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The Transition from Church Growth to Church Health

Philip Walker

Recently, the British Church Growth Association changed its name. I thought that readers of the JASCG would find the reply by Philip Walker to a letter he received quite interesting. —Editor

I recently received an email which said, 'I was genuinely shocked by the collapse of BCGA and the Digest. I think an article by the editor is required to say whether he considers Church Growth and Church Health to be synonymous. Or are there broader aims?' I had already been giving this much thought as it is such an important area and I had already begun to write this article. So are church growth and church health synonymous?

The History

In the 1970s the church was impacted by new ideas coming from the United States and many began to read about and understand the thinking of people like Donald McGavran and Peter Wagner¹. At this time the Bible Society began to make this new way of thinking widely available to church leaders in the UK and at the end of the 1970s the *Church Growth Digest* began to be published followed by the founding of the British Church Growth Association a few years later. The Digest and BCGA were formed to reflect on and disseminate the ideas coming from the American movement, but also to develop and share a European perspective too. Across Europe similar things were happening and many national Church Growth Associations were formed. For the first time church leaders were excited that they might see growth and the new books being published were devoured. There was a great change of heart amongst many younger ministers and many, for the first time, put numerical growth on the agenda.

At the beginning of the 21st century the picture was very dif-

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ferent. Many of the national Church Growth Associations had closed over the years, including the British Church Growth Association in 2003. In Europe the decline in church attendance had continued throughout the period. So what had happened in this 25 year period? Had Church Growth thinking failed?

Church Growth or church growth?

We must distinguish between church growth and Church Growth teaching, which came out of Fuller Theological Seminary through the work of McGavran and Wagner. It had spread widely around the world, with much criticism, and had become an important part of church thinking even where the principles were supposedly rejected.

Most church people desire church growth, i.e. they wanted to see more people attend their church (provided they don't rock the boat, for many). Much of the growth we hear about seems confined to the Southern Hemisphere, but many have a great longing for revival and for thousands to turn to Christ. Church Growth is a social science, with its own vocabulary and its own way of looking at things. It is greatly concerned with quantifiable data but it also recognizes the importance of the divine input in spite of the way many people have seen it.

When I have taught Church Growth principles I have found it helpful to look at Acts 2:41-47 and the variety of growth types indicated in these verses. You will find:

Growing up in verse 42, individuals growing into a mature relationship with God

Growing together in verse 44, in great generosity and spiritual gifts

Growing out in verse 47a, into the community

Growing more in verse 47b, as the numbers increase.

The problem has been that Church Growth thinking has been caricatured as relating only to the last of these, although a careful reading of the Church Growth books shows that there always was far more than this. I think the problem is that many have been threatened by the thinking, which says that numerical growth should take place and that God calls us to fruitfulness, especially in Europe where the church has declined for more than 50 years.

However, anyone who only concentrates on 'bums on seats' is missing an important part of God's purposes for his kingdom. He desires growth in *every* dimension, not just numerical!

The Benefits of Church Growth Thinking

So are the original Church Growth principles flawed and of

no use? By no means! There is much that has come out of the movement to thank God for. Here are some of the changes to consider:

- The focus on the church not on individual conversions
- The focus on integrity not on excuses
- The focus on the main task not on secondary tasks
- The focus on principles not pragmatics
- The focus on sociological tools not traditional correctness.²

I believe that many of the newer developments in church life, such as cell church, seeker sensitive services, emerging forms of being church, and church planting, owe much to the work of Church Growth specialists in the past. It might be difficult to show direct links, but the new forms of thinking introduced 25 years ago have made all of this possible now.

There has been a sea change in people's thinking over the last 25 years which has been enabled by these aspects and more, but...

How Far Has It Succeeded?

Apparently not much! The decline in church attendance in the UK has been most rapid since the 1970s when the study of Church Growth began. So has it been a failure?

I want to argue strongly that it has not been a failure, but the answer given cannot be a straight forward negative, for true success would have changed the decline of the last half century, and yet it is clear that churches and denominations which took Church Growth thinking seriously experienced some growth (or least less decline). Many of the newer churches adopted the key Church Growth principles, sometimes without realizing it, and then grew. And maybe that is part of the point. The understanding of Church Growth principles has become so much a part of today's growing churches that there is no longer any need for specific teaching and training on it. It has become part of the psyche of the church and an important part of most theological training.

So Church Growth teaching has gradually filtered into the thinking of many churches and denominations and they have become much more strategic in their thinking even if they don't acknowledge it. They have adopted mission statements. They have considered fundamental questions about the quality of their life together. These might not otherwise have happened.

There is another aspect, however, which is a reflection on the way of the world today. Much has been said and written about post-modernism, but it seems clear to me that Church Growth

principles equate far more with a modern mind-set and far less with a post-modern. That being the case, if these principles are right and valid, they must be repackaged and represented for a new generation. After all we have to continually contextualise a never changing gospel for each new generation, and this teaching must be a part of it.

The clear evidence available of a connection between intentional mission and numerical church growth cannot be ignored. As we begin to look at numbers and fruit, this sort of intentional work has begun, albeit at times only in desperation, but looking at improving the health of a local church is much less threatening (at least to begin with) and far more effective in developing growth in all dimensions.

The Transition

In the early 1990s, Peter Wagner was surprised that in the USA after 20 years of Church Growth teaching, input and thinking, the church had not grown numerically.³ Although he hoped that there were now fewer nominal Christians than there had been, there had been no real change in church attendance. He was disappointed, but his own direction had already begun to change and his concentration on prayer and spiritual warfare were perhaps a reflection that the spiritual aspect—prayer—had had too little stress in the earlier teaching. It had not been ignored, but the way it had been presented by many (including me!) had been too mechanical—‘If you do it this way, growth is inevitable.’ It wasn’t! We were wrong for we had too easily left God out of the equation and the Spirit of God always moves where *he* chooses. I do not believe that makes the principles wrong—just not presented as well as we might have done.

So What of the Future?

I would argue that Church Growth principles are still needed, even if presented in a different form. If we reject them, we very easily return to the unassessed pragmatism of an earlier generation. Even now we tend to adopt the latest fashion in evangelism from elsewhere — whether it fits or not, and the teaching of Church Growth helps us to examine the principles behind the models.

However, my research amongst younger people, both existing ministers and ministers in training shows that the terminology is turning people off. It is time to change, develop and move into a new millennium. For there is a new paradigm arising: Health before growth...

Healthy Church

Considering health is not a new concept. This transition has developed over the last 25 years. It seems to me to have begun with Peter Wagner's Seven Vital Signs for a healthy church in 'Your Church Can Grow' originally published in 1976 and revised in 1984⁴. These signs have been tested several times for the UK, and have generally proved to be right and helpful, although the homogenous unit principle was generally not seen as right and relevant. His signs were:

- A pastor who is a possibility thinker and whose dynamic leadership has been used to catalyze the entire church into action for growth
- A well-mobilized laity which has discovered, developed, and is using all the spiritual gifts for growth
- A church big enough to provide the range of services (i.e. worship styles, social events, practical care etc.) that meet the needs and expectations of its members
- The proper balance of the dynamic relationship between celebration, congregation and cell
- A membership drawn primarily from one homogenous unit⁵
- Evangelistic methods that have been proved to make disciples
- Priorities arranged in biblical order

Since then a variety of authors have listed the things that they feel make a church healthy (I actually have 28 different lists although many are similar). It is interesting to draw comparisons and note that the leader and the people usually appear in each list, often at the beginning. It is no wonder, as together the leader and the people *are* the church!

Here are some examples:

Twelve Keys to an Effective Church: Kennon L Callahan⁶

1. Specific, concrete missional objectives
2. Pastoral & lay visitation
3. Corporate, dynamic worship
4. Significant relational groups
5. Strong leadership resources
6. Streamlined structure & solid, participatory decision making
7. Several competent programs & activities
8. Open accessibility
9. High visibility
10. Adequate parking, land, & landscaping

11. Adequate space & facilities
12. Solid financial resources

Characteristics of a Healthy Church: Rick Warren⁷

1. Active spiritual formation
2. Authentic community (not public)
3. Contagious evangelism
4. Mobilized spiritual gifts
5. Good stewardship
6. Strong leadership
7. Cultural relevance
8. Effective generation focused ministry
9. Collaboration and partnership

Signs of Health: Eddie Gibbs⁸

1. Positive Leadership – from all holding leadership positions, including the ordained ministers
2. An agreed agenda – a sense of purpose with quantifiable goals and objectives and the means to meet them
3. Inspiring Worship – with strong participation and an awareness of an encounter with God by those who attend, and attractive to ‘fringe’ and other people
4. Cultural Relevance – communicating the gospel through familiar language, arts, imagery etc.
5. Multiplication of life cells – essential nurture for groups of Christians, building up one another
6. Apprenticeship Training – identifying the gifts of individuals and giving them opportunity to develop and use these gifts
7. Spontaneous Witness – seeking and seizing opportunities to talk about faith and invite others to church
8. Planned Evangelism – addressing the needs of the people in the neighborhood
9. Community Involvement – practical service to the community
10. Enabling Structures – forward looking, prompt decision-making to resource mission
11. Specific, believing prayer – recognition that God’s plans for the local church require his involvement in its life
12. Life-related Bible exposition – a central place for communicating the word of God

Natural Church Development (NCD)

1. Empowering Leadership
2. Gift-orientated Ministry
3. Passionate Spirituality
4. Functional Structures
5. Inspiring Worship Services
6. Holistic Small Groups
7. Need-orientated Evangelism
8. Loving Relationship

Christian Schwarz writes that he rejected Church Growth teaching and went on to develop this process, but it seems to me that his work has strong roots in Wagner's vital signs, and there are many links with other lists too. I would not argue that Christian Schwarz has borrowed his characteristics from elsewhere, as different people looking at the same type of organization are likely to come up with similar ideas. However, there is a commonality here, and I think that the previous work makes the list of characteristics a possibility.

Actually, Schwarz' main thesis is that the church is both organism and organization. Most people tend to think and work with the church as one or the other, but in reality it is both at the same time — his bi-polar paradigm. As an organism the natural world has much to teach us.

Natural church development literature does not generally use the term 'church health', preferring to describe 'quality', in the church, but I want to argue that true quality in a church brings about church health.

NCD has some basic premises, which are valuable to note (they are not in any special order):

- Healthy things grow
- Health comes before growth
- Growth is God's prerogative
- Our role is preparation, planting and harvesting
- In partnership with God, natural growth can be released
- We need principles not models!
- Health is essential: no growth — no health and no health — no growth!
- If it is God who gives the growth, we can only remove obstacles

In the past, many church growth concepts have so focused on the fruit that they have failed to consider the root that produces the fruit. And when the roots have wilted through neglect, churches have died. Today, church health must be at the heart of all we do. For too many are saying things like, 'Jesus I under-

stand and I could follow him, but I can't stand the church...'

If the Church is truly Christ's body there should be no dichotomy. I know it is Christ's responsibility to build HIS church; all we can do is follow his instructions and proclaim God's Kingdom. The church is called to be his body — his hands and feet and yet people are rejecting the church every day. If the roots have been neglected, it is no wonder.

We need to examine and improve the root stock of the existing church. I don't believe that God has completely written off local churches as they stand, but the parable of the fruitless fig tree in Luke 13:6-9 may well serve as a warning to us. If the church is fruitless, and fails to fulfill God's purposes for his Church, it may be his time for the axe to put into the roots and for something new to be planted. I do believe (strongly) that we need to discover the right ways to do church in the 21st century, which may well mean starting new churches, which bear little resemblance to those which I have been brought up with! But what about all the existing resources of people, buildings and ministries already out there?

In truth our work in the church is described well in the parable of Mark 4:26-28. Jesus is there talking about the kingdom of God rather than the church—as he normally did. He says it is like a farmer who plants seed and whether he sleeps or wakes, the seed grows, even though he doesn't know how. Much church work is like this. I usually find that the worst people to tell you how a church grew are those who are closely involved with it. They do not really know for they did little different to everyone else, but God seems to have stepped in somehow and growth has taken place. As the parable puts it, 'the earth produces crops; first the blade, then the head and then the mature grain in the head.' This is 'all-by-itself' growth. It is almost automatic, except we know who is behind it and without him the growth cannot take place.

So What about Church Growth?

The truth is that on our own we cannot produce any real and lasting growth! But the Bible describes us as 'workers together with him.' Natural Church Development teaches that our part in releasing the 'all by itself' growth (which God has already put into the church) is the work of preparation and obstacle clearance. God has provided the resources already—the people, the leaders, the spiritual gifts, the premises, etc. It is through these—and primarily through the people—that God Himself grows His church. This is his choice—he could do it all himself but he chooses to work through us. What a privilege!

So is NCD the only way to improve the health of a local church? Certainly not and the *Growing Healthy Churches* work done by Robert Warren and others (for example) is another valuable tool, not yet mentioned. The advantage of NCD for me is that it is an iterative process, with standardized results. It is more than the church deciding where their strengths and weaknesses lie (valuable though that is)—it provides properly validated results in comparison to other churches in the country. It also allows a local church to know the results their work has achieved at the end of say each 12-month period, or whenever they are ready to do a further survey.

The Change Process

It is probably starting the process that is the most difficult for most churches. After so many years of decline, a changed mind-set becomes very hard for many, but it must be done. It is possible to plot the demise of whole denominations unless something happens. I do not believe that it is God's purpose to see the closure of many churches and denominations, but unless we tend the roots, that is the likely outcome. In the final analysis, it is essential that we use some means to see where our strengths and weaknesses lie, and begin to work towards improvement.

As the NCD partner for the UK and Ireland, it is no wonder that I would recommend that process (and I do), but actually my heart's desire is that something is done to make churches healthy, missional and effective in their work for God.

And finally...

So is Church Growth and Church Health the same? No, there is a distinct difference. I trust that I have argued succinctly that the Church Growth principles are still needed, but by some means we must look to health and quality in our local churches before we can even consider growth. Many of the aspects of teaching under the Church Growth heading will be dealt with under the Church Health heading, but the heart of what we are trying to do is different. We are looking for best practice (to borrow a term from elsewhere) in everything that we do—including in mission and discipleship!

But how will we know when we have a healthy church? I believe with all my heart that a healthy church will be experiencing church growth in every aspect of its life, and this will normally include numerical growth. For if we get the roots right, we will have in place all that is needed for health and *growth*. But that part of it is God's responsibility and we cannot presume on him, except that his desire is to see numerical growth too. Peter puts it

this way in 2 Peter 3:9 'The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.'

There is also a sense that we will never be healthy enough. The process of improving the health of a local church will continue while the church remains, because the church on earth is made up of frail, failing people who frequently have to start all over again, but these are the very people God chose to make up his church and this ongoing process of improving health and moving ever more to a better way of doing church is what really pleases God. Dare I say that it pleases him even more than the growth because it is our attitude of heart that is the most important? I have frequently been challenged by Amos 5:21-27. I still wonder whether God is saying to many, "Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps," because our heart attitude is not right.

May we see church health and church growth in many more churches in the UK, Europe and beyond. The method and terminology used is not important but the fact that we do it is essential.

Writer

Walker, Philip. Reverend Dr. Philip Walker is the founder of Healthy Church UK and is the Natural Church Development (NCD) partner for the UK and Ireland. He edits and publishes a quarterly magazine called *Healthy Church Magazine* for Church leaders concentrating on the health of local churches by telling stories and reflecting on best practice. From 1996 he was the Executive Director of the British Church Growth Association taking over from Mrs. Monica Hill, until the Trustees closed down the charity as they felt it had completed its work. It was during this time that Philip gained his experience with NCD. He had previously used it in the church he was leading in York, but then he was widely used in teaching and training at local level. Now he is regularly training denominational leaders so that they can teach and train coaches for the NCD process. More than 500 churches have now undertaken a survey in the UK and Ireland. He can be reached at philip@healthychurch.co.uk.

NOTES

1. McGavran, Donald A, *Understanding Church Growth*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1970) became the seminal book used by many in Theological training institutes and elsewhere. It was extensively revised and updated in 1980 and 1990 by Peter Wagner.

2. I am grateful to Dr. Derek Tidball, who introduced these ideas at the 2001 Annual General Meeting of the British Church Growth Association.

3. Material from a Doctor of Ministry course at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1991-1992.

4. Wagner, C Peter, *Your Church can Grow: Seven Vital Signs of a Healthy Church*. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1976).

5. I find it very interesting that many of the newer and emerging forms of church are homogenous, in spite of the many words written denying that this is a right principle.

6. Callahan, Kennon L, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

7. Warren, Rick, *The Purpose Driven Church*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995).

8. Gibbs, Eddie, *Body Building Exercises for the Local Church*. (London: Falcon, 1979) pp. 48-60.