

10-1-2000

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Recommended Citation

Gibbs, E. (2000). Church Growth Viewed “Through A Glass Darkly”. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 11(3), 3-13. Retrieved from <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/jascg/vol11/iss3/2>

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Church Growth Viewed "Through A Glass Darkly"

Eddie Gibbs

President Mouw, family members, faculty colleagues and fellow students, I count it a great honor to have been invited to be the second occupant of the church growth chair named after the founder of the movement.

I would also like to thank the Salvation Army's Brass Ensemble for playing for us on this occasion. My wife and I have had a long association with the Salvation Army. I have had a long association with the movement and have been privileged to share in their officers' conferences both here in the United States and overseas. You have made a wonderful contribution to this occasion. All we needed was a fanfare of trumpets at the appropriate moment to turn a chair installation into an enthronement!

I am especially indebted to Dr. Paul Pierson and to Dr. Peter Wagner for inviting me to Fuller more than seventeen years ago. If it were not for their risk-taking initiative I would not be here today. I am also grateful for the significant role the Doctor of Ministry program played in equipping me for the task.

Academic "Chair" or "Saddle"?

When you hear the term "academic chair," I wonder what image comes to mind? Most frequently it is that of a well-upholstered chair, in that academics do a lot of sitting and pondering. However, when it comes to the "chair of church growth" a very different image is conjured up in my mind. It is not a picture of a comfortable chair, but of a saddle set on a bucking bronco. I say this recognizing that the Church Growth Movement was launched nearly fifty years ago into an arena of polemics

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Fall 2000

and controversy.

Has the Term "Church Growth" Passed Its "Shelf Life"?

Now attitudes have calmed somewhat. You may still hear the occasional negative comment and have to deal with strident criticism, sometimes perceptive, but more frequently uninformed. Generally speaking, the prevailing attitude is that we have now moved on from church growth to other church related concerns.

Frankly, for many pastors in North America and Europe who read church growth literature and attended seminars on related themes in their thousands during the 1970s and 80s, their expectation were not realized. Despite all of our efforts the tide has not turned in terms of the prevailing decline in church attendance. At which point the pragmatists might be justified in their assertion that, "If it doesn't work then let's discard it."

What then does it mean to be a Professor of Church Growth at this point in time? Does one simply assume the title and find other things to do? Do we quietly drop the term "church growth" as having outlived its shelf life?

In this brief presentation I want to argue for retaining the term, not in order to secure my position until retirement, but because I believe that its challenge still needs to be heard. I want to briefly present *eight convictions* I hold in regard to church growth.

First Conviction: The Need to Hold Together Ecclesiology and Missiology

My basic argument for the retention of "church growth" arises out of the conviction that we must hold together the disciplines of ecclesiology and missiology. The church is neither an institution nor an organization, but an organism. Living organisms are born, move, mature, give birth, multiply and die.

The Church is a dynamic entity in that the Word of God is constantly calling the *ekklesia* into being. The word "church" is more a verb than a noun. It describes the movement of a people, called out, brought together and sent forth. As soon as that dynamic is lost then the church is in jeopardy.

From its inception the Church has been responding to the calling and sending of God. The notion of a missionless church is an oxymoron. Church growth must be concerned primarily with the *being, calling and going* of the church, if its *growth* is to have

theological and spiritual integrity as well as missionary significance. I am not sure that this message has gotten across yet, nor that its profound implications have been recognized by many, even within the movement.

When "church growth" was marketed like a "Viagra pill" to bring reproductive potency to aged institutions, many church leaders regarded it as a way to restore youthful vigor and make churches attractive to a new generation of religious seekers and shoppers. Others assumed a more radical stance, understanding church growth to advocate the abandoning of hundreds of thousands of old churches in order to plant new contemporary models which they were confident would make a more significant impact.

A fatal flaw running through both these developments was that *marketing* displaced *mission*. Church growth was increasingly measured by the size of the crowd, the acreage of the campus, and the size of the budget. The focus was on the premises and programs to attract the many spiritual seekers roaming around in society at large.

For many pastors church growth represented a "pumpkin patch" mentality, with entrepreneurial pastors competing to see who could grow the giant pumpkin. We need to remember that there were no "pumpkin patch" churches in the first 250 years of the history of church. Rather they resembled strawberry plants, with each plant sending out runners that embedded themselves in fresh soil to form new plants.

*Second Conviction: The Need to Move the Emphasis from
"Growing" to "Going"*

A distressing percentage of evangelical churches are no longer evangelistic. With some notable exceptions, we forgot that *the church* is meant to be *the seeker*. This is precisely the emphasis of Donald McGavran who urged a vast seeking and finding of lost sheep, followed by those lost sheep being returned to the fold where they belonged. He advocated a *harvest* theology over and above a token *search* theology.

Today, large sections of the church have given up even on the search. Many churches have largely replaced the image of the seeking shepherd with that of Bo Peep. In the children's nursery rhyme, you will remember that Bo Peep had lost her sheep and didn't know where to find them, it goes on to advise

"leave them alone, and they will come home, wagging their tails behind them."

The day of the "returning seeker" is long past in Europe and Canada, and is rapidly passing here in the United States—indeed has already done so in some regions such as the North West, and Los Angeles county. The wave of returning Boomers which was so significant in the later half of the 1980s has now broken on the shores of consumerism and disillusionment.

Most younger boomers and the under 35s are seeking in other directions than the evangelical church. They are no longer shopping down our isles in the religious supermarket. The problem is that so many pastors concerned to win pre- and post-Christian people think in marketing categories, and are attempting to apply marketing strategies, because they have no missiological framework to relate to their ministry situations.

In the Gospels we read that Jesus came to seek and to save those who were lost. That same Jesus said to his followers, "As the Father has sent me, even so send I you." Paul was called by the Risen Christ to continue that mission. Indeed, it is hard to separate his conversion from his commissioning. He describes his missionary calling in that renowned passage in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22, which hits us with fresh force in Eugene Peterson's graphic paraphrase:

...I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, non-religious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized—whoever. I don't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it.

That's what it means to have a seeker-sensitive ministry. The apostle Paul is not here using the language of marketing but of mission. It is not a strategy by which we invite people to come to us, but a radical challenge to the church to become the infiltrating community. It is a ministry of identification with diverse populations in every aspect of life, as a transformative presence.

*Third Conviction: The Need to Shed the Self-Confident Attitude
Characteristic of Modernity*

If the replacement of mission by marketing was the first fatal flaw, the second was the reducing of divine mission to human enterprise. If the liberals thought they could build the kingdom of God through social action, we evangelicals thought we could bring in the kingdom through our evangelism and church planting. We tended to overlook the fact that the Kingdom of God always comes as a result of Divine initiative. It comes to us always as a gift and often as a surprise.

In many ways church growth has been a child of its times. Consequently, I agree with those critics who charge church growth with being over-influenced by modernity. But this same criticism can be leveled at other branches of evangelical scholarship with equal justification.

So-called "church growth principles" were in fact extrapolated from growing churches around the world. Most of those churches had not started out by intentionally working according to predetermined guidelines; they emerged *after the fact*. These operational principles were then applied to new church planting projects. They were also applied to existing congregations with the hope of revitalizing them. As a general rule the results were more impressive in the former than in the latter.

When we turn from the Western world to the Majority World, we find worldviews that have not been so spiritually impoverished by the rationalistic reductionism of modernity. More perceptive church and mission leaders, with missionary insights, and a reliance on the guiding and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit applied church growth insights to populations long assumed to be impenetrable to the gospel.

*Fourth Conviction: The Need to Affirm the Value of a Statistical
Approach*

The statistical emphasis and quantifiable approach to mission has been strongly criticized, especially by Latin American theologians, as a North American controlling and managerial approach to mission. I have some sympathy with their criticism, especially when statistics are manipulated to justify an unbiblical triumphalism. The Bible gives a sober warning against counting with the wrong motivation. It will indeed bring down the judg-

ment of God if it is undertaken out of pride or as a measurement of power.

On the other hand, the Bible encourages counting for the sake of pastoral accountability. When large numbers of people are on the move and are disconnected from their family and friendship networks you can lose a lot of people whether in the wilderness or the concrete jungle.

We also count for the sake of honesty to avoid exaggeration, and to deploy a field-force strategically. In these cases counting has nothing to do with control but with commitment and urgency. Quantity questions should always lead to the quality questions. Some churches claim that it is unspiritual to count their members. I have yet to find a church that was too spiritual to count the offertory money after the service!

Listen to this quotation written long before the church growth movement and see if you can guess the author. Here is a clue—he was a cigar-smoking Baptist, and the year of publication is 1895!

I am not among those who decry statistics, nor do I consider that they are productive of all manner of evil; for they do much good if they are accurate, and if men use them lawfully. It is a good thing for people to see the nakedness of the land through statistics of decrease, that they may be driven on their knees before the Lord to seek prosperity; and on the other hand, it is by no means an evil thing for workers to be encouraged by having some account of results set before them.

We must not set up *quantity* in opposition to *quality*. I personally believe that God wants both *more* followers of Christ and *better* followers of Christ. I believe that he wants more churches that are determined, whatever the cost, to reach out to the lost and welcome them into the family of God.

Fifth Conviction: The Need to Acknowledge the Mystery of the Church and Its Growth

This brings me to the title I have given to this address—*Church Growth Viewed Through A Glass Darkly*. As many of you know this is a reference to the King James Version translation of 1 Corinthians 13:12, where Paul says, “*Now we see through a glass darkly...now I know in part*.” The reference is to ancient mirrors

with rough and hazy surfaces that blurred and distorted the image. It also provides a reminder that any mirror gives a restricted field of vision.

In terms of the working out of our salvation much remains unclear, and beyond the range of our conceptual world. However, while we do not have all the answers, we know sufficient to sustain our faith, hope and love, and to spike our curiosity, leading to a lifetime studying these issues.

The New Testament speaks of the *mystery* of Christ, the *mystery* of the Kingdom, the *mystery* of the Gospel and the *mystery* of the Church. The *Gospel* is the mystery of the Good News made known in Christ, while the *Church* is the mystery of the Body of Christ made actual by the presence of the Lord, who is now the Ascended Christ making himself available to us by his Spirit. In Ephesians 5:32 it is recorded that the relationship between Christ and his church is a "*profound mystery*."

Incidentally, a key component of that mystery is the evidence of the power of the gospel to bring about ethnic reconciliation. "*This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus* (Eph 3:6)." As we face the urban challenges of our day we need to be reminded that the Church from New Testament times grew in an urban Greco-Roman urban world characterized by misery, chaos, fear and brutality. First century cities were characterized by immense cultural diversity and were peopled by strangers, compressed within city walls, and crowded into single rooms in tenement blocks. Yes churches can grow in the midst of urban squalor as well as in affluent suburbs.

If mystery lies at the heart of the church then church growth can never be a deterministic science. While it helps our understanding in establishing those correlations that we have called church growth principles or, more recently, the evidences of a healthy church, it can never make a church grow. While we are held responsible to sow constantly and cultivate diligently, only God can bring about the germination of the seed and cause it to produce fruit *after its own kind* (1 Cor 3: 5-6); which raises two disturbing questions. First, "Does God want more people around like us?" Second, "Does God want more churches around like mine?" Quantity questions must never become a diversion from asking the quality questions.

If the churches we represent have degenerated to the point that they are no longer anticipatory signs of God's coming Kingdom, but have become denials of that provisional reality, then the answer is clearly, "No." Many denominations have a Department of Church *Growth*, perhaps they also need a Department of Church *Euthanasia*, as some churches may need to die with dignity! It will serve no useful purpose simply to put such soul-dead churches on long-term, life-support systems. They will experience no growth without the pain of dying to their own agendas, followed by a resurrection to their true being and calling to be the winsomely subversive people of God in the world.

Sixth Conviction: The Need to Regard Evangelism Not Primarily in Terms of Individual Decisions Recorded but in Terms of Communities of Disciples Formed

In relation to the evangelistic task Donald McGavran brought a powerful critique. Too often evangelists have thought of their task in terms of bringing individuals to the point of decision, and then left others to deal with the follow up of converts. McGavran's perspective was radically different. For him, the fundamental task was not precipitating decisions but in helping people embark on the life-long journey of Christian discipleship (which he called "*perfecting*") and forming communities of pilgrim believers. Within the Christendom context evangelism had come to mean bringing people back to the faith in which they had been reared but which they had never made their own or had later abandoned.

McGavran challenged both the individualistic assumptions and the one-time event preoccupation. His ministry in India had been among Hindus, for whom evangelism meant teaching the gospel story they had never known, and drawing them into communities of Christians living out the gospel within their cultural context.

Now that we are in post-Christendom cultures in the Western world, the churches here need to change their evangelistic strategies. For most people, coming to faith will not be so much a process of believing in order to belong, but in belonging in order to believe. Conversion will be a process with a number of significant steps along the way, rather than an isolated event.

Seventh Conviction: The Need to Embrace Church Growth as a

Multi-Disciplinary Field of Study

My next reason for wanting to retain the *discipline*, or more accurately, the *field* of church growth, is that it needs to be exposed to a more open and less adversarial dialogue with the other academic disciplines. For as I began to appreciate the complexity of "church growth" I came to realize that it is not a narrowly defined focus of study, but one that is a vast interdisciplinary field. For the issues it raises draw one inevitably into the Person and work of Christ, Salvation history as recording in both Testaments, the ministry, worship, liturgy, sacraments and mission of the church, church history, religious sociology, leadership and organizational systems theory, communication theory, evangelism, etc.

The institutional, contextual and spiritual issues are so complex that I do not believe anyone can become a church growth *scholar*, only a church growth *student*. How can one ever achieve a comprehensive understanding of the many factors contributing to the growth of churches around the world and representing a multitude of cultures and church traditions? How can one hope to keep abreast of events?

In attempting to explore the mysteries of the growth of the church we need the insights of church historians, especially in regard to the complexities of the early Church period. Here in the West we are emerging from the Constantinian era to a post-Christendom, postmodern, neo-pagan cultural context.

In learning how to reposition ourselves in this unfamiliar cultural terrain we need to learn from the early Church, which from the first operated from the margins, with little social influence, and minimal material resources, in a pluralistic society. They knew how to operate and grow exponentially as networks, not as centralized hierarchies. We need to relearn those long-forgotten lessons with the help of our church historians.

Church growth scholars also need the wisdom of colleagues in the School of Psychology, which has already made a number of significant contributions in understanding the process of conversion, and in developing a psychological profile to help Home Mission boards identify potential church planters and to have better selection procedures. It has also drawn attention to the fact that dysfunctional churches are contributing to the alarming rise in the number of dysfunctional and abusive pastors.

To my esteemed colleagues in the Schools of Theology and Psychology I want to say that I will come knocking on your door, and I invite you to knock on mine! I value your scholarship and your commitment to the academy, and affirm the contributions your insights bring to the ongoing life and mission of the church. If we can find creative ways of pooling our resources to address the agenda of re-defining and re-tooling churches everywhere we will be uniquely positioned to make a contribution with local and global ramifications.

I believe that Fuller Theologically Seminary is uniquely situated and resourced to achieve that goal. For Los Angeles country represents one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, of the world's cross-cultural mission challenges. Mission is not an activity of the church that happens across the seas or even over the border, but across the way. As a seminary, mission is what we are about. For we are no longer operating in a Christendom cultural context, but in an increasingly neo-pagan society. The social strength of our religious institutions is being eroded daily, revealing a church that is spiritually emaciated and theologically and biblically illiterate.

In order to face such a challenge we cannot marginalize ministry, nor confine mission to one school. We need not so much a theology of mission, but a mission theology, entailing a fresh engagement with the Biblical text as documents forged in mission engagement with the world and in the struggle to form communities of believers from religious legalism and pagan moral license. That first century challenge is now a twenty-first century imperative.

*Eighth Conviction: The Need to Re-Affirm the Relationship
Between Church Growth and Mission*

Perhaps a word needs to be said as we draw this presentation to a close concerning the relationship between "church growth" and "missiology." I do not believe that the two terms are synonymous. Neither do I believe church growth to be a department of missiology in that it permeates the whole. Whilst church growth lies at the *heart* of mission it is certainly not the *whole* of mission.

In this regard the sequence we find in the New Testament is of abiding significance—first the kingdom, then mission, and then the church—in that order. To make church growth synonymous

with mission is to be guilty of an ecclesio-centric focus, which will undermine the integrity of the discipline. For the church must never simply draw people *to* itself, but must consistently point *beyond* itself to the gospel of the kingdom in all its inclusiveness and to the ongoing mission of the church in all its comprehensiveness.

Within this overall mission church growth concentrates on certain essential components: effective evangelization; discipling new believers to become more and more like Jesus; establishing new communities of believers able to reproduce after their own kind; and revitalizing existing churches. I trust that we are all able to affirm these basics and be committed to them from the standpoint of our own academic disciplines.

Saddle Up!

So, as I mount my bucking bronco my hope is that we will all exchange our chairs for saddles, to engage a rapidly changing world in support of the churches in its manifold witness. We do this in response to the Lord we seek to serve, which continues to beckon, saying, "*Come follow me.*" In so doing we will all have a lot of travelling to do, and perhaps venture into places we have never been before.

Writer

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