

1-1-2008

## Remembering Bill Sullivan

Gary L. McIntosh

Biola University, [gary.mcintosh@biola.edu](mailto:gary.mcintosh@biola.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/jascg>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McIntosh, G. L. (2008). Remembering Bill Sullivan. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 19(1), 3-11. Retrieved from <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/jascg/vol19/iss1/2>

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by APU Digital Archives. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* by an authorized editor of APU Digital Archives. For more information, please contact [mpacino@apu.edu](mailto:mpacino@apu.edu).

## Remembering Bill Sullivan

Gary L. McIntosh

One of the founding members of the American Society for Church, Bill M. Sullivan, passed away on June 23, 2007. Bill's passion for church planting and evangelism made him a beloved leader in the Church Growth Movement.

Born on January 7, 1933 in a farmhouse near Grange, Arkansas, Bill was the youngest of three children. He attended high school in Pine Bluff, Arkansas and graduated from Bethany Peniel College, now Southern Nazarene University in Bethany, Oklahoma. On August 31, 1954, Bill married Elizabeth "Kiddy" Howard. Over the years God blessed them with two daughters and four grandchildren.

After graduating from Nazarene Theological Seminary in 1957, Bill planted Denver Westminster Church in a suburb of Denver, Colorado. Later he was pastor of the Colorado Springs First Church of the Nazarene from 1965-1975. From 1975 to 1980 Bill served as District Superintendent of the North Carolina District. In 1980 he was elected Executive Director of the Department of Evangelism at Nazarene Headquarters in Kansas City. Following a reorganization of departments, Bill was elected Director of the Division of Church Growth. His doctoral dissertation, "Creating New Districts in the Church of the Nazarene as a Strategy for Growth," facilitated the development of pioneer areas within existing districts as a means of church growth. Dr. Sullivan initiated several leadership development programs in Canada and the USA for the Church of the Nazarene. The story is recounted in the article "The Impact of Donald A. McGavran's Church Growth Missiology on the Church of the Nazarene," which is in this issue of the *Journal of ASCG*.

Bill became the sixth president of the American Society for Church Growth in 1991, and is fondly remembered for his com-

---

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2008

mitment to solid research as the foundation for planning and development. I particularly remember Bill for his encouragement. My first presentation at the ASCG annual meeting was due to his invitation. Every time I met him, he complimented my ministry, most recently at the meeting of the Association of Nazarene Sociologists and Researchers in 2007. Others also have fond recollections of Bill, as the following reflections illustrate.

I met Bill Sullivan when he was a high school senior in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Among other things, his hobby was working with electronics. He was assembling a radio at that time. He was an alert, refreshing young man with great promise as a preacher. He had already preached several times and, when he enrolled in Bethany-Peniel College, was already an effective preacher and student leader. Bill was a member of one of the finest college quartets produced at Bethany. Rev. Curtis Smith and his wife Marge, Church Representative for BPC considered Bill as their "boy." It is not surprising that God has so effectively used such a gifted servant/leader as Bill Sullivan in every role where Providence placed him. A man of vision and grace....we will miss Bill.

—Don Owens

Bill Sullivan was probably the USA's most effective denominational director of evangelism in the past generation. I was especially impressed by how he kept the apostolic vision before the imaginations of his people, the way he addressed typical problems—like "the 200 barrier," by the way he martialed the denomination's attention and prayer for one world-class city per year—year after year, and the way he mobilized so many other people and groups (such as the denomination's sociologists) to advance the growth of the churches. Many denominations could learn from his pioneering years with the Church of the Nazarene.

—Dr. George Hunter, Asbury Theological Seminary

When I started the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth back in the 1970s and invited John Wimber to team up with me on the project, we both knew from the outset that a major key to our marketing success would be to minister within denominational structures. When we met Bill Sullivan it was like striking a vein of gold! Not only was Bill a fast learner, but he became an aggressive promoter for church growth

within the Church of the Nazarene. Before long the denomination had appointed him to head up a new unit for implementing church growth. His influential book, *Ten Steps to Breaking the 200 Barrier*, soon emerged and was used by many other denominations. Bill became a church growth role model and was much in demand as a consultant for churches across the board. I am grateful to Bill Sullivan for his untiring pioneering heart.

—C. Peter Wagner, Presiding Apostle, International Coalition of Apostles

To meet with Bill Sullivan was to meet with a modern day Barnabas. He always had an encouraging word. From 1988 to 1997 Bill and I would meet to exchange ideas and strategies on church planting and church growth. I served as the Director of Evangelism and Church Growth for the Free Methodist Church and Bill Sullivan served as Director of Church Extension for the church of the Nazarene.

Bill was always generous and would share materials and resources in the area of evangelism and church growth. I remember Bill as one who had a deep passion to advance the kingdom of God and a willingness to help leaders of sister denominations who were carrying out that same task.

Bill Sullivan's influence was felt among the Holiness Denominations, the National Association of Evangelicals, the American Society for Church Growth and the Church of the Nazarene world-wide. I have been privileged to call Bill Sullivan a true friend. His friendship has enriched my life.

—Dr. Ray Ellis, Sr. Pastor, Willow Vale Community Church, San Jose, CA.

I was greatly blessed and helped by the life and ministry of Bill Sullivan. He was an exemplary Christian. Over the decades he lived a consistent, dedicated life. He modeled integrity in ways that encouraged and challenged the rest of us to be better Christians. I am grateful for his warm, supportive friendship. He was constantly attentive to the needs, interests, and possibilities of the people God brought into his life. He was an effective leader. I have never known anyone who saw clearer visions or dreamed greater dreams of what the church could and should be. And he was effective in translating

the visions and dreams into programs and processes. One of the great gifts God has given me in this life has been the privilege of knowing and working with Bill Sullivan and enjoying his friendship!

—Dr. Ken Crow

I first met Dr. Bill Sullivan when I was a college student at Nazarene Bible College. He was pastoring Colorado Springs First Nazarene at the time. He came to our class to share with us regarding pastoral ministry. I had never met a man whose modesty and compassion were so profoundly visible. He had an incredible way of making you feel like you were special. His wisdom, wit, example, and leadership continued to impact my ministry throughout my career. I am fortunate to have known him, to have been influenced by him and to have counted him as a colleague and friend.

—Dr. James R. Russom, Associate Director of Online Education, Nazarene Bible College

As a Sunday School Chairperson for the Michigan District Church of the Nazarene I would have Dr. Sullivan on the district for special meetings. My privilege was to drive him to various meeting locations so it was just the two of us in the car. His knowledge of the church generally and the denomination specifically awed me! Statistics, graphs, facts and figures were a forte with him, but more importantly were the people those stats represented. His passion for the lost...his care for the hurting...his concern for those leaving the church all dovetailed into his desire for people to know Christ. Conversations turned from pure statistics to concerned longing that what he was saying would somehow help a pastor or a layperson to catch the vision that Jesus died for every person. Bill was much more than a church growth expert...he was a churchman of the highest degree.

—Derl Keefer, Adult and Prime Time Ministries Coordinator, Church of the Nazarene

Bill Sullivan was a great churchman who had a passion for planting new churches. Through being a pastor, author and leading the denominations' Church Growth movement in the USA and Canada, he gave his all to advance the Kingdom. I appreciated him and the dedicated service he gave to the Church.

—Louie Moore

When I was pastoring in LA, Bill would come through every once in awhile. I remember inviting him to preach for us at LA First. He was a master preacher, and then, we walked the streets of LA—Hollywood, Skid Row, MacArthur Park. For me, he was a leader in the Church I looked up to and respected. One who didn't just pass through town, but took the time to come to walk the streets of life and ministry with me. I think it was something of a metaphor, actually. An incarnational metaphor in the sense that he embodied the spirit of the Kingdom in taking time to be fully present and engaged with me, walking the streets of LA. I can remember some of our conversations and his dreams that perhaps someday there could be a pastor's conference, not just for urban pastors, but pastors from across the country who could come together to talk, think and pray about ministry, all in the context of a city like Los Angeles. He understood that context mattered...

I remember a sermon he preached on one of the PalCon [pastors and leaders conversation] tours. He was preaching about Wesleyan theology and ministry. His main message was that Wesleyan theology is a practical theology. That is, Wesleyan theology cannot really be understood as a theological system removed from the context of local congregational ministry. As I remember, the point he continued to make was, "Wesleyan theology can only be understood from the streets!"

One more memory, Bill's belief that sociology had something to contribute to our understanding of the context in which we are called to minister led him to convene the Association of Nazarene Sociologists of Religion (the name has since been changed, of course). I had the privilege of being one of the founding members. Each year we would gather together under Bill's sponsorship. Bill was an eager learner. For him, there was so much to learn about the world that informed the way we went about ministry. I think this contributed to his optimistic spirit. Rather than giving in an attitude of despair or fear that other religious leaders seemed to embrace when they looked out at a rapidly changing world, Bill believed that if we could only better understand the world, we could find new and creative ways to minister.

—Ron Benefiel

I first met Bill Sullivan when I was a student at Bethany

---

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2008

Nazarene College (Southern Nazarene University). Since I was a religion major, and part of his assignment was helping young preachers find opportunities to preach in local churches, he became a friend and mentor to me. Our friendship and his influence upon my life continued for over four decades. It was my privilege to pastor Bill, Kiddy, their two daughters and families while I served in Olathe, Kansas. During this time Bill and I became more closely associated and spent a good deal of time talking about the future of the church, and what we might do to assist local churches in the fulfillment of their mission.

After I was elected to my present assignment Bill became my Mission Growth Consultant to assist me in encouraging and equipping pastors and churches in exploring new ways to engage our changing world with the gospel. Only days before Bill's death he and I talked about new ideas and new ways of fulfilling the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ. He never lost his passion for God, the church, and the people who had not yet believed in Jesus Christ. Indeed, he lived his entire life to this end.

All of this is to say that Bill was passionate about his faith and sharing that faith with others. He strongly believed starting new churches was the best hope to evangelize our world. He modeled Christian holiness in every way and never wavered in his faith in Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and the Hope for our world.

—J. K. Warrick, General Superintendent, Church of the Nazarene

In the past, Dr. Bill Sullivan and I both served as district superintendents in North Carolina, he for the Nazarenes and I for the Wesleyans. Later he served at the Nazarene headquarters in Kansas City while I had a similar position with the Wesleyans. We became friends over the years.

Bill was a sharer of ideas. Six or seven of us representing different denominations and having a similar assignment would meet at least once a year to exchange ideas and materials. Bill was a leader in every sense of the word. He allowed us to use materials his department developed or we could adapt them to our settings without cost. We all did the same in exchanging ideas and

materials.

Bill will be missed by all of us who had the privilege to share with, pray with, and fellowship with him. Truly - one of God's spiritual giants has left us.

—Dr. Marlin Mull, Evangelism and Church Growth Director, The Wesleyan Church (1988-2000)

Dr. Bill Sullivan was one of the first denominational leaders to see the great impact that Church Growth could make on all of the churches who followed his leadership. When Bill organized his denomination into conferences to communicate the principles of church growth, it made a great impact on many churches. They grew, they became more powerful, many because more healthy. God used Bill Sullivan to put a great spirit of hope and anticipation in the Nazarene church. But more importantly, God used Bill Sullivan to stretch their faith to believe God for big and greater days.

—Elmer L. Towns, Co-Founder, Liberty University, Dean, School of Religion

I am going to speak, not about Dr. Bill Sullivan's remarkable insights into church growth within our Holiness movement, but about Bill Sullivan and his graciousness. Over a decade ago I attended the annual meeting of the American Society for Church Growth (ASCG) as a guest, invited by a friend.

My friend was the current president of this society, and his duties prevented him from interfacing with me during this conclave. Bill Sullivan, a former ASCG president, noted my awkward situation and purposely reached out to my wife Rebecca and I. While all of the attendees were gracious and kind, Bill exemplified an extraordinary gift of hospitality as he ensured that Rebecca and I became connected to the members of the American Society for Church Growth.

Since that time, Bill Sullivan has been my model for reaching out to new attendees at the ASCG. As I prepare to take the reins of this organization in 2008-2010, I have set my goal to never be too busy to exemplify Bill Sullivan's gracious and hospitable character. Dr. Bill Sullivan has exemplified the Church Growth Movement's understanding of Growing in Favor, where an outsider as myself was welcomed by his unassuming and kind personal example.

---

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2008

—Dr. Bob Whitesel, Director, C3 International

I often referred to Bill Sullivan over the past 30 years as the one who gave me my first wife and my first church. I still have my wife. Dr. Sullivan performed Dorothy's and my wedding in Colorado Springs on May 29, 1971. In the spring of 1976, as District Superintendent of the North Carolina District Church of the Nazarene, he facilitated my call to pastor the First Church of the Nazarene in Durham, North Carolina. I was one of the pastors in the first group of Nazarene pastors Bill attempted to teach the principles of Church Growth. I always sensed that he did not see Church Growth as the answer to every question, but he did see it as immensely helpful in keeping us from lying about why our churches weren't growing. He was always supportive of me and of my calling. When our house in Durham was robbed and our stereo taken, Bill brought us a "record player" that he had built from a kit years ago so that we could continue to enjoy music. Early in my pastorate he convened a meeting of new pastors and spent a day with us going over very practical matters like managing your schedule and constructing worship services. I still use both principles and illustrations from that day with the DS. Finally, as far as I know he was the mind behind the Breckenridge Conferences, which was the single most influential set of events in my ministry in keeping our schools and the church together in the task of preparing people for ministry. My memories of Bill Sullivan are happy memories of commitment, excellence, and joy on the journey.

—Roger L. Hahn, Dean of the Faculty, Nazarene Theological Seminary

Among my many good memories of my friend Bill Sullivan are times we shared in Doctor of Ministry classes at Fuller Theological Seminary. Bill was quick to initiate relevant and helpful church-growth discussions with fellow students from a variety of denominational and ethnic origins. He was gifted in bringing out the best in people.

—Gordon Wetmore

I worked on the Church Growth staff in the early eighties and could not have asked for a more helpful and committed leader. He set a marvelous example for everyone on the team in his knowledge of church growth

---

and his relationship with Christ. Bill was always positive and optimistic and cared deeply for those who worked with and for him.

One thing I will always remember is a comment he made that was greatly encouraging to me as a young pastor. We were in a meeting that was the forerunner of the K Church/COK church movement. I was sitting in front of him during one of the sessions and he leaned forward and whispered to me, "You'll be one of these pastors someday." I was grateful for his words of confidence. I am grateful that we were friends.

—David Wilson

Bill Sullivan was a man of diverse interests that seemed to coalesce around one fundamental value—LOVE. Bill's love for the kingdom of God was fervently expressed in his love for people. This holy love fired his interest, curiosity, and compassion. He was always challenging people to stretch themselves to new standards of excellence.

—Nina G. Gunter, General Superintendent, Church of the Nazarene