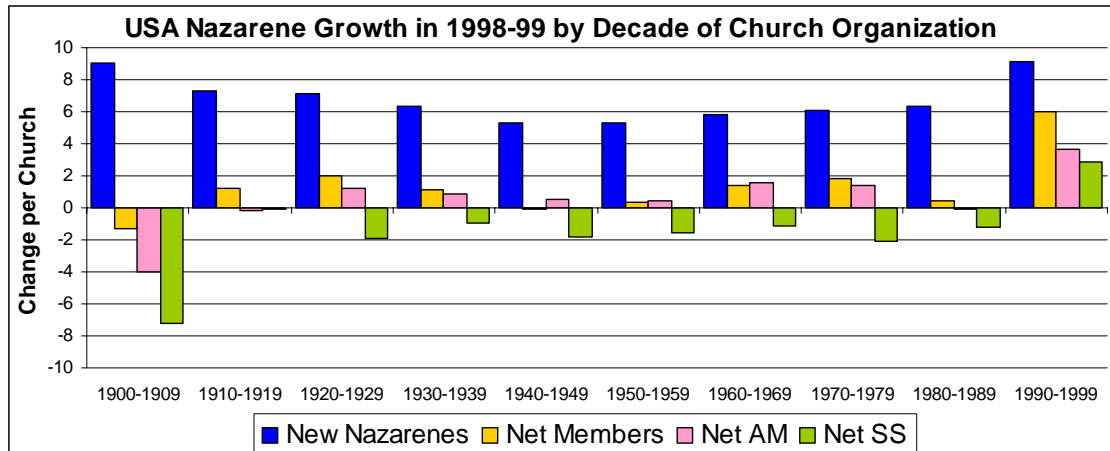


Average Number of New Nazarenes Reported by Size of Church, 1990 and 2000

As a matter of fact, they are. Since 1990, the average number of new Nazarenes has increased for every size category. As further evidence, during this same time period the number of congregations reporting at least 1,000 in membership or attendance has more than doubled, from 14 to 29.

But districts have programs and procedures in place, too. The Church Growth Research Center has analyzed the effectiveness of mergers, and found that they rarely produce growth. There may be good reasons for a merger, but creating a dynamic, growing congregation is not a realistic rationale.

And how important are new churches to the denomination? The church growth authors have emphasized the importance of church planting for years. But is it as important within the Church of the Nazarene? Absolutely. Our net growth in membership and attendance is dependent upon our newer congregations.



Average Growth of Nazarene Congregations by Age Category

Research helps us find solutions

Testing hypotheses. Discovering potential problems. Evaluating programs. These are important in church growth circles, and to researchers in general. But research can help us find solutions as well.

We determined that new churches are important to the denomination. But local church attitudes, of both pastor and laity, were against starting more “small, weak churches.” So Dr. Sullivan commissioned research into what made some churches successful. Essentially, those churches that reached viable financial strength did so within four years. And they had three distinguishing characteristics: a core group of Nazarenes from other churches, an experienced pastor, and adequate financial resources. Armed with this information, the NewStart program was launched with the full cooperation of district leaders nationwide: Starting strong, new churches the right way. And the carefully documented research has played a role in changing attitudes at the local level. This past year saw a 50% increase in new congregations reported.

This year, a new process has begun to help districts implement changes. Dr. Sullivan and the Research Center staff have met with more than a dozen district superintendents one at a time. During a day long session, each superintendent is shown the demographic challenges facing him, and he is shown the realities of Nazarene growth on his district. Then, the superintendent is given the opportunity to brainstorm with the group on possible applications on his district. And, whenever appropriate, research findings are used to explain how well certain strategies have worked in similar situations.

Conclusion

The church growth movement, in the form of careful, meticulous, and informed research, has a great influence on the Church of the Nazarene. Most of the examples in this paper have stressed the role of the Church Growth Research Center and the Division of Church Growth in carrying out the research and communicating the findings. In recent months, the attitude of “let research inform our decisions” has spread to additional headquarters offices. District superintendents have contacted us about specific research; and even when they don’t like our conclusions, they do additional research on their own rather than simply ignore our data.

A new day has arrived with the millenium. Recent actions of the General Board have taken “Church Growth” out of the Research Center’s name. And the Division of Church Growth has become the USA/Canada Mission/Evangelism Department. But the principles remain firmly embedded in our mission statements, policies, and practices.

USA Mission is committed to finding out what is really needed, what is really happening, and what is really effective. The Research Center is attempting to resource more of the church each year. And that brings us to one of the strongest evidences that the church growth movement has affected the Church of the Nazarene.

The Association of Nazarene Sociologists of Religion exists because the denomination is committed to research. And not research on pre-determined topics arbitrarily assigned by officials with a not-so-hidden agenda. The church has leaders who believe that all truth is God’s truth, and that we must be as fully informed as practicable before making decisions. And the training that you sociologists have received, and that which you share with us, is exactly the perspective we need to make intelligent choices about our role in God’s work. The survey you established (*nee* Listening Post, now ANSweR Poll), the papers you’ve presented, the speakers you’ve invited, and especially the discussions you’ve let us hear, have all contributed to the acceptance of the church growth mindset within the denomination.

So, I present this paper on “The Effect of the Church Growth Movement on the Church of the Nazarene” to the single group that best epitomizes that effect. And I thank you for your help in keeping our denomination focused on accurate and understandable information.