
The Church Growth Movement

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We are living at a time of steady decline in church attendance and in the impact the evangelical church is making on society in the Western World. A movement concerned with this fact, desiring to promote the growth of congregations, must be welcomed. Anyone who takes seriously the *Great Commission* and who studies the dynamic growth of the early church chronicled by Luke in the book of Acts is bound to be interested in this subject.

The Church Growth Movement is largely the history of one man and one institution, **Donald McGavran** and the School of World Mission and the attached Institute of Church Growth which is at Fuller Theological Seminary in California. McGavran died four years ago, well into his nineties. For the best understanding of his approach to the mission of the church his series of lectures given at Westminster Theological Seminary and published in 1988, entitled **EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM A THEOLOGICAL MANDATE**, (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company) should be consulted. In part autobiographical they tell of his life as a missionary, his deliverance from modernism, the beginning of the Institute of Church Growth and how he came to his basic convictions. In the latter half of the 1970's those convictions reached the U K and swiftly became the staple of the lecturing in practical theology at most of the evangelical seminaries in the country. Scottish Baptist pastor, Tom Houston, introduced them into the Bible Society soon after his appointment there, so that in the U K, Bible Society and Church Growth Movement are virtually synonymous. The British Church Growth Movement, with its executive director, Mrs Monica Hill, was started in 1981. It produces the *Church Growth Digest*, a quarterly magazine, and it plans regional conferences. The MARC Europe Organisation promotes Church Growth principles by its publications. The emphasis on 'people movements' has influenced **OPERATION WORLD**, compiled by Patrick Johnstone and produced by OM. The book has become very influential; its 1993 edition ran to 330,000 copies. Part speciality almanac and part prayer-list it provides a tour of world-wide Christianity. The 660 page volume is an aspect of a campaign to establish churches in all people groups by the turn of the century. The key British books on the Church Growth Movement are Roy Poynter's **HOW DO CHURCHES GROW?** (Marc) and Eddie Gibbs' **I BELIEVE IN CHURCH GROWTH** (Hodder). Both those men were working for the Bible Society but then went to California to lecture at the Fuller Schools of World Missions and Church Growth.

Distinguishing Characteristics

Presbyterian pastor William Smith of Pittsburgh has outlined the distinguishing principles of the Church Growth Movement as the following:

1. **a commitment to the Great Commission**, in the light of which liberals are criticised for losing sight of the urgency of the evangelistic mission of the church and for identifying evangelism too broadly. Evangelicals are criticised for their emphasis upon the cultural mandate, for putting the priority of taking care of sheep far above that of saving goats,

for settling for less than the Bible's requirements for the health of the church and for their unwillingness to look at what is actually happening (as opposed to what they imagine is happening) in their own congregations.

2. **an ecumenical spirit**, of a very broad nature, which embraces all kinds of Protestants as well as Roman Catholics. The CGM is not primarily concerned with doctrine: it asks, What is your doctrine doing? It wants to know if your church holds to enough of the essential elements of the biblical mission of the church. It is not sympathetic to the type of theology promulgated by Dr David Jenkins, nor of liberation theology. It is unimpressed with denominational schemes for uniting church groupings in one super-denomination. It wants to categorise people in terms of whether people are moving in the right direction or not.

3. **the social sciences**; the CGM holds the Bible in one hand and in the other such sciences as anthropology, psychology, sociology and their related disciplines such as management, communication and leaderships theories, all in order to help us understand people, know how they think and build up a church. Hence it has developed its own vocabulary and jargon: "mega-churches", "metropolitan regional churches", "awkward-sized churches", "receptivity", "resistance axis", "soil testing", "wet movement", "oikos evangelism" and "people groups."

4. **culture**; McGavran noted how the gospel moves along family and tribal lines (the "bridges of God"). In order to gain new converts social networks of new Christians are the most productive areas to work in. McGavran argues that the Great Commission itself requires this cultural approach - we are charged to disciple "all the peoples, or ethnic groups."

5. **the homogeneous unit**; people are best reached by people like themselves. So the emphasis is upon targeting people who are like the people already attending the church. CGM is strongly anti-racist and believes that every church should be open to every person, yet it recognises that every congregation is usually one homogeneous unit. One judges that the CGM would have done better to have simply observed that phenomenon as a matter of fact rather than try to elevate it into a principle.

6. **a business like approach to the work of the church**; the CGM encourages lucidity in the congregation's sense of mission, a rigorous use of statistical studies to know one's community and where are the winnable people, the congregation's meetings and structures, effective management especially in strong pastors (dubbed an 'internal change agent') and the mobilisation of members, setting the right priorities and use of resources and productive programmes. It encourages outside intervention of experts (dubbed an 'external change agent') when a church is sluggish.

Appreciation

Os Guinness in *DINING WITH THE DEVIL* has evaluated the CGM and has written of its positive features in terms of its concern for renewal, how it displays the Christian genius for innovation and adaptation, the working models of growing churches which it illuminates, and that it has provided hope in despairing circumstances.

Bill Hull has mentioned other useful aspects: "common sense" advice concerning the way churches present themselves to their local communities; improving leadership qualities and communication; giving a more professional polish to church bulletins; providing insights into interesting options in outreach programmes (*POWER RELIGION*, p 142).

William Smith has listed other features:

1. **its commitment to evangelism**; CGM supporters really do believe that sinners are lost without Christ and that we have been given a mission by Christ to reach them.
2. **its commitment to discipleship**; “the goal is not decisions but disciples” is a phrase one hears continually in CGM circles.
3. **its commitment to the local church**; the CGM does believe that the church is needed to gather and disciple those it finds in evangelism.
4. **its searching questions**; do we want our churches to grow? Are we afraid or resentful of bigness? Are we willing to take a hard look at what is happening amongst us? Are we too tied to our own comfort in our traditional ways and attitudes?
5. **the practical help we can receive**; someone else has already done the things we have heard of. What are the pitfalls and guidelines? What are the common characteristics of churches that are growing? And those that are not growing? For example, the factor above everything else that brings a person along to church is an invitation from someone they know. Just that fact counterbalances a fatalistic attitude that thinks if people are meant to come along and become Christians they will come anyway.

Criticism

Bill Hull, the director of church ministries for the Evangelical Free Church of America, was someone involved in the Movement for many years and continues to assist churches in strategies for growth. Yet in his essay, “*Is the Church Growth Movement Really Working?*” in *POWER RELIGION*, edited by Michael Horton (Scripture Press, £6.50), Bill Hull says that the CGM “has a sociological base, it is data-driven, and it worships at the altar of pragmatism. It esteems that which works above all and defines success in worldly and short-sighted terms. It offers models that cannot be reproduced and leaders who cannot be imitated. The principles of modern business are revered more than doctrine; the latter, in fact, often being perceived as a detriment or at least a distraction to church growth. Yet churches are supposed to be driven by scriptural teachings, not by the latest marketing surveys or consumer trends. In short, theology before sociology, please” (p 142). Bill Hull’s essay is worth the price of that book, but the whole is useful. Certainly McGavran insisted that a scientific approach to mission was essential. George Marsden, in his history of Fuller Seminary, *REFORMING FUNDAMENTALISM*, writes, “McGavran was frankly a technician of church growth.” It was no secret that the ageing Charles Fuller who founded Fuller Seminary was disappointed in McGavran’s appointment. Fuller regarded the warmth of the Holy Spirit, projecting toward each individual who heard his broadcasts, as the overwhelming key to his success. He had always dreamed of a school of missions and evangelism, and then McGavran was appointed and in 1965 came to the Fuller Conference to tell supporters about the new school. Charles Fuller listened as McGavran illustrated his talk with numerous charts and graphs. When he had finished Fuller got up and did not thank McGavran for his wonderful presentation, as his custom was, but asked the congregation if they would sing a verse of “*Heavenly Sunshine*” and then turn round and shake hands with their neighbours. This was not the inspirational approach to world evangelism Fuller had prayed for but he did not have the theology to diagnose what was wrong. It was something more than a lack of ‘warmth.’

Christianity Today, that pragmatic organ of the new evangelicalism, published an article on June 24, 1991 on this theme, “*Somehow Church Growth Principles Don’t Work*”. It

pointed out that after a decade of CGM promotion the 1980's was characterised as a period in which the percentage of American adults attending church remained the same, while Protestant church membership actually declined. The average American evangelical church witnessed 1.7 professions of faith in Christ per year for every 100 people who attended. The most significant fact about American evangelicalism is that people are moving from smaller churches to bigger ones in droves. In 1970 there were in America 100 churches with over 1,000 members. Twenty years later the number had rocketed to over 4,000. So big churches apply CGM principles and they grow at the expense of small churches. But statistical growth by evangelism, discipleship and outreach is not taking - and that is the standard by which CGM asks us to judge.

Why do pastors attend the CGM seminars? In Bill Hull's judgment it is overwhelmingly to break the 200 or 400 or whatever numerical barrier they themselves have erected in their church's attendance, to learn a new method (a quick fix), and to meet their ego needs. In these CGM conferences they meet a parade of role models who tell their success stories and then say, "You can do it!" That is just not true for most pastors. Those speakers, because of their personalities, rare leadership gifts, creative abilities, charisma and church locations might have done it, but others could not. You cannot transfer context, nor personality, nor gifts, nor a church's geography. If you try to copy a man you impersonate him rather than imitate him. You cannot transfer spirituality, and every pastor who has been truly blessed got to where he is through close experiential growing dealings with God. Richard Lovelace has pointed out that in the history of the church when God has sent revival there have been two elements invariably present, an awareness of God's holiness and the depth of our own sin.

When William Smith evaluates the CGM he judges that:-

1. **it lacks hermeneutical principle, exegetical precision and a theological base.** The handling of the Scriptures is consistently shallow, superficial and inadequate. One gets the impression that protagonists of CGM have arrived at certain conclusions which they are committed to and then they go to Scripture searching for an example or interpretation which will undergird it. For example, Peter Wagner interprets the reason Jesus sent his disciples first to the Jews as an example of targeting people likely to be responsive, rather than explaining that this period was an overlap of the old covenant with the new, and that God was, until AD 70, still dealing in a special way with the old covenant people: it was then "to the Jews first, and after to the Gentiles." Or again, the parable of the sower was not told, as Wagner suggests, in order to encourage the preachers to test the soil where he is likely to get the best response so that he is to sow his seed there but rather to explain the multiformity of responses to the word which is to be preached to all men.

Peter Wagner pleads that the CGM has its own peculiar methodology. He says, "I use a phenomenologically informed hermeneutical methodology." In other words he uses experience and the latest sociological judgments to evaluate the Bible. And to the extent he does that he is undermining the Bible. It is not just what you believe about the Bible that counts but how you handle it.

2. **it elevates evangelism over every task in the church.** The CGM absolutises evangelism making it control every other thing that the church does. The *Newsweek* magazine (December 17, 1991) published a Christmas cover story on American religion entitled, "*And the Children Shall Lead Them.*" It chronicles the growth of large

congregations and said , “The CGM experts judge a minister’s accountability not by his faithfulness to the gospel, but whether, as Lyle Schuller, ‘the people keep coming and giving.’ By that measure the most successful churches are those that most resemble a suburban shopping mall.” The article pointed out that another hindrance to a church growing is Christian doctrine, and that people want to hear what the church is for, not what it is against. So everything possible is done to make services not only attractive but non-threatening to unbelievers. That is too high a price to pay for what is called ‘evangelism’. We are not prepared to take our focus off the living God or make the centre of our worship anything other than the glorifying of his name by those elements which he himself has told us to do. When the best of modern insights are in full swing there should always be a remainder, an irreducible character that is not affected by the sum of all that is cultural, natural, organisational and human.

3. it so contextualises the gospel that the gospel itself becomes lost. Conviction of sin, repentance, trust in the Lord Jesus Christ alone as one’s sole plea for mercy are the non-negotiable elements in God’s way of peace. Of course, let us be culturally sensitive to how people in the home counties or in the highlands of Scotland evaluate and take a perspective on issues. Let us learn how to communicate the eternal truths in a fresh and relevant way. But if we become obsessed by what we think is contemporary communicative language then our slipping into trendiness will actually detract from the solemnity of the message and its simplicity. It is compassion and love for people that gives boldness in addressing them with an urgent lucidity. There is the additional danger that in the name of cultural sensitivity we actually jettison careful exegesis and obedience to the whole counsel of God.

Modernity poses the most insidious problem for the CGM because it appears to be no problem at all. When men are gripped by an awareness of the blessings and benefits of being citizens of the 1990’s, with all the power and speed at their disposal in communicating and selling their messages, at that point the threat to historic revealed religion is formidable. Os Guinness illustrates thus: “One Christian advertising agent, who represented both the Coca-Cola Corporation and engineered the ‘I Found It’ campaign, stated the point brazenly: ‘Back in Jerusalem where the church started, God performed a miracle there on the day of Pentecost. They didn’t have the benefits of buttons and media, so God had to do a little supernatural work there. But today, with our technology, we have available to us the opportunity to create the same kind of interest in a secular society.’” (*Table Talk*, March 1992, p 53) The very reverse is true: man can no more create a pentecostal-like interest in Jesus Christ than raise the dead.

4. it has a pragmatism which can be manipulative. What works for the growth of the church surely must be right, says CGM. It has observed that people attend meetings where their felt needs are met. They are responsive to what they judge their needs to be. But what of their needs as God judges them to be? Which arbiter of needs is the church going to serve? The pulpit may so concentrate on felt needs that it never gets around to presenting the gospel. It may be so fearful of offending sinners that popular presentations of psychiatry usurp the preaching of the Word. With felt needs programming, William Smith says, “we may well produce in the Western world a whole new generation of rice Christians.”

Comparing the enthusiasm for religion at the end of the century with that displayed in the Great Awakening, the *Newsweek* article said, “the aim this time is support not salvation, help rather than holiness, a circle of spiritual equals rather than an authoritative

church or guide. A group affirmation of self is at the top of the agenda, which is why some of the least demanding churches are now in greatest demand... In their efforts to accommodate, many clergy have simply airbrushed sin out of their language. Like politicians they can only recognise 'mistakes' which congregations are urged to put behind them. Having substituted therapy for spiritual discernment, they appeal to a nurturing God who helps his (or her) people to cope. Heaven by this creed, is never having to say no to yourself and God, and never having to say you are sorry."

This *celebration* of oneself is a game which young people find fun. With Christian maturity *deliverance* from self by a loving Saviour becomes one's longing and thanksgiving.

5. it lacks confidence in the Word of God and the ordinances. Does any Christian believe that if you find a responsive people, come up with the right strategy, offer key facilities in your building, make your follow-up visits fast enough, provide a nursery and toilets, and organise relevant services that, as a result, people will turn from their sin in loathing and put their confidence in the finished work of Christ? The only people to believe that are Pelagians. It is not right strategy that makes churches grow. And if congregations are not growing the reasons are not that you are working with the wrong people nor that you are using the wrong strategy. What were the reasons the seven churches of Asia Minor of Revelation chapters 2 and 3 were in the states they were in? Could a CGM expert guarantee any one of those churches growth even though the Lord had spit one of them out of his mouth and had removed the candlestick from another?

The CGM fails to emphasise the link between obedience and blessing, when the Word and ordinances are given their divine place in a congregation. The CGM does not remind us that the church at Antioch grew because the hand of the Lord was with it. It emphasises the planting of Paul and the watering of Apollos but the fact that God gave the increase is ignored. The effective pastor of the CGM is little exhorted to buy theology and truth passionately. What is praised is his ability to delegate, interact, make decisions, be visible, practical, accountable and discerning. That may be the profile for the executive manager but is it the pastoral epistles' description of church leaders? One is reminded of the cynical comment of rock star Michael Been of *The Call*: "Everything that goes on in every major corporation goes on inside the church, except as a sideline the church teaches religion."

6. it can demoralise faithful pastors. The men most keen on CGM are confident young ministers of growing congregations who will also have their stories to tell. The pastor who remains faithfully at his post and pastors his people in a static or shrinking scene will find the CGM remedy devastating. The blame can almost always be laid at his feet - he does not want growth, does not know how to get it, is uninspirational and is a poor manager. While God, we are somehow assured, wants that congregation to grow numerically, the blockage in the way of growth is the pastor.

What would be the CGM's diagnosis? "You are working with a resistant population, so abandon the work"? Or, "You have the wrong strategy, change it"? Or, "The church has an inadequate man in leadership so get rid of him"? What if he has been prayerful, loves Jesus Christ more than anyone else in the world, cares for his people, has witnessed to the lost, wept with them that mourn, comforted the dying and encouraged the fearful, is he to be written off because he has not produced the numerically growing congregation that the young executives in the congregation want to be a part of? The ministerial casualties of this mentality are all over the country.

7. it is favourable to 'power evangelism' of signs and wonders. Critics of the CGM have said often enough that it is naturalistic, not relying on the sovereignty of the Spirit, with no doctrine of revival and no consciousness of the history of the church and her great awakenings. The CGM has listened and has responded to a large extent by embracing the theology and methodology of John Wimber and the Vineyard churches. Wimber has submitted a chapter in one of the latest CGM symposia to be edited by Peter Wagner, CHURCH GROWTH, THE STATE OF THE ART.

The book is a tract for the charismatic churches. Wagner says, "My initial findings indicate that across the board Power Evangelism is clearly resulting in the most vigorous church growth." In his essays Eddy Gibbs says, "What we need are power encounters in which the Word is confirmed with signs and wonders." F G May writes that the best method of activating the people of God in our day is anointed preaching, "backed up by supernatural manifestations of God's grace." He makes the customary claim that this kind of preaching has been found most often amongst pentecostals and charismatics and that therefore they are the fastest growing churches in the world. Wimber says that we need to undertake evangelism according to the model of the ministry Paul had in Corinth which was that, "The explanation of the Gospel comes with the Spirit's power through signs and wonders. It is a spontaneous Spirit-empowered presentation of the Gospel, usually preceded and under girded by supernatural demonstrations of God's presence." So if we want our churches to grow, the CGM encourages us to look to the pentecostal and charismatic churches. The phenomena we see in them, we are assured, are the result of the Holy Spirit's presence. It is not only the latter claim we have difficulty with: are such churches rapidly growing? In the U K CHRISTIAN HANDBOOK 1992-1993 we discover that the Elim churches grew by 7,000 new members in the past five years, that is, they grew by 3.5 members per congregation per year. The Assemblies of God added 8,000 new members in the same five year period, that is, by 2.5 members per congregation per year. The Apostolic Church actually had 900 less members in the same five year period, everyone of its congregations declined by a member every year. If these figures are compared to the FIEC, it grew by 3,000 new members in five years, that is, by 1.5 members per congregation per year. So there was slightly faster growth in some of the pentecostal denominations than in an evangelical denomination.

Of course, this does not account for the House Church or Restorationist movement. What of this charismatic grouping in Britain? How quickly is it growing? In those first enthusiastic years of its early expansion they had more rapid growth, by 45,000 members in that same five year period, that is, by six members a year per church. Scarcely a revival, but certainly growth. But the price of that style of worship, plus the phenomena observed in those churches would be too costly for many evangelical Christians to pay. Certainly the extent of the growth of those pentecostal and charismatic churches in Britain has been greatly exaggerated.

The CGM has many useful lessons to teach us, just as long as we are guided by a knowledge of church history and theology, and by a commitment to a thorough faithful proclamation of the Scriptures. There can be no New Testament growth without that.

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