

Dangers of the Church Growth Movement

by Ralph H. Elliott

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It ever seems to be my lot in life to find it necessary to deal with half-truths which have a germ of validity but which accepted in their distorted form constitute a heresy -- which is exactly what I think we are dealing with in the "church growth movement."

As I contemplate the church today, I would judge it to be an institution in very serious trouble; every mainline denomination is faced with the same agonies of declining membership. I feel considerable ambivalence concerning what to do about this trouble. Part of my feeling comes from my very conservative roots, which influenced the value system that remains with me. At the same time, I hold no brief for those who talk about the church as if smallness in and of itself were a guarantee of quality.

My own Baptist church had been in a state of very serious numerical decline since the early 1950s. Then out of nowhere came the promised salvation: the "church growth movement." I bought every book and I read every manual on the subject. Now I am more concerned than ever because I believe this movement to be one of the worst distortions of the church that American ingenuity, born of an outworn capitalist mentality ("if it succeeds, it is right"), could possibly devise.

'Our Kind of People'

The center of the church growth movement is the School of Missions at the Institute of Church Growth at interdenominational Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Church growth people attempt to apply to the American scene the scientific principles of church growth as developed by Donald McGavran, based on his 30 years of missionary work in India. McGavran created the Institute of Church Growth first at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon, and wrote *Understanding Church Growth*, considered the "Magna Carta" of the movement. Popularizers (although they don't come from the same roots) include such people as Robert Schuller, author of *Your Church Has Real Possibilities*.

The primary leader, however, is McGavran's successor and disciple at Fuller, C. Peter Wagner, whose books are selling like wildfire. Two of them in particular outline the movement's methodology and objectives: *Your Church Can Grow*, subtitled "seven vital signs of a healthy church," and *Our Kind of People*, subtitled "the ethical dimensions of church growth in America." A whole cadre of professionals has grown up in the

movement, and they are flooding the country with institutes and seminars. Illustrations of their success are Redwood Chapel of Castro Valley, California; First Nazarene Church of Denver; First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana; Thomas Road Baptist Church of Lynchburg, Virginia; and First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas.

The basic thesis of the movement is that congregations must be built from homogeneous groups of people. Movement adherents suggest that a higher rate of conversion growth can be predicted for the homogeneous church; it is important that people can "feel at home" and know that they are among "our kind of people." Over and over, the literature stresses that "men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers." The movement seeks to rebut the work of Jürgen Moltmann, for instance, who argues in his *Religion, Revolution and the Future* that the church, to be authentic, must be heterogeneous, reconciling the educated and the uneducated, black and white, high and low. Moltmann sees the church at its best when it contradicts the natural groupings of human beings, while Wagner sees the church as at its best when it conforms to such groupings. Wagner and McGavran give attention to the work of H. Richard Niebuhr. They both use his book *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* to contradict the work of Liston Pope, *The Kingdom Beyond Caste*, and Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches*, in order to undergird the thesis that the church ought to accommodate itself to social and caste systems.

Following the Leader

The second thesis can be called "the multi-individual or multi-independent decision-making" basis for growth. It is not easy for persons to become Christians individually. Therefore, factors which emphasize separateness in the Christian life should be ignored and a group comfort should be developed. Because people have prejudices, these biases should be used and made an aid to Christianity. A tribal consciousness should be developed, according to which main leaders are captured first for the church, and then everyone else follows. McGavran and his disciples suggest that those desiring church growth should become more conscious of sociological "people movements" and encourage people to become Christian through the people-movement route. The "one-by-one" option will never be satisfactory.

Church growth professionals believe that most opposition to the Christian movement arises not from theological causes but from sociological ones. They believe, for example, that if Jews could come to Christ without losing their Jewish identity, most of their theological differences with Christianity would be greatly reduced. Thus, church growth would advocate a kind of "Jews for Jesus" movement in which people could try to have the best of both worlds.

The third contention of the church growth people is that the pastor must be master. Wagner suggests that the first vital sign of a healthy and growing church is a minister who is a "possibility thinker" and whose dynamic leadership has been used to catalyze the entire church into action for growth. Because the pastor is the catalytic growth factor in a local church, he or she is encouraged "not to be afraid of power." One does what is

necessary to stimulate the people to think of their pastor as the greatest. One must build a kind of personality cult. One should secure a staff that has no interest in doing the things that the senior pastor does, thus clarifying pastoral authority. One should be the company commander who receives orders from the commander-in-chief, doing away with a plurality of committees that may dilute the power. Wagner suggests that the pastor may appear to be a dictator but "to the people of the church his decisions are their decisions. They should realize that almost as if he had a sixth sense the pastor knows how to lead the church where the people want to go." Wagner concludes this particular emphasis with "scratch them where they itch."

Separate but Equal

The fourth tenet of church growth is "segregation is a desired end." Wagner devotes much attention to the failure of the social movement in the 1960s and suggests that it turned out the right way. In the section on "creation" in *Our Kind of People*, Wagner argues that because God created us this way then we had better stay this way. Biblical justification is sought: Genesis is used in the reverse. Church growth enthusiasts say that people were supposed to be separated into groups but didn't want to be; therefore they were punished. John 4 is used to cite the separation between Jews and Samaritans as proof that homogeneity is desirable (negating the chapter's emphasis on one spirit and one worship). In stressing the separate but equal principle, the church growth movement proposes to preserve the strength of each group. But in this "cultural circumcision," as Wagner calls it, the strengths of various peoples are never shared.

Church growth enthusiasts also argue that social action in the church must be denied. They state quite bluntly, "To the degree that socially involved churches become engaged in social action as distinguished from social service they can expect church growth to diminish." The primary thrust must be toward the multiplication of cells of Christians, and church growth considers the social order as outside of that task. Supporting social causes gives "mixed signals."

The movement's sixth basic principle is that church ministry and mission must be located where they succeed. We must go only where people respond. According to church growth theories, the early church allowed the numbers baptized to determine the direction and intensity of mission. The New Testament church went where people responded, believing this to be God's Will. We are cautioned by Wagner "not to peer into ravines where there are no sheep."

Pseudo-gospel

The dangers inherent in the church growth movement are many, and the crucial issue in assessing those dangers is whether we are talking about becoming Christians or about building institutional membership. The greatest danger in the movement may be that it obviously succeeds. If one tailors the church to identify with its culture and engages in the pseudo-gospel of "possibility thinking," promising to assuage guilt with the minimum

of pain and connecting that promise with marketing techniques, there will be success. The question is whether the result will bear any similarity to the church.

A second danger is that the movement encourages sinful prejudices. A third is that it misses the major gospel note of reconciliation, forgetting that the key theme of the Christian gospel is the breaking down of the walls of partition between male and female, Jew and Greek and so on. The body of Christ should not be merely a reflection of the divisions that exist on earth predetermined by the exterior similarity of social class and cultural background.

The church growth theology is also dangerous in dooming the city to hopelessness. The strong emphasis on choosing target populations according to the criterion of success leads the church growth people to neglect the city with its economic mobility, its changing neighborhoods and racial mixture. The preference is for the suburbs and for each succeeding suburban ring which mobility and economics establish. One suburb gets old, so emphasis shifts to the next one because that's where the best possibilities are. The biblical concern for the powerless is totally overlooked. The movement also sanctifies the unholy status quo. In regarding the church as "our kind," church growth sees no problem, for example, with apartheid churches in South Africa, regarding them as routine.

In warning against any ecumenical concerns, the movement also violates the unity of the church. Followers suggest that ecumenical concerns drain away energies and smooth the sharp edge of competitiveness that beats out the other person and leads to success.

In truth, the movement prostitutes the church. Wagner calls on Dean Kelley's book *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* for theological support, yet the church growth thesis and Kelley's are opposites. Kelley portrays the successful church as being against culture, whereas Wagner wants the church to identify the given culture as "my culture." This is surely a sell-out for the gospel which often calls us to leave father and mother and brother and sister.

Finally, church growth theories neglect the biblical dimensions of truly meaningful growth, such as those discussed by Jitsuo Morikawa in his little book of sermons, *Biblical Dimensions of Church Growth*. In it the author examines the call to grow as individuals and as a faith community -- adhering to qualitative, not merely quantitative, standards.

Most of us in mainline and liberal churches have used a remnant theology for so long as a justification for our failure to grow that we have lost the motivation to be Christ's evangelists. In our defensive posturing we have been guilty, I think, of a good deal of faulty logic. I agree, for instance, with the major thrust of Robert Hudnut's book *Church Growth Is Not the Point*. But I certainly do not, as he does, see it as a good sign that people are leaving the churches. Nor would I, as he does, rationalize "that loss of growth in statistics has meant increase in growth in the gospel."

We must recognize that there is some validity to the thesis of homogeneity; it is when it is made the norm that it loses validity. The old melting pot idea is not satisfactory. An

assimilation model, usually of the Anglo-conformative variety, will not do. But neither will a mosaic model, according to which there is a dwelling side-by-side with no touching and no flavoring. Maybe there is value to Andrew Greeley's "stew pot" vision, in which each ingredient adds its own characteristic flavor but in some way maintains its identity. One does not have to lose individuality or identity in order to be part of the new creation, the new humanity in Christ.

The church growth movement might serve to jolt mainline church people from a timidity which blocks out all growth efforts. On the other hand, we might wonder whether it is possible to be the church and a "successful" institution at the same time. The church growth people would of course say Yes, but I'm not convinced.