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## What Is Wrong With the Homogeneous Unit Principle?: The HUP in the 21st Century Church

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**What Is Wrong With the Homogeneous Unit Principle?:  
The HUP in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church**

**Skip Bell**

The question posed within the title may have drawn you to read thus far. You may also sense the alternate verbal, emotional, or cognitive responses to the question. Responses like: “Good! We need to identify how damaging and wrong this principle is!” Or—“Good! We need to recognize the observations of this vital church growth principle!” Or—“Good! We need to readdress this quarter century old principle in the realities of today’s world.”

If you find the homogeneous unit principle to be controversial, credit Donald McGavran, who launched the church growth movement with his important work, *Understanding Church Growth*, first published in 1970. McGavran describes this principle: “Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”<sup>1</sup> McGavran noted evident language obstructions but also cited the following:

The principle is also readily discerned when it comes to pronounced class and racial barriers. It takes no great acumen to see that when marked differences of color, stature, income, cleanliness, and education are present, men understand the Gospel better when expounded by their own kind of people. They prefer to join churches whose members look, talk, and act like themselves.<sup>2</sup>

What exactly did McGavran and other key church growth researchers mean by this principle?

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*Observation or Prescription?*

To propose that church growth is the science of how churches grow is a significant oversimplification. It is true, however, that principles of church growth are discovered through observing congregations with significant growth, and only demonstration over time in diverse environments can enable a researcher to assert that a given observation is a principle, or declare that it is universal.

There is little doubt that McGavran and those who followed in the development of church growth literature considered the homogeneous unit a universal principle. Peter Wagner, a missionary, missiologist, seminary professor, and frequent contributor to church growth thought, wrote in his 1976 work on church health, *Your Church Can Grow*:

Of the entire scientific hypothesis developed within the church growth framework, this one as nearly as any approaches a "law." A decade and a half of research dealing with numerous cultures in virtually every corner of the world confirms that the churches most likely to grow are those which bring together in the local fellowship those of a single homogeneous unit.<sup>3</sup>

What must be examined is the nature of such observation. To observe how a church is growing is not to say that is how a church should grow, or to suggest that such a correlate is even within God's will. It is mere observation. Since early church growth researchers were for the most part missiologists, they were distinctly sensitive to implications of separation or prejudice the homogeneous unit principle presented as they observed it in diverse world cultures. They applied careful research to the question of church growth, and their findings may be received in one perspective as objective observation and not prescriptive.

Maintaining that the homogeneous unit principle is mere observation becomes challenging, however, when you consider that these same missiologists advocated with clear biblical support the priority of church growth. Identifying the growth of the church as faithfulness to God, adaptation to homogeneity as the church develops mission strategy was embraced as practical. McGavran states: "Simply becoming Christian is the greatest step toward brotherhood which it is possible for most people in Afercasia to take."<sup>4</sup> Speaking of racial tension in America, he

continues:

While the church is properly engaged in the battle for brotherhood, she must always remember that the rules for that battle are not the rules for a prior discipling which brings varied tribes and tongues into the Church and makes the growth of brotherhood possible... Jews and Gentiles—or other classes and races who scorn and hate one another—must be disciplined before they can be made really one.<sup>5</sup>

McGavran conceded to human nature, proposed effective growth strategy, and suggested that if growth could be accomplished as brotherhood was expressed that would be the preferred course. “If in a given instance, congregations which neglect this principle grow better than those which observe it, she will not blindly follow the principle.”<sup>6</sup> He further states that in cities where brotherhood has become a cultural pattern, unity of people should be prerequisite. “In such cities the unifying brotherhood should be stressed, breaking with the old homogeneous unit should become a prerequisite for baptism...”<sup>7</sup>

There are other indications that the homogeneous unit may at times have been considered prescriptive. Wagner states in a 1978 article:

Love accepts people as they are. Jesus did not make people into seraphim or angels in order to meet Him halfway. He became a human being with all the limitation it involved. He modeled what we might call “incarnational love”, and we are told to “let the mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). When God’s representatives move out into the world with God’s message of salvation, they must be prepared to accept people as they are found. The integrity of their individual personalities and the integrity of their group’s culture must be respected if Jesus’ incarnational love is to be reflected.

Homogeneous congregation allows for the celebration of people-hood. The careful preservation of the genealogical records of God’s Chosen People so prevalent in the narratives of the Old Testament reflects God’s own respect for “roots.”

It goes almost without saying that the application of the

homogeneous unit principle cannot be coercive. Individual desires and initiative must always be respected. No one can be forced to join a church of one homogeneous unit if for some reason he prefers another one. No homogeneous unit church can be fully Christian and close its doors to others...Christian love must balance the need for people hood and group identity with the need for a tangible exhibition of one of Jesus' most radical principles: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one for another" (John 13:35). The model most likely to accomplish this one on a worldwide scale is the homogeneous unit principle.<sup>8</sup>

Wagner sought to defend the homogeneous unit principle on theological grounds, frequently citing the growth pattern of the early church as the homogeneous unit principle in process. He voiced respect for diverse culture, for diverse culture in the church, and recommended maintaining distinctive congregations as a strategy for numerical growth.

*The Context of the HUP*

The world known by McGavern and his contemporaries in 1960 struggled with the stress that multiculturalism implied. Goals of integration, mixed with language of diversity, challenged neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and churches. Communities struggled with interpretation and sought the appropriate fulcrum point for health. The HUP was offered in a different world than we experience today.

The research project "Racial Integration in a Transition Community" published in *American Sociological Review* in 1969 by Harvey Molotch illustrates the challenge of the church of the time. His work records conditions under which various forms of racial integration occurred in the South Shore community of Chicago. He finds that racial integration was very limited despite the proximity of housing units in transitional neighborhoods.

Particularly interesting is Molotch's finding that religious institutions were especially resistant to integration. He found that in formal associations, such as worship services where liturgy or tradition controlled acts and gestures, limited integration was found. Only four of the South Shore's sixteen protestant churches held integrated worship services. In three of those four

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attendance of black persons was less than 15%.

Children's Sunday Schools were more integrated. Molotch indicates this is "suggestive of the significance of interpersonal vulnerability as a determinate of racial patterns. Parents (of both races) were willing to place children in racially mixed settings because such settings provided no psychic difficulties for them (the parents)."<sup>9</sup>

People in all but one of these four somewhat integrated faith communities evidenced virtually no social interaction with those of the same faith tradition but of a different race. "Church life, outside of worship services, was virtually completely segregated and completely white....In part, the near-total absence of blacks from church social life was a result of deliberate white exclusion."<sup>10</sup>

There was one surprising exception to the norm. In the South Shore community of the 1960's one fundamentalist Baptist church evidenced total integration in both worship and social structures. Molotch asserts that the fundamentalist viewpoint of this economically disadvantaged congregation forced them to either accept integration with intentional demonstration of unity or reject it completely. They had made a decision to embrace complete integration as a requirement of faith. Further, the condition of spontaneity that characterized the worship and structure of the seventy-five member congregation necessarily led them to a state of total acceptance of differing practice. They experienced no set worship order, liturgy, or social strategy that could be threatened.

In his summary, Molotch makes these significant observations. "Although there are some commonalities in the problems which both blacks and whites face under conditions of biracial propinquity and contact, the consequences on the two groups are not identical. In South Shore, as in the rest of the society, the integration "experiment" opens with the most important and useful institutions, organizations and settings as white, and the "challengers" or "invaders" as black."<sup>11</sup>

He further observes, "But for blacks, there is the added problem of knowing that in presenting oneself in a biracial setting, one is challenging and "pushing" to gain something otherwise unavailable. The modal black response would seem to be either a show of hostility (as in some manifestations of the current phase of the civil rights movement) or, as was common in South Shore, a show of deference and total capitulation to white prefer-

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ences."<sup>12</sup>

Molototch cites four conditions that limited transracial solidarity in the community institutions of South Shore. Those were: 1) absence of atypical ideologies that provide basis for development of social alternatives, 2) inequality in social status, 3) exclusion in organizational usefulness, and 4) the lack of previously constituted community organizational ties.

*Opponents of the HUP*

Contemporaries of McGavern were not always in alignment with the HUP. Even among evangelicals there were dissenting voices. Charles Leonard, in his doctoral thesis at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1984, examined the sociological factors at work in communities where multi-ethnic congregations existed. Factors such as economics, housing, government, and people movement were discussed. He concluded:

The people who are members of the multi-ethnic situations are proud of the fact that they are members of such congregations. They cherish their relationships with the other races and cultures. Many of the people feel uncomfortable talking about racial and cultural differences. In general they sense that there are problems within the Church; however, they express a strong sense of commitment in promoting their oneness in the Body of Christ. The spirit of inclusiveness is held high in the minds of the people. Most people have experienced changes of varying degrees as far as their attitudes toward people of other cultures and racial groups as a result of their church fellowship.<sup>13</sup>

Leonard's research serves to explain exceptions, but does not challenge the general prevalence or application of the HUP. Others were more direct in their opposition to the principle. C. Rene Padilla examined apostolic teaching and practice and offers this strong challenge in 1982:

In the early church the gospel was proclaimed to all people, whether Jews or gentiles, slaves or free, rich or poor, without partiality...The breaking down of the barriers that separate people in the world was regarded as an essential aspect of the gospel, not merely as a result of it...The church not only grew, but it grew across cultural

barriers...The New Testament clearly shows that the apostles, while rejecting "assimilationist racism", never contemplated the possibility of forming homogeneous unit churches that would then express their unity in terms of interchurch relationships... There may have been times when the believers were accused of traitorously abandoning their own culture in order to join another culture, but there is no indication that the apostles approved of adjustment made in order to avoid that charge...

If these conclusions are correct, it is quite evident that the use of the homogeneous unit principle for church growth has no biblical foundation. Its advocates have taken as their starting point a sociological observation and developed a missionary strategy; only then, a posteriori, have they made the attempt to find biblical support. As a result the Bible has not been allowed to speak.<sup>14</sup>

Greenway and Monsma challenge the views of New Testament missiology asserted by Wagner. They describe the unifying effect of the Gospel among early Christians of diverse culture in the New Testament church as a powerful witness in its growth. "The first blow against pagan racial and social barriers was struck at the communion table where master and slave, women and men, Jew and Gentile sat together around a common table and celebrated the same salvation."<sup>15</sup> The church in Antioch of Syria is an evident example of such diversity. The book of Acts, Greenway and Monsma point out, describes the church as multicultural and missionary (Acts 11:20; 13:1-3). They among other scholars describe the transformation of the early church from ethnocentrism to multiculturalism.

Apparently McGavran's position, adopted by many as a universal church growth principle, enjoyed vigorous debate. The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism issued a statement within "The Pasadena Consultation" critical of the HUP.

Def: Dr. Donald McGavran's definition of a HU is "a section of society in which all members have some characteristic in common." Used in this way, the term is broad and elastic. To be more precise, the common bond may be geographical, ethnic, linguistic, social, educational, vocational, or economic, or a combination of several of

these and other factors. Whether or not members of the group can readily articulate it, the common characteristic makes them feel at home with each other and aware of their identity as “we” in distinction to “they”.

Critique: All of us are agreed that in many situations a homogeneous unit church can be a legitimate and authentic church. Yet we are also agreed that it can never be complete in itself. Indeed, if it remains in isolation, it cannot reflect the universality and diversity of the Body of Christ. Nor can it grow into maturity. Therefore, every HU church must take active steps to broaden its fellowship in order to demonstrate visibly the unity and the variety of Christ's church. This will mean forging with other and different churches creative relationships, which express the reality of Christian love, brotherhood, and interdependence.<sup>16</sup>

More recently church growth researchers have broadened their criticism of the HUP by citing the success and faithfulness of multi-ethnic churches. Douglas Ruffle comments:

Critique: The success of multi-ethnic communities of faith have defied the nay-sayers who promulgated the “homogeneous unit principle” that says that growing churches must be comprised of “people like me.” The reference point for persons of like mind and position, according to these “church growth experts,” were economic status, race and national origin. In the multi-ethnic church, however, like-mindedness centers on Scripture and the teachings of Jesus.

In an age where racial strife and divisions are still very much the reality, “contrast Christian communities” that bring together persons of different racial, ethnic and economic background are serving as living signs that point to the gracious Reign of God in our midst.<sup>17</sup>

#### *The Current Situation*

The world has changed dramatically in the past quarter century. Information technology, ease of travel, and development of second and third world countries have contributed to a global economy. To survive we are constantly reminded of our chal-

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lenge to embrace the emerging reality of a global community. Is the homogeneous unit still relevant in today's church? Does observation of today's growing churches affirm the homogeneous unit principle?

J. Dart reported on The Congregation Project initiated at Rice University in the year 2000. The researchers discovered that about 20% of Catholic churches evidenced diversity, but only 2-3% in mainstream protestant churches. Conservative protestant churches and non-denominational churches were somewhat higher in incidents than mainline protestant churches. A diverse congregation was defined as one with at least 20% of its members providing diversity. They observed that diverse congregations have strong pastoral leadership, inclusiveness in worship and music, and shared values among the membership.<sup>18</sup>

Kidd and Howe identified numerous multicultural congregations in their research presented to the Anabaptist Evangelism Council in the year 2000, including mainline protestant churches. They assert that each of these churches considered heterogeneity as obedience to the will of God.<sup>19</sup>

The mostly Caucasian Willow Creek in Chicago or Saddle Back in Los Angeles may seem to affirm the HUP. It should be noted that generally such Caucasian mega churches are in predominately Caucasian places. Saddle Back is in Lake Forest, California, a city of about 59,000, 39,000 of whom are Caucasian, a marked contrast to the social demographics of other areas in the Los Angeles region. Similarly, Willow Creek is located in a predominately Caucasian region west of the city of Chicago. Still, other growing predominately Caucasian churches, scores of dynamic Black American or Hispanic churches, and the innumerable congregations formed by unique people groups seem to underline that the principle survives in tact as a practical reality after all these years.

However, there are significant new exceptions, and these churches are growing; and growing rapidly. They are not experiments, they are thriving healthy congregations. Recently several colleagues in the Andrews Doctor of Ministry program investigated two such churches in the Los Angeles area.

*Mosaic*

Mosaic is a church in San Gabriel, California, associated with the Southern Baptist denomination. Formerly known as the Brady Street Baptist Church, then the Church on Brady, the

church has a history of almost 50 years. In the past decade the church has recast its vision with the leadership of its senior pastor Erwin McManus.

San Gabriel is a city of 40,000, 7,000 Caucasian, 360 black, 19,000 Asian, and 12,000 Hispanic. Approximately 2,000 now attend the weekly service of this multi-cultural church. It is bursting with young people of generations x and y. We asked members if they are a heterogeneous church and the replies were quick; "We are the most heterogeneous church in America," "Yes," and "Absolutely," characterized the responses. And observation affirms the assertion. The attendees at any of the three Sunday morning services are an equal mix of the Hispanic, Caucasian, and Asian population of the San Gabriel area.

One member explained; "I work in a multi-cultural office, my neighborhood is multi-cultural, so I looked for a multi-cultural church. I could not invite my friends to the Chinese church I used to attend."

Everyone we queried replied with a clear sense that the heterogeneity of the church was contributing to its growth. The senior pastor offers an interesting reflection. While affirming the vision for heterogeneity, and expressing his commitment to it and the niche the church fills, he suggested that heterogeneity, while meeting an important need and being right, might in some contexts offer a slower growth option than homogeneity.

It is apparent that Mosaic feels relevancy is a command, not an option, and that heterogeneity fulfills that command in their community.

#### *Sunrise*

A Baptist church planted in Rialto, California, in 1957, Sunrise had a steady rate of growth over its first two decades. When the congregation moved into a new facility in 1980 it was primarily Caucasian, and attendance plateaued at 500 within a few years.

Rialto is a city of 92,000, 20,000 white, 20,000 black, 2,000 Asian, and 47,000 Hispanic.

It was about 1988 that the church made an intentional decision to diversify leadership, worship, programming, and outreach. It determined to become multi-cultural and reflect the nature of the changing suburban community around it.

Today attendance has grown to 2500, with a somewhat equal mix of Caucasian, Black, and Hispanic people. We asked many

people why they chose Sunrise. The answers were typical; "Because of the multi-cultural outreach," "Because we are reaching the community," "I was invited by a friend," "We are multi-cultural," "Because of our mix of people; I like it."

We asked members if they could describe the mission of the church. The answer was usually clear; "Be One, Bring One, Build One." We found the mission statement in the bulletin; "Be One person who is faithful to God, Bring One person to personal relationship with Jesus, Build One person to maturity in Christ." The enthusiasm, vision, and ministry of Sunrise members are quickly evident.

The pastoral staff of Sunrise links the resurgence of vision, outreach, and growth to the intentional decision for heterogeneity.

#### *The Global Village and Affinity*

This is not the world of twenty-five years ago.

Assessments of our diverse world fill the pages of business literature. Nelton noted in 1992 projections that 85% of the nation's workforce in 2000 would be women, first generation immigrants, and minorities.<sup>20</sup> He asserts that managing diversity will require an environment where all kinds of people are nurtured and provided the opportunity to succeed.

In large population centers we work in multi-ethnic offices, and increasingly live in multi-ethnic neighborhoods. University communities even in otherwise isolated cities are increasingly multi-ethnic.

Children seem to accept diversity with growing ease. Jay P. Greene and Nicole Mellow of the University of Texas at Austin presented findings in their research: "Integration Where it Counts: A Study of Racial Integration in Public and Private School Lunchrooms" in September, 1998, at the American Political Science Association meeting in Boston.

They observed the interactions of over 4,300 students from private and public schools in lunchrooms of their schools. Almost two-thirds of the students set in inter-racial groups at tables among the private schools, while about half in the larger public school settings did so.<sup>21</sup> We are adapting to a multi-cultural world.

How do we define diversity in today's multi-cultural world? Joplin and Daus offer this definition: "Diversity encompasses any characteristic used to differentiate one person from oth-

ers."<sup>22</sup> They include in their definition differences of race, age, physical ability, and sexual orientation. Shaw and Barrett-Power describe diversity as the differences found in members of any social unit, thus suggesting that diversity is characteristic of a natural social unit.<sup>23</sup> They also describe categories of diversity; readily detectable and less observable underlying diversity. Breckenridge and Breckenridge point out three ways to view the concept of diversity. At the simplest level it refers to the increasing variety of Western Culture. At a deeper level it refers to the social value of tolerating diversity. The more significant perspective is that no religion or social practice ought to take precedence over any other.<sup>24</sup>

Does diversity in today's world necessarily lead to pluralism? Rhodes asserts that diversity assumes a common ground and the possibility of unity within diversity, while pluralism assumes the impossibility of any common ground. Pluralism, according to Rhodes, "rejects any notion of an underlying unity."<sup>25</sup>

Churches whose members come from diverse cultural backgrounds find the discovery of common ground more challenging. Culture is a corporate experience. Schein defines culture: "A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaption and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems."<sup>26</sup>

The presence of cultural differences among people in today's heterogeneous churches is self-evident. Multicultural, diversity, and pluralism are terms that evoke reflection on the church. Is the Gospel of Jesus big enough for a multicultural world? Our observation of heterogeneous churches in today's western world asserts it is.

Only a multicultural church can demonstrate the Lordship of Jesus. Diversity management has become an important issue in today's business literature, indeed in the practice of business management. The first argument for such concern is the effect on the bottom line of profitability. What of the mission of the church? Can we remain insulated from multiculturalism? Can we afford to gather in homogeneous units, insulating ourselves from diversity as we worship the creator of the universe? Are we under the rule of our human experience, our culture? Or are we under the rule of Christ?

Successful church organizations in today's world will be led

by people with a vision for diversity. In the two heterogeneous models we note, the top leadership of the church had buy-in to the concept of heterogeneity. They envisioned a multicultural church. They led the way.

*The Witness of Heterogeneity*

Some assert that the successful heterogeneous churches of today are accidental, suggesting worship style or a dynamic pastor have provided the impetus for diverse people groups to form a congregation. Our observation suggests that is incorrect—there is intentionality within the membership around the diversity. These Christians are more comfortable with diversity than homogeneity. Further, in the experience of these members of the body of Christ, race, linguistic, and class differentiation are in the process of moving to the background. The homogeneous unit principle for them is a reflection of a past time and place. For these people, a church that is not diverse is unlikely to succeed in disciple making.

Some perspective is needed. Select models do not commend the entire Christian movement. There are likely as many samples of church communities that resist the multi-cultural complexity of their neighborhood as there are samples of those embracing the diversity their members experience in the work place and neighborhood. And, especially in Western Christian culture, Christians frequently gather in largely homogeneous neighborhoods. An observer may as well deduct that Christians do not adapt to racial differentiation.

It is also true that the HUP survives often as a cold reality rather than a principle for growth. Caucasian mega-churches are flourishing among people who have chosen to live in homogeneous community away from urban centers. These churches reflect the reality of continued separation in America. It is challenging to the authenticity of our belief system to work and live with other cultures, but worship separately.

This investigation reveals that heterogeneous churches are emerging where cultural experience has already brought people together. The work place, school, and neighborhood seem to be more powerful forces for multicultural appreciation. Christian churches are frequently reflecting change rather than leading change.

There is however, a change occurring. The speed of that change is quickening. The witness of the church communities we

observed is that the emerging heterogeneity of some churches is the new "homogeneity". We are seeking places where diversity is the commonality that draws us together. As we live and work in multi-cultural settings, we wish to experience worship in the same context.

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