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Ten Foundational Books of Church Growth¹ That Influenced the Movement

Elmer Towns

This article is an attempt to look at the foundation and growth of the Church Growth movement through the 10 foundational books that were most influential in developing the movement. For those who don't understand Church Growth, read the following books in sequence to trace the development of the Church Growth movement from its embryonic seed to its modern day fruit, i.e., the mega church movement, the indigenization of missions, the worship movement of the evangelical church, to the evolution of the "radical and extreme" church of the "Xers."

The Ten Most Influential Books

1. *The Bridges of God*; Donald McGavran², Friendship Press, New York, 1955.

This book is the foundation of the Church Growth movement because it introduces Christianity to cross-culture evangelism, basing the evangelistic practices on biblical and sociological research (i.e., a discipline/science), focusing outreach on the Great Commission (i.e., church planting), and a passion that numerical growth is important. *The Bridges of God* dealt with the philosophy of Church Growth, not its principles or methods. This is the book that is the conceptual foundation of the Church Growth movement, and has influenced today's worldwide missions outreach that has changed foreign missions from Western domination to become indigenously driven.

2. *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools*; Elmer Towns³, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1969.

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While McGavran laid the philosophical foundation for Church Growth, Towns used this as a research tool to determine the basis for American church growth. C. Peter Wagner calls this book, "The first American Church Growth book to lay the foundation for the American Church Growth movement and the mega church movement." This book cites 10 churches as a data pool from which growth principles were discovered and communicated. Towns did not know he was using Church Growth as a scientific tool to share growth principles with his readers. The nation-wide popularity of the list of the 100 largest Sunday schools by Towns in the late 60s was a foundation that made this book a best seller in the *Christian Bookseller* and a textbook in colleges and seminaries.

3. *Our Kind of People*; C. Peter Wagner⁴; John Knox Press, Atlanta, GA, 1979.

This book is the most definitive research in theology and sociology that gave credibility to the homogeneous Church Growth principle, i.e., the People Movement. This book was the doctoral dissertation of Wagner's at the University of Southern California in the area of sociology, establishing academic credibility for the movement.

4. *Your Church Can Grow - Seven Vital Signs of a Healthy Church*; C. Peter Wagner, Regal Books, Ventura, CA, 1971.

Wagner identifies the characteristics of the Church Growth principles of a healthy church and explains how a church can grow. This is the first of many Church Growth books on principles that he wrote. While McGavran was the primary author of philosophy, Wagner was the primary author of principles.

5. *How To Grow A Church*; Win Arn and Donald McGavran; Regal Books, Ventura, CA, 1973.

This became the first book to spell out the philosophy of *The Bridges of God* into practical application. Whereas *The Bridges of God* was received gladly by the academic community, this book was received by local churches to help them grow and reach out. Many books on Church Growth followed this one, most being a duplication of the principles found here.

6. *The Complete Book of Church Growth*; Elmer L. Towns, John N. Vaughan and David J. Seifert, Tyndale House, Wheaton, IL, 1981.

When Towns and Vaughan were doing research to write a book on the principles of Church Growth, they constantly found churches that applied principles that apparently contradicted

other churches; yet both types of churches were growing. David Seifert, Pastor of Big Valley Grace Community Church, Modesto, California, had done his doctoral dissertation suggesting there were several different sets of principles by which churches were growing. The three men combined research in *The Complete book of Church Growth* to suggest that there were six models or paradigms by which churches grew. This book included case studies for each of the six models, lessons and principles found in each model, and suggested practical methods that work for each model. This book is included because it was the first to suggest the different models of Church Growth.

7. *A New Face for the Church*; Larry Richards, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI., 1970.

While Towns, Vaughan and Seifert were suggesting six Church Growth models, Larry Richards at the time a professor of Christian Education at Wheaton College, suggested that the old models no longer work, but there was coming a new evangelical church that would be vastly different than the historic Protestant church. He was radical and controversial. Richards suggested most evangelicals were just “re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic” of a historical model that would soon sink. While Richards called for a radical new church, he was blinded to the diversity and strength of the historic Protestant church, and he ignored the dynamics in the various Church Growth models.

The seventh book on this list could have been *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* (Gene Getz, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1974) or *The Measure of a Church* (Gene Getz, Regal Books, Glendale, CA, 1975). While Getz called for a new innovative model for Church Growth, he was not as inflammatory as Larry Richards against traditional church models. Getz acted on his ideas and planted the Fellowship Bible Church in North Dallas while a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary and from that one church, Getz began many other local churches. His model was a combination of the Expository Bible church and the Body-Life church.

8. *Body-Life*; Ray Stedman, Regal Books, Glendale, CA, 1972.

As the pastor of Palo Alto Bible Church, Ray called for a church that was driven by expository preaching and *koinonia* fellowship/ministry in small cells. He used the analogy, “The body grows by the division of cells.” This book is primarily a biblical exposition of the New Testament passages, showing the

church as a body. At the same time the Full Gospel Church of Seoul, South Korea, pastored by David Yonggi Cho, was a vivid example of what the Body-Life church could accomplish and how it could grow. Many years later after Cho's church had reached world-wide recognition, Cho wrote *Successful Home Cell Groups* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1981). This could have been the eighth book on the list but was not completed until the *Body-Life* model was functioning.

9. *The Purpose-Driven Church*; Rick Warren, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995.

This book is a description of the "seeker-sensitive" church model that captured the attention of the church during the 90s. Bill Hybels was the first when he planted Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, in 1975. But Hybels didn't write a book to detail his strategy which is *seeker-driven*. Rick Warren's strategy, which is *seeker-sensitive*, established Saddleback Community Church in 1980 but eventually added more structure to his church than Hybels. The book, *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995), details the principles and methods by which Rick Warren has grown his church. This is the only Church Growth book to sell over a million copies.

10. *Power Evangelism*; John Wember and K. Springer, Harper, New York: NY, 1986.

This is the first book to examine the spiritual basis for Church Growth. The authors indicate that as the world becomes more secular, animistic and as we enter into a post-Christian world, the church should evidence signs and wonders as credibility for the preached message of the Gospel. Originally, McGavran characterized the movement as "voodoo religion," because it appeared to be growing a church by feelings and "spirituality" that could not be examined or classified by the scientific method. However, others followed this area of research to reveal that there is a "spiritual discipline" that can be examined to determine the growth of a church

While C. Peter Wagner's book, *Look Out! The Pentecostals Are Coming* (Creation House, Carol Stream, IL 1975), was the first to observe the phenomena of growth by spirituality, the book did not examine the growth of churches in a systematic way. Wagner's book was descriptive not definitional.

Later, McGavran changed his opinion to accept this as a valid area of Church Growth research.

Summary/Conclusion

A movement always begins with vision, passion and ideas, and so it was the Church Growth movement was given birth and grew to influence the entire world. The vision was to obey the Great Commission and the passion was to reach every person with the Gospel. The ideas were the philosophy, principles and methods of cross-cultural evangelism that evolved out of the discipline/science of Church Growth.

Writer

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NOTES

1. Editor's note: Not everyone will agree with the author's choice of the ten most influential books in the Church Growth movement. If you think a book has been left out, or a book should not be included, write a "letter to the Editor" to be printed in a future edition.

2. Donald A. McGavran, ed. *Church Growth and Christian Mission* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

_____, ed. *Eye of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972).

_____, "The Great Commission," *Reaching All* (Sydney, Australia: World Wide Publications, 1974).

_____, *How Churches Grow*, (London, England: World Dominion Press, 1959).

_____, *Ten Steps For Church Growth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977).

_____, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1970).

3. Elmer Towns, *America's Fastest Growing Churches* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1968).

_____, *Getting a Church Started in the Face of Insurmountable Odds with Limited Resources in Unlikely Circumstances* (Nashville,

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TN: Impact Books, 1975).

_____, *Great Soul-Winning Churches* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1973).

_____, *Is the Day of the Denomination Dead?* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1973).

_____, *The Successful Sunday School and Teachers Guidebook* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1976).

_____, *World's Largest Sunday Schools* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1974).

4. C. Peter Wagner, ed. *Church/Mission Tensions Today* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1972).

_____, *Look Out! The Pentecostals Are Coming* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1973).

_____, *Stop the World I Want To Get On* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1974).

_____, *Your Church Can Grow* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1976).