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The Rise and Decline of the Church Growth Movement

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Elmer L. Towns

abstract

Dr. Towns surveys the movements and personalities that brought the Church Growth Movement into being and gave it a focus in the American church scene. Then he discusses the several accomplishments in its golden age of influence. After 20 years of ministry in various areas, the Church Growth Movement began to decline as evidenced by nine trends surveyed by Dr. Towns. Then he noted seven continuing influences of the Church Growth Movement on today's church culture. Finally he reminds the reader of what God can do through the church and that God is still using churches today.

A fascinating study in our times is the rise and decline of the Church Growth Movement, asking questions such as, what were the powerful forces that captured the thinking of many evangelicals? What contributed to the explosion of many mega churches? What were the seeds within the movement that plotted its fall? How could something so effectively used of God actually decline and eventually be criticized by many?

the Roman Empire,¹ trying to determine why the movement floundered and collapsed.

The Roman Empire was given birth in obscurity, but it rose to power because of great dedication by a few pioneers of the Empire. However, succeeding generations began to decline because followers did not buy into the same core values of the original pioneers, nor were followers willing to make the same sacrifices to keep the movement going. This exemplifies the lesson of forgotten vision—when decisive victories are won at tremendous cost, they can be later lost when conquerors stop applying the lessons that made them victorious in the first place.

Donald A. McGavran, missionary to India under the United Christian Missionary Society (the missions branch of the Disciples of Christ from 1923–1955), is generally recognized as the father (or grandfather) of the modern Church Growth Movement, or CGM.

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McGavran saw a problem in evangelism every time his denomination started a church among one caste in any city; those in castes above or below were not incorporated into the local congregation.

Churches were planted in different towns, and new churches were started in different castes. Each church stayed relatively small, though, around 100; each was constrained by the caste where it was founded.

New believers remained in the caste where they were converted and did not gravitate to a church in another caste. They also did not attract to Christianity those above or below them sociologically. If that were the end of the story, the worldwide Church Growth Movement might have died before its birth. McGavran questioned why Christianity apparently did not give converts the ability to cross cultural barriers.

J. Waskom Pickett,² a missionary evangelist, demonstrated to McGavran that the power of evangelism could “bridge” the social caste system and reach many for

¹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: Vol. 1–3* (New York, NY: Everyman's Library, Div. of Random House, 1993). Edward Gibbon famously placed the blame on a loss of civic virtue among the Roman citizens. They gradually entrusted the role of defending the Empire to barbarian mercenaries who eventually turned on them. Gibbon held that Christianity contributed to this shift by making the populace less interested in the worldly *here-and-now* because it was willing to wait for the rewards of heaven. “The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight,” he wrote. “In discussing Barbarism and Christianity I have actually been discussing the Fall of Rome.” (Review taken from “Decline of the Roman Empire,” *Wikipedia*, available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Decline_of_the_Roman_Empire (accessed June 9, 2011).

² See “Background Data for Mission,” *Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church*, available from <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/about/us/ecg/research/backgrounddataformission/index.cfm?i=4702> (accessed June 7, 2011). J. Waskom Pickett went to India as a missionary in 1910 at age 20, having already completed college. He served there the rest of his career . . . He was well acquainted with Ghandi and was regarded as a confidant to the first president of India,

Towns: *The Rise and Decline of the Church Growth Movement* Christ. Therefore, McGavran began to see every new church as an evangelistic instrument to reach those for Christ in the caste where it was planted. When McGavran realized that a church must be planted in every caste of every village, he understood the task of evangelizing India was much greater than anyone realized. Rather than hibernating into a pessimistic shell, Pickett challenged McGavran to evangelize the multitudes.

the birth of the modern church growth movement

McGavran took a furlough in 1954 and during that time published the *Bridges of God*.³ That book was and remains an elementary foundation for the Church Growth Movement. Robertson McQuilkin, the president of Columbia Bible College, wrote that it had five Church Growth principles.

1. Numerical growth,
2. Focus of receptivity in converts,
3. People movements (the homogeneous unit principle),
4. Use of science as a tool to determine successful evangelistic principles,
5. Right method guarantees large response.⁴

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Dr. McGavran isolates five key events that have contributed immeasurably to the expansion of the movement. The five events include: (1) in 1961 establishing the Institute of Church Growth on the campus of Northwest Christian College (Eugene, Oregon) to develop students' knowledgeable in growth concepts; (2) publishing the *Church Growth Bulletin* in 1964; (3) relocating the Institute of Church Growth from the campus in Eugene (1961) to Fuller Seminary at Pasadena (1965); (4) establishing the William Carey Library (1969) for mass publication and circulation of Church Growth books; and (5) creating the Institute for American Church Growth in 1973 by Dr. McGavran and Dr. Win Arn.⁵

On June 16–20, 1969, McGavran conducted a historic gathering of church growth leadership in the first Annual Church Growth Colloquium at the

Nehru, after the British pulled out. He was brilliant, hard working, and dedicated, and served even the lowliest of the Caste system there. In fact, he had a special emphasis with the least of them. He was consecrated Bishop in 1935. He would leave India for "retirement" in the U.S. after 46 years of service in the land he came to call home. One of his landmark accomplishments in India was a massive social research study, the first of its kind outside the USA. This led to his publishing of *Christian Mass Movements in India*.

³ Donald A. McGavran, *Bridges of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955).

⁴ J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Measuring the Church Growth Movement: How Biblical is It?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), material cited in Elmer L. Towns, *A Practical Encyclopedia: Evangelism and Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995), 77.

⁵ Elmer L. Towns, gen. ed. *A Practical Encyclopedia: Evangelism and Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996), 77. Executive editorial committee included: Dr. Robert Coleman, Dr. Lewis Drummond, Dr. Gary Greig, Dr. Kent Hunter, Dr. Charles Kelley, Dr. Gary McIntosh, Dr. Paige Patterson, Dr. Thom S. Rainer, Dr. Alvin L. Reid, Dr. John Vaughan, and Dr. C. Peter Wagner.

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Emmanuel School of Religion, Milligan College, Tennessee. This four-day
conference included such topics as “The Scientifically Measurable Factors of
Church Growth,” “Why Churches Stop Growing,” and “How to Activate
Churches.”⁶

While McGavran was teaching the principles of Church Growth for a foreign
mission evangelistic outreach, I began thinking and applying Church Growth
principles to the American scene. I was interested in the growth of churches ever
since I wrote an article and tract entitled *The Laws of Sunday School Growth*⁷ in
1960. I spent much of the 1960s traveling to individual churches, teaching *The
Laws of Sunday School Growth* and also instructing Sunday school teachers how to
use Sunday school as an evangelistic outreach arm of the church.

In 1969, I published the *Ten Largest Sunday Schools*,⁸ and Robert Walker,
editor of *Christian Life* magazine, said, “The news of the ten largest Sunday
schools hit America like a thunderclap.”⁹ Almost immediately the book was listed
on the best-selling list of Christian publications and remained there for the next
two years.¹⁰ In the succeeding four years, I followed up with four bestselling books,
each one on a topic of Church Growth.¹¹

C. Peter Wagner, Church Growth professor at Fuller Theological Seminary
said about the book, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools*, “This book is the first
American Church Growth volume and the first book on the mega church.”¹²

About the same time, Win Arn developed the American Institute of Church
Growth and began publishing books and information on how churches should
grow.

C. Peter Wagner had been involved with the movement *Evangelism In-Depth*,
an evangelistic program/movement that swept across Latin and South America in
the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹³ The movement’s spokesman, Kenneth Strachan,

⁶ Ibid., 76–77.

⁷ Elmer L. Towns, *The Laws of Sunday School Growth* (National Sunday School Association, Chicago, IL, 1960).

⁸ ———, *Ten Largest Sunday Schools* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1969).

⁹ ———, *Ten Sunday Schools That Dared to Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1969), 22.

¹⁰ During the dates 1969–1972, I traveled to speak in 84 of the 100 largest churches listed in *Christian Life* magazine. Also I spoke in numerous ministerial associations of large cities on the topic, “The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and How You Can Build a Great Growing Sunday School.”

¹¹ These four books on Church Growth were *A Church Aflame* (with Jerry Falwell) (Nashville, TN: Impacts Books, 1971), the story of the explosive growth of Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, VA; *America’s Fastest Growing Churches* (Nashville, TN: Impact Books, 1972), an analysis of ten churches across America that were growing; *Capturing Your Town for Christ* (with Jerry Falwell) (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming-Revell, 1973), a book that explained with a passion and heart of evangelism at Thomas Road Baptist Church; *World’s Largest Sunday School* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc. 1974), an analysis of the growth of First Baptist Church, Hammond, IN, that made it the largest church in the United States.

¹² Towns, gen. ed. *A Practical Encyclopedia: Evangelism and Church Growth*, 77.

¹³ LAM (Latin American Mission), “History of the Latin American Mission,” by W. Dayton Roberts and Paul E. Pretz (Prepared in 1970, updated in 1985, 1994, 1995 and in 2000 by Kenneth D. MacHarg), available from <http://www.lam.org/about/history/> (accessed June 7, 2011).

Towns: The Rise and Decline of the Church Growth Movement taught that the key to evangelizing a nation was not with well-known gospel singers, or with massive crusades, or with big-name evangelists, such as Billy Graham or Luis Palau. Rather, Strachan taught evangelism must be done *in-depth* by organizing and coordinating evangelistic events at the local neighborhood level through backyard Bible clubs, door-to-door evangelistic visitation, local evangelistic crusades, etc. Therefore, Moody Science films were shown in public piazzas in an evening all across each nation. Gospel music concerts were also held in piazzas, featuring artists and musical groups from local churches.

The year that *Evangelism In-Depth* was launched, in each South American nation was found a huge parade down the center of Main Street of major cities. Evangelicals marched together for Jesus Christ, the Salvation Army band heralded the Gospel, and pastors and Sunday school teachers marched to show their allegiance to Jesus Christ through their local Protestant churches. Evangelicals joined together across South America to reach their country for Jesus Christ.

C. Peter Wagner was teaching at a theological seminary in Bolivia, South America, and worked with *Evangelism In-Depth* for Bolivia, whereby all the evangelicals of that country were organized into various local campaigns of evangelism. After a year of intensive evangelism in Bolivia, Wagner was greatly surprised to discover that the year-long program had not increased the number of members in the churches.¹⁴ In fact, he went on to say, the percent of annual growth was greater the year preceding—than during and the two years following—the *Evangelism In-Depth* effort!¹⁵ He concluded corporate endeavors to evangelism did not work as effectively as the intense outreach of a local church to reach lost people, win them to Jesus Christ, and bond them to a community of believers.

Wagner was influenced by McGavran, and the idea of carrying on the dream of Church Growth in North America captured Wagner's heart. Wagner was invited to teach at Fuller Seminary, so he enrolled in the University of Southern California to earn his Ph.D. in anthropology. His doctoral dissertation, *Our Kind of People*,¹⁶ became a touchstone book for Church Growth.

Wagner revitalized the Doctor of Ministry program at Fuller Theological Seminary with his classes on Church Growth. Whereas in the early 70s, Fuller had approximately twenty-five students in the D.Min. program, by 1985 there were over 1,200 students in that program, mainly motivated by Church Growth seminars conducted by Pete Wagner. These classes were also taught by Eddie Gibbs, Arthur Glasser, and others.

¹⁴ C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1987), 141.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁶ C. Peter Wagner, *Our Kind of People* (Louisville, KY: J. Knox Press, 1979). This research became the foundation study for the homogeneous unit, reaching people through natural relationships.

Institute for Evangelism and Church Growth. These classes were taught throughout the late 70s and into the 80s. Denominational officials from almost all denominations attended the seminar to learn how their group could grow by planting churches.

Two results came out of Wagner’s seminars. First, the denominations across America began establishing a titled position called church growth director, and they began refocusing evangelism on planting new churches, rather than trying to grow existing churches. Second, many denominational officials attended the one-week seminar, turning it into their first class to earn a Doctor of Ministries from Fuller Theological Seminary. As a result, Wagner spread the effective use of Church Growth to denominations beginning at the executive level that began trickling down to state and local church levels.

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a glorious twenty year window

Twenty glorious years of evangelistic ministry (1970–1990), known as the Church Growth years, were unlike anything else ever seen in the face of Christianity. Other decades of great outreach had occurred, but Church Growth years were unique in that they were based on research that established workable biblical principles to reach people for Jesus Christ and bond them into local churches. These years were unique in that they emphasized and allowed for the explosion of mega-churches around the world.¹⁷ In a mega-church, one pastor-leader and his congregation planned to saturate their entire “Jerusalem” with the purpose of winning as many to Christ as possible and getting them in their local church.¹⁸ It was unlike any other period because a multitude of workable methods had appeared on the scene. Some methods were used by a few churches; other methods used by others. Some methods were used in one culture; others worked in a different culture. The total number of new methods produced exciting results in the kingdom of God.¹⁹

As I have studied church history, I have realized certain “windows” or “eras” exist, wherein God uses an unusual method to produce unusual results, many times

¹⁷ Steven Richard (Sam) Towns, “Elmer L. Towns: A Biographical and Chronological Presentation of His Writings” (Doctor of Ministry, Liberty University, 1988) available from http://www.elmertowns.com/bio/Dr_Sam_Towns_Dis—locked.PDF (accessed June 7, 2011).

¹⁸ Quote by Jerry Falwell, “Saturation Evangelism: Reaching Every Available Person Through Every Available Means,” available from <http://www.liberty.edu/academics/religion/seminary/index.cfm?PID=16985> (accessed June 7, 2011).

¹⁹ A multitude of local churches began using media (television and radio) to evangelize the masses. Among the early nationwide leaders were Jerry Falwell, Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, VA; Rex Humbard, Cathedral of Tomorrow, Akron, OH; and Robert Schuller, Crystal Cathedral, Garden Grove, CA. Beyond these were hundreds of churches that did not televise their ministry through local outlets.

Towns: *The Rise and Decline of the Church Growth Movement* different from previous generations. Usually these new methods did not work in the next generations because culture changed.²⁰

In other writings, I have called these “*anointed methods*,”²¹ as though God anointed a certain method in an unusual way—something He had not done before or thereafter. However, while some observers mistakenly think God anoints methods, it is really the people who are anointed by God. They are filled with the Holy Spirit and uniquely guided by God to produce supernatural results. Therefore, a method is not anointed, but people are anointed. It only appears that a method is anointed.

Apparently, “geographical anointings” occurred, whereby God used a person in an unusual way in one location, more than any other spot on the globe. As such, evangelist Reinhard Bonnke has attracted over a million people to his crusades in Africa, but the same anointing or results are not evident in his meetings in the United States. Donald McGavran seemed to have had a “geographical anointing” for India and world missions, so that he has been used as one of the most influential foreign missionaries in the twentieth century. However, his direct influence on the U. S. churches is hard to measure. Perhaps his influence on Wagner, Win Arn, and Gibbs is most apparent, and the disciples of McGavran influenced the U. S.

An abundance of “things” were named Church Growth that indicated the expanse of the movement. The first might be institutes organized to research, promote, produce, and package methods to help churches grow. Each institute produced different areas of “methods,” and each reached a different clientele. Win Arn packaged the most famous in the American Institute of Church Growth in Pasadena, California; Larry Gilbert organized the Church Growth Institute in Lynchburg, Virginia; and Kent Hunter organized the Church Growth Center in Corunna, Indiana. Peter Wagner headed up the Charles E. Fuller Institute for Evangelism and Church Growth, later headed up by Carl George.²² Besides these interdenominational institutes, a number of such organizations existed within denominations.

Next, many denominations began hiring an individual to the position of church growth director, many times changing from the previous title of home

²⁰ See Elmer Towns and Douglas Porter, *The Ten Greatest Revivals* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications/Vine, 2000). This work features the different methods that either contributed to a “revival” or grew out of a revival.

²¹ Steven Richard (Sam) Towns.

²² “This is Carl George,” *Introducing Carl George*, available from http://www.leadershipforministry.org/Information/CFGIntro/cfg_intro.htm (accessed June 21, 2011). An experienced church planter, pastor, school administrator, and lecturer, he is author or co-author of: *Leading and Managing the Local Church*, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, *Breaking Growth Barriers*, *The Coming Church Revolution*, *Nine Facts of the Effective Small Group Leader*, *Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership*, and *The Meta Church Workshop*.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 4, Iss. 2 [2013], Art. 2 missions director, outreach director, or other such titles. Of course, when they changed the name of the director, they also changed the name of the various departments dealing with evangelism and ministry within the United States to “The Department of Church Growth.” (Later, many of these titles for leaders and departments were changed to a more current descriptive title.)

Seminaries and Christian colleges began offering individual courses in Church Growth.²³ Next, programs of study were designed in Church Growth, such as a Master of Arts in Church Growth. Entire schools in theological seminaries were given the title Church Growth. For example, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, called it the School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth.

Next, an all-inclusive encyclopedia, named *A Practical Encyclopedia: Evangelism and Church Growth*,²⁴ was prepared to give stability to the movement.

The “window of Church Growth” seemed to begin closing. Those who fell in love with the results of Church Growth also fell in love with the methods they learned from Church Growth, and they equated Church Growth with that one method. With primary commitment to methods, the results of Church Growth declined. I saw an allegiance to methods and not to the spiritual factors that produced Church Growth, so I began emphasizing spiritual principles of building churches rather than my previous emphasis on outward methods.²⁵ Ed Stetzer said it was an allegiance to methods and a loss of the original missional church vision of Donald McGavran.²⁶

Christian Schwarz tried to downplay the Church Growth models when he advocated a new approach to growth. He advocated *Church Health*.²⁷

why has church growth declined?

Natural growth cycles occur in the human body; we all begin to die the moment we are born. Trees, vegetable plants, animals, and birds also experience natural growth

²³ Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary offered five courses in Church Growth: Church Growth I, Theological Foundations; Church Growth II, Spiritual Factors of Church Growth; Church Growth III, Programs of Church Growth; Church Growth IV, Case Study to Plan and Organize a Year-Around Program to Organize a Local Church to Grow; Church Growth V, Church Planting.

²⁴ Towns, gen. ed. *A Practical Encyclopedia: Evangelism and Church Growth*.

²⁵ Elmer L. Towns, *Spiritual Factors of Church Growth* (Lynchburg, VA: Church Growth Institute, 1990). I produced this seminar which featured prayer, revival, worship, fasting, etc.

²⁶ Ed Stetzer, “The Evolution of Church Growth, Church Health, and the Missional Church: An Overview of the Church Growth Movement From, and Back To, Its Missional Roots,” available from <http://www.edstetzer.com/2008/11/14/ChurchGrowth.pdf> (accessed June 9, 2011).

²⁷ See Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996). The eight principles mentioned are 1) Empowering leadership; 2) Gift-oriented ministry; 3) Passionate spirituality; 4) Functional structures; 5) Inspiring worship service; 6) Holistic small groups; 7) Need-oriented evangelism; and 8) Loving relationships.

Towns: The Rise and Decline of the Church Growth Movement cycles. God has supernaturally embedded these cycles within His creation. Did God pre-determine that Church Growth would be influential and then pass off the scene?

The following are suggestions why Church Growth began to decline. Some of these are primary reasons; others are secondary. Some reasons for decline come from within the movement itself; others come from without. Just as the buggy whip and running board lost their place in the commercial market, has Church Growth been superseded by a movement more powerful and “anointed” by God?

1. *Loss of Church Growth's titular head.* When the movement lost Donald McGavran in 1990 to death, obviously the strong voice for Church Growth went silent. Prior to his death, Donald McGavran was the banquet speaker each year at the North American Society for Church Growth. Church Growth leaders looked forward to his yearly exhortation. Right to the end he was strong, never losing his compass-bearing for the Great Commission.²⁸ McGavran quoted Matthew 28:19 often because he believed it deeply, repeating it many times in the original Greek, *matheteusate panta ta ethne*, “make disciples of all ethnic groups.” In his last speech, I said McGavran quoted it fourteen times; Wagner sitting next to me counted thirteen times. Who knows which of us was right—McGavran probably said it more times in his heart than he said audibly. The voice went silent, signifying the approaching twilight of the Church Growth Movement’s glorious age.

2. *The Church Growth Movement lost its rallying voice—C. Peter Wagner.* C. Peter Wagner underwent theological shifts in his own personal life, which meant changes in his ministry emphasis. Wagner always called these his “new assignments of God.”²⁹ In the early years of growth, C. Peter Wagner seemed to produce a new book each year on Church Growth, each one becoming a top seller. It seems that everyone who was caught up in the Church Growth Movement wanted to read the

²⁸ For two or three years at the banquet, C. Peter Wagner and I would sit together and count how many times Donald McGavran would say, “*Matheteusate panta ta ethne*.”

²⁹ Wagner evolved through several areas of emphasis: (1) Prayer, (2) The Holy Spirit, (3) Signs and wonders, and (4) The new Apostolic Movement. However, in Wagner’s defense, these shifts were not born out of weakness but in his deep attempt to do a better job in carrying out the Great Commission, reaching more people for Christ, and planting more churches.

Wagner’s new assignment was researching, writing, and teaching on the spiritual factors in Church Growth. His research (published in Zondervan’s *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*) showed that the fastest growing segment of American Christianity was the independent charismatic churches. As he researched their growth, he found that they had a stronger and more up-front view of the person and work of the Holy Spirit than evangelicals. Wagner wrote to me, “However, I could not persuade my Church Growth colleagues to incorporate these charismatic-type insights and behavior patterns into their teaching. In fact, many regarded my research into spiritual factors as something other than pure Church Growth, which it was not. A study of the explosion of Christianity in the Global South today will find these spiritual principles at the very essence of these churches. I have a strong suspicion that the glory of the Church Growth Decades was due to the supernatural favor of God over the movement, and that this favor was eventually withdrawn because the leaders failed to hear what the Spirit was saying to the churches for the next season.” (Email to Elmer Towns from C. Peter Wagner, June 16, 2011).

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 4, Iss. 2 [2013], Art. 2 latest book by Wagner.³⁰ When Wagner did not have any new areas to explore, it seemed he ceased being a leader of Church Growth. The movement became like Israel without a clear leader to (1) defend from attacks, (2) articulate the questions that needed to be answered, and (3) point the way to emerging generations.

C. Peter Wagner was the obviously rallying personality of the Church Growth Movement; he had been the controlling influence in Pasadena—the Fuller Factor.³¹

3. *The Church Growth Movement followed evolving methodology and became captured by its methods, not principles.* Technically, Church Growth built on principles, but it was known for different methodologies. As the American church unknowingly shifted its allegiance from one methodology to another, it was slowly turning its loyalty away from Church Growth. Realistically, scholars should have recognized that any movement runs its course, and all tools or methods ultimately lose their steam. Does not an old adage say,

*Methods are many,
Principles are few;
Methods may change,
But principles never do.*

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A principle comes from the Word of God and continues from generation to generation, from one geographical culture to another, and is God's way of reaching people and bringing them to Christ. Basically, methods or tools are defined as the application of God's eternal principles and laws to effective evangelism in a given culture.

It seems that the Church Growth Movement was built on several methodologies. One methodology was strong evangelistic preaching in the pulpit, including the Sunday morning gospel invitation to receive Christ. Sermons ended in a call for people to make a decision for Christ when an invitation was given for people to walk to the front of the church to pray to receive Christ. Door-to-door invitation evangelism was a method that also lost its effectiveness. Another methodology was Sunday school bus ministry that brought thousands to a local

³⁰ Ten plus years of Wagner's books on Church Growth: *Your Church and Church Growth* (Pasadena, CA: Department of Church Growth, Fuller Evangelistic Association, 1976); *Our Kind of People* (Louisville, KY: J. Knox Press, 1979); *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1979); *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel* (Europe: MARC, 1981); *Helping Your Church Grow* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1982); *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1982); *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1983); *Basic Church Growth Research Methods* (Pasadena, CA: Charles E., Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth, 1985); *Church Growth: State of the Art* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1986).

³¹ In 1979 John Vaughan and I identified a school of Church Growth that we labeled the *Fuller Factor*. The influence from the Fuller Factor involved (1) Fuller Theological Seminary and its school of world missions, (2) the Charles E. Fuller Evangelistic Association, the financial source for Church Growth outreach seminars and Church Growth classes conducted by Charles E. Fuller Evangelistic Association, (3) the American Church Growth Institute, with their president, Win Arn, who wrote books, conducted seminars, and was a consultant to many denominations in Church Growth matters.

Towns: *The Rise and Decline of the Church Growth Movement* church. Many feel Sunday school itself was a method, while others would deny that assertion. When applied to time, organizational structure, and curriculum, Sunday school meets the criteria of methodology. A fifth method is the use of cells in homes. Again, some would argue this is a principle because the church met in homes in the New Testament. However, the unique organization of home cells, with the overarching influence of a local church as administrator of the program, seems to make cells into a method.

4. *The seeker church movement hitchhiked on the evangelistic goals of the Church Growth Movement but diverted the movement by the success of its methods.* Bill Hybels, pastor and founder of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, is recognized as the fountainhead, calling his church seeker driven. Rick Warren, pastor and founder of Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest, California, gave the movement more attention while describing his method as seeker sensitive.

Hybels used a research model to plant his church by going door-to-door asking, “Why don’t you attend church?” He organized the answers he received into five self-evident truths of the seeker movement, which are the following: 1) Preaching is boring, so he chose relevant topics that answered the questions of seekers; 2) Churches embarrass visitors by saying, “Stand up and speak up, giving your name,” so he designed a service so seekers could worship in anonymity; 3) Churches beg for money, so he did not take an offering at first (he later took the offering but told visitors not to give); 4) Music was old and out of date, so he used contemporary music, a praise band, and a praise worship ensemble (he especially eliminated the choir, organ, and piano that were identified with traditional church music); 5) People had to “dress up” to attend church, so he arranged for members to attend in casual attire to make the seekers comfortable.

The data pool for his research was an upper-middle class community of upward mobile couples. The methods used by Hybels worked in his community and in other communities of the same culture. However, when pastors of different socio-economic strata attended Hybels’ conferences, they could not implement his methods back home. Some split churches, some stifled churches, and others were fired. Rick Warren loved to wear Hawaiian shirts for preaching, so some visiting pastors went home to wear Hawaiian shirts. This approach did not work because they did not minister in a Southern California culture.³²

³² A humorous event happened the week I wrote this paper. A pastor wearing a Hawaiian shirt told me in Lynchburg, Virginia, that his church had “fired” him because they disagreed with his program of evangelism. I wondered if it were not his “Hawaiian shirt” in a culture of coats and ties. See Elmer Towns, *Putting an End to Worship Wars* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1997).

Rick Warren seemed to distance himself from his Church Growth roots when he said, "Church health is the key to church growth."³³ He wrote the successful book *The Purpose Driven Church*, which was more a description of Saddleback and the way he did ministry. It was not an implementation of the *Healthy Church* movement. A full explanation of his thoughts is found on his web site.³⁴

The success of the *seeker movement* drew attention away from the Church Growth Movement and from principles that can be applied across different cultures and across time. Many seeker churches became contemporary worship churches that ministered to early seeker crowds. At these churches, the pastor did not wear the Hawaiian shirt, but rather he had his shirttail out, wore sneakers, and had spiked hair.

While the contemporary praise worship model is growing and effective in some communities, it cannot be transplanted into an African-American inner city community. It does not adapt to a community that would rather listen to Southern gospel or some upper-class community that worships better with classic music. The book *Hipster Christianity* is critical of the contemporary praise worship movement.³⁵

5. *The church health movement was introduced as a criticism of the Church Growth Movement and tried to take its place.* Technically, its founder, Christian Schwarz, wanted his movement to be called Natural Church Development (NCD). He explained it was based on research from over 1,000 churches in thirty-two countries on five continents. At a meeting of the North American Church Growth Society in the early 90s, Schwarz was asked to provide access to his research, but he avoided the question and never allowed Church Growth leaders to examine his research or data.

Flavil Yeakley, a respected member of the Society, and John Ellas wrote a critique of the NCD in the *Journal of the American Society of Church Growth*, claiming Schwarz was "fatally flawed, pseudo-scientific, and that he did not follow scientific methods."³⁶ To Schwarz's credit, he recognized different models in churches that need to be applied to be effective. He said natural church growth included eight principles, which are the following: 1) Empowering leadership, 2) Gift-oriented ministry, 3) Passionate spirituality, 4) Functional structure, 5)

³³ Ed Stetzer.

³⁴ <http://www.purposedriven.com/en-US/AboutUs/WhatsPD/12+PD+Characteristics.htm>

³⁵ Brett McCracken, *Hipster Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010).

³⁶ John Ellas and Flavil Yeakley, "A Review of Natural Church Development," in *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, volume 9, Spring 1999, 81-90, p 83.

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Inspiring worship service, 6) Holistic small groups, 7) Need-oriented evangelism,
and 8) Loving relationships.³⁷

Ed Stetzer criticizes the NCD because it was blinded to the needs of various cultures, especially lacking a theology of evangelism and Christology.³⁸

While many were not aware of the eight principles of the NCD, or of the movement itself, they adopted the title phrase “healthy church.” Many said they wanted to be a “healthy church,” rather than a soul-winning church, or an evangelistic church, or even a growth-oriented church. True, they included evangelism as one of the lesser objectives, but the dominant passion became church health.

6. *Achieved goals resulted in complacency.* When only a few mega churches were found in America, many pastors worked, sacrificed, and did everything possible to become a mega church. The original standard was 1,000 in attendance, and that goal drove many pastors to “achieve their impossible dream.”

When pastors began to achieve the impossible dream, like Alexander the Great, they sat down and wept because there were no more kingdoms to conquer. When a church sets its passion on reaching a thousand, and does so, what else is there to do when there are no more perceived mountains to climb?

Other pastors realized that achieving the goal of 1,000 involved hard work, discipline, and sacrifices that they were not willing to make. Pastors wanted more free time to write books, or play golf, or do a hundred other pursuits that occupy a pastor’s time.

Also, reaching the mega church goal of 1,000 in attendance could be the fate of the number one watched television programs in America. Over the years, many outstanding television programs have achieved the illusive number one ranking, but they lost it.

Why? The American audience gets bored very quickly. They turn the dial to another channel, and number one begins to slip in ratings until it is dropped from the next fall schedule. Could it be that the pastor and/or church becomes like the “bored“ American audience? Once number one is reached, the pastor and/or church turns attention to other goals.

7. *Perhaps Church Growth has declined because of the Third Generation Syndrome.* After Israel conquered her enemies and occupied the Promised Land, the next generations forgot the Lord and lost all they conquered. “So the people

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³⁷ See W. M. Carroll, *A Theological and Methodological Analysis of Natural Church Development* (Louisville: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999).

³⁸ Ed Stetzer.

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served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who
outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the LORD which He had
done for Israel . . . another generation arose after them who did not know the
LORD, nor the work which He had done for Israel. Then the children of Israel did
evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals; and they forsook the LORD
God of their fathers” (Judg. 2:7, 10, 11).

How could Israel turn to worship the gods of their enemies—the ones they
defeated—after incredible victories? A basic principle about living in victory is,
after you win a battle, keep doing the things that made you victorious, or you will
eventually lose a battle and be conquered by your enemies.

The second and third generations always have trouble remaining true to their
founders’ principles. This is reflected in families, churches, or interdenominational
movements. Richard Niebuhr writes,

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Children born into families of first-generation sect members begin to change
the sect into a church even before they reach adulthood. With their coming, the
sect must become an educational and disciplinary institution in order to make
the new generation conform to its ideas and customs. The second generation
holds its convictions less fervently than pioneers of the sects, whose
convictions were formed in the heat of conflict and sometimes at the threat of
martyrdom. With each succeeding generation, isolation from the world
becomes more difficult.³⁹

Many churches worked hard to reach lost people. As a result, they began to
grow because of many effective methods. They grew spiritually in answer to prayer,
they grew numerically as souls were won to Christ and baptized into their
community, and they grew financially as new members began to tithe and sacrifice.
They also built new buildings, new auditoriums, and began other ministries, such
as Christian schools, counseling centers, television outreach, and all other
programs they thought they needed to maintain a huge church.

Something corroded the “dream” of the mega church, though. Some pastors
began thinking smaller is better; others began thinking their evangelistic methods
were out of date. Other pastors visited the conference of the latest “hot” church
leader and adopted methods and ministries that were not only different from what
they had been doing, but they also diverted their energies and spiritual attention of
the original pioneers that made the church big. Worse yet, they adapted a method
that worked in the neighborhood or culture of the “hot” church but that was
inapplicable to the pastor’s home turf.

³⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press, 1954), 19–21.

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8. *Church Growth began to decline when anointed methods lost their spiritual anointing.* Obviously, God does not anoint a method. He anoints people who apply faith, dedication, and sacrifice to grow a church. Technically, a method is the application of an eternal principle to culture. When culture (the church's neighborhood) changes, however, past methods are no longer effective. As was said before, all methods eventually "play out" and lose their effectiveness. In this case, methods lose their anointing. Therefore, this is a "spiritual" observation why the Church Growth Movement declined.

Church Growth declined when its leaders forgot the nature of their enemy and who it was they were trying to defeat. The church in general, and every church in specific, has an enemy personified in Satan who "walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Satan uses his tools, "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:15), to defeat the church.

When the Gospel was preached, the primary motive was never to build a huge church for the sake of numbers; however, it was to rescue people from sin by the power of the Gospel. Church Growth was built on the power of transforming lives. People who were saved repented from sin and left their evil ways. It was not just a negative turn from sin; it was also a commitment to holiness and godliness. People involved themselves in a growing church because it was there they were nurtured, and it was there they helped reach other people and bring them to Jesus Christ. Battles go well when the enemy is identified, known, and a commitment is made for complete victory. When the Church Growth Movement lost its evangelistic heart of rescuing people from sin, it lost its edge and its place in the loyalty of church leaders.

9. *New methods that do not match the culture of the church were applied.* When the new "next method" does not bring results as the original method did, attendance begins to decline, and people's confidence begins to wane, causing leadership to begin to question its decisions. When a church does not march forth in confidence, it loses its members because of missteps and lack of confidence.

continuing influence of the church growth movement

Just as the Greeks left an indelible influence on the Roman world, even though they were conquered by the Romans, so the Church Growth Movement will leave an indelible influence on the church of Jesus Christ, even though it no longer enjoys the "limelight" of popularity. It may be gone and forgotten, but some positive things will continue to influence God's church. The lessons learned from Church Growth will last because of the discovery and implementation of growth

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principles during the height of the Church Growth Movement. What should we
remember about the Church Growth Movement?

1. *We should have a recessive memory of the church's golden days of victories. Many were won to Christ, and successful evangelism, revival, and an influence on culture occurred.* Many will remember some of the great churches built during the Church Growth decades. Even though principles that built those churches may be forgotten, and may even be ignored by future evangelists, the accomplishments of these twenty years cannot be ignored. These positive memories will encourage faith within individuals, motivate future workers to excellence, and remind believers that the great work of God in the past can be done again in their future. No one can deny that average pastors built great churches, against insurmountable barriers, with limited resources, in difficult circumstances. Yes, the God of the Bible interjected history with His power to do supernatural works.

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2. *Church Growth used the principles of scientific exploration to discover valid rules, by which churches are planted, grow, flourish, and die.* The use of science did not deny biblical principles. Just the opposite, Church Growth leaders used scientific inquiry into Scripture to discover or apply the principles by which churches grow. They then examined culture (anthropology), people (psychology), institutions (sociology), and history to see how churches grew. They never tried to compromise scriptural principles with cultural principles, but the Bible always trumped culture.

Yes, Church Growth is about numbers, but remember the greater truth—Church Growth discovered and applied the principles of evangelism, winning souls to Christ, and planting churches.

Previous to the Church Growth Movement, many large churches were built. Across the South were many Southern Baptist pastors who prayed to reach their community, applied the Word of God to their preaching, and as a result, grew some great but isolated churches. However, most of these leaders who built these churches took the lessons of growth to the grave with them. A few became professors in theological seminaries, but even there they did not apply their laws of growth to culture. Most felt any student could grow a church the way they grew a church. They were probably ignorant of cultural implications. Perhaps that is why most Southern Baptist church planters of the past tried to build the same kind of church every place they went. As a result, the principles they taught might have built the large First Baptist Church of Waycross, Georgia, but the same principles did not work in midtown Manhattan, or the Common of Boston, or along Laguna Beach in Southern California. Also, the principles that might have worked in one church in Waycross, Georgia, would not work in the heart of Africa, or in

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A brief look at the scientific principle of discovery will suggest how Church Growth discovered the principles of the laws of growth.

1. Gather data (the researcher must gather any and all data as to why churches are growing, multiplying, and/or dying. They gathered data from the Bible as well as from culture.)
2. Analyze data thoroughly (not just the gathering of facts, but meaningful facts must be compared. When situations are similar, insights must be drawn. Even then, the insights must be analyzed for principles of growth.)
3. Research must construct a hypothesis—a proposed law of why growth occurs. Hypothesis originally meant *hypo* = proposed and *thesis* = unproven law or thesis. Technically, a thesis is a conclusion that a researcher wants to verify or establish.
4. All hypotheses must be tested to find their truthfulness, workability, and veracity.
5. Based on successful testing, a law is established and verified. NOTE: We cannot prove that these laws are workable; we can only demonstrate their reliability when applied in certain controlled circumstances.

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3. *The Church Growth Movement allowed rugged individuals to do great works for God by applying faith to the culture they faced, producing powerful results for God.* Church Growth produced a few giants of the faith who defied tradition, believed God's Word, and understood the conditions by which they ministered. By tenacity, discipline, and trust in God, they built huge churches, constructed Christian organizations, and demonstrated that a big God still did His work in a big way.

The world will not remember the Church Growth researchers who established the laws, wrote to explain biblical and cultural principles of growing churches, and whose principles became a demonstration of the effectiveness of their faith. The world will remember best those who applied Church Growth laws and built great churches. In the same way, the world does not remember the scientists and engineers who built the long-range WWII bomber (the B-29). However, many remember the Enola Gay flown by Paul Tibbets and the long trip from Tinian Island to bomb Hiroshima, ending WWII.

The world will remember Jerry Falwell who built one of the largest Sunday schools at Thomas Road Baptist Church in small Lynchburg, Virginia, a town of 62,000 people. The world will remember Bill Hybels who used seeker-driven

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 4, Iss. 2 [2013], Art. 2 principles to build Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, to over 26,000 worshippers. Also, the world will remember Rick Warren who applied the seeker-sensitive principles to build Saddleback Church in Southern California.

The Church Growth age left an example of exponentialism and demonstration of God's greatness and power. Perhaps it is because those in that age learned that God runs the world on His laws (including Church Growth laws), and God has promised to honor the right application of those laws. Perhaps their knowledge of Church Growth laws allowed them to do things bigger and better, and obviously, they did great things for the glory of God.

During the Church Growth age, Dr. Paul David Yonggi Cho built the largest church since Pentecost, consisting of approximately 750,000 worshippers each week.⁴⁰ This huge congregation is measured both by its weekly cell groups in homes, laundry rooms, recreation rooms, and restaurants throughout the city of Seoul, Korea, and also is represented by those who attended Sunday worship at the main sanctuary on Yoido Island in Seoul, Korea.

Dr. Bill Bright began and built Campus Crusade for Christ International,⁴¹ one of the largest Christian organizations in the world. Bright founded this organization with the purpose of evangelizing the college and university campuses of the world. Campus Crusade promotes evangelism and discipleship in over 190 countries around the world, has 25,000 fulltime missionary workers, and is run by 225,000 volunteers around the world.

Billy Graham began an evangelistic crusade holding some of the largest single gatherings of people in the history of mankind. These meetings were held in state and national capitols around the world. Perhaps his greatest meeting was when he preached to over 1 million people in Seoul, Korea, in 1973.⁴²

Paul Crouch decided that he could evangelize the world through television by setting up a television ministry in Southern California called the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), which is viewed globally on 70 satellites and over 18,000 TV and cable affiliates. TBN is also seen on the internet globally, is carried on over 287 television stations in the U.S., and on thousands of other cable television and satellite systems around the world in over 75 countries, where their programming is translated into over eleven languages.⁴³

⁴⁰ "David Yonggi Cho," *Wikipedia*, available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Yonggi_Cho#cite_ref-economist_0-1 (accessed May 17, 2011).

⁴¹ Campus Crusade for Christ International, available from <http://www.ccci.org/about-us/index.htm> (accessed May 17, 2011).

⁴² "Korea '73 Billy Graham Crusade," *Far-Outliers*, from *Born Again: Evangelicalism in Korea*, by Timothy S. Lee (U. Hawaii Press, 2010), 94–95, available from <http://faroutliers.blogspot.com/2010/01/korea-billy-graham-crusade.html> (accessed May 17, 2011).

⁴³ "Paul Crouch," *Wikipedia*, available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Crouch (accessed May 17, 2011).

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D. James Kennedy founded Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in 1959 and built it to become the largest Presbyterian church in the United States. From that base he went on to establish Coral Ridge Ministries, Knox Theological Seminary, and Westminster Academy, K-12. Most importantly he established Evangelism Explosion International, a program that instructs the soul winner who is sharing his faith to lead with the question, “If God were to ask you, ‘What right do you have to enter My heaven?’—What would you say?” In answering, Kennedy fully explained that not only must your sins be forgiven, a minus process, but you must have the righteousness of Jesus Christ, a positive addition of salvation. Evangelism Explosion is now used in every nation and territory, and the leaders claim it is in more languages than any other Christian outreach program.⁴⁴

In addition to the above named spiritual giants, every pastor who determines “to capture his Jerusalem for Christ” by building a mega church, displays spiritual exponentialism and demonstrates that God’s power is still available.

4. *Church Growth Movement focused on the primacy of the local church.* It has always been easy to criticize local churches and find their weakness, if not find their “sins.” That is because we have this “treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7). The “vessel” in this passage may be a reference to humans; it also includes a community of humans—the local church.

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Before the age of Church Growth, many books had not been written on the primacy of the church, the effectiveness of the church, or even the necessity of loyalty to one’s local church. True, an emphasis was probably given on one’s personal church as an expression of one’s personal discipleship to Jesus Christ. Most emphasis on the church was an individual’s obligation to God, whether in personal godliness or personal soul winning.

However, the Church Growth Movement focused attention on organizing churches to fulfill evangelistic outreach. Readers of Church Growth material began to see how other churches were being used of God to reach their “Jerusalem” with the Gospel. In early American Church Growth, Sunday school bus ministries became a contributing method of building churches. As information about Sunday school bus ministry was circulated through books, articles, radio, and television, many other laymen got the vision of how they could serve God in the bus ministry. It did not take years of training, vast Bible knowledge, or even mature Christian character. Laymen surrendered to be used of God to bring children to the house of God where others could teach them the Word of God.

⁴⁴ “D. James Kennedy, Ph.D.,” *Coral Ridge Ministries*, available from <http://www.coralridge.org/partnercentral/about-djk.aspx> (accessed May 17, 2011).

The same could also be said about the cell movement among local churches.

Laymen were used as hosts and hostesses, discussion leaders, and many other roles to carry out the work of God. Therefore, one of the by-products of the Church Growth Movement is the unleashing of laymen to work in various capacities throughout the local church ministry.

5. *The Church Growth Movement placed emphasis on pastoral leadership.* The leadership guru John Maxwell began teaching concepts of leadership, breaking leadership down into laws.⁴⁵ As a pastor of the growing Skyline Church in Lemon Grove, California, John not only studied the laws of leadership, but he also implemented them successfully to build a church with over 4,000 in attendance. Then he parleyed his skills into INJOY!⁴⁶ and held seminars across the country, teaching pastors leadership skills. As a result, they could lead their church to growth, health, outreach, and to the nurture of individual believers.

178 Prior to the Church Growth Movement, it seems that lay people mostly served God through church committees and small supervisory roles throughout the Sunday school. At the same time, the role of the pastor was focused on ministry by preaching, teaching, visiting the sick, counseling, and conducting funerals and weddings, etc. However, Church Growth began to reverse that strategy by putting lay people in ministry and giving church leadership to pastors. Many feel that this perhaps was God's original priority according to Ephesians 4:8–16.

6. *The Church Growth Movement recognized the power of the homogeneous unit as a component of the total church—the heterogeneous body.* The church is pictured as a physical body (Eph. 1:22, 23; 4:12–16) made up of many cells. Very few throughout church history understood how cells of the body functioned or multiplied.

When Donald McGavran first described churches as being homogeneous units, some called him racist because it seemed to imply to them that “Birds of a feather, flock together.” People thought he was saying black churches ought to be black churches, and white churches ought to be white churches. The homogeneous unit then becomes the standard or norm for all churches. Technically, the Church Growth Movement never said the homogeneous unit was the standard to achievement; it was simply following a scientific principle of *describing* the practice of ethnical groups, not *prescribing* it as norm.

The homogeneous unit could be described as affinity groups or cells within a celebration. Technically, the homogenous unit could be described as, “Everyone in

⁴⁵ John Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, 2nd edition (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

⁴⁶ “INJOY,” available from <http://www.injoy.com/about/history/> (accessed May 17, 2011).

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a single-cell church knows everyone; everyone relates to everyone, everyone accepts everyone before anyone will do anything.”⁴⁷

I have described a homogeneous unit as 87 people standing in a church auditorium, in a large circle, facing one another. Then threads are stretched from every person to every other person in the room, so that each person has 87 pieces of thread in his hand. If anyone pulls on any thread, at any time, it links him to another in the room. That does not mean that he agrees with the other person on everything, nor does it mean they are exactly alike. It does mean they are linked homogeneously in a cell.

Rather than isolating races or groups of people, Church Growth influence has focused on the necessity of the church becoming a *heterogeneous body made up of homogenous cells*. That means as a church grows beyond a single-cell church to become a multi-cell church, it is essentially a middle-sized church with several cells. Hence, a growing church allows for diversity in a local congregation. Then as the multi-cell church continues to grow, it becomes a multi-congregational church with a multitude of cells. Each cell is different from one another, but it is usually linked by the overriding purpose of the larger church.

What does this mean? Churches have become more diverse racially, more diverse in class differences, more diverse in occupations, and more diverse in styles of life.

*7. The application of the homogeneous unit principles was that churches became less restrictive to race, class, and ethnic background, and more inclusive in its outreach and ministry.*⁴⁸

The Church Growth Movement placed emphasis on numbers and growing larger, but unseen results were unintended—yet biblical—consequences. For example, churches began to resemble the Great Commission in color, language, and ethnic makeup. They became large heterogeneous bodies made up of smaller homogeneous cells. While the house church usually resembled one kind of people, a multi-congregational church was made of many homogeneous cells, all worshipping as one heterogeneous body.

why not a million?

The work of God is exciting because it is not about our desires; it is about pleasing the One who commanded us to “go into all the world and make disciples of all

⁴⁷ Towns, gen. ed. *A Practical Encyclopedia: Evangelism and Church Growth*, 44.

⁴⁸ The average American church has 87 people and is a homogeneous unit made up of people who are like one another. As a result, approximately 89 percent of all American churches are a single-cell church, made up of less than 100 people. They tend to be exclusive of diversity and inclusiveness.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 4, Iss. 2 [2013], Art. 2 ethnic groups” (Matt. 28:19). The work of God is never boring. It is refreshingly challenging because Jesus promised, “You shall do greater works than I do, because I go to the Father” (John 14:12, *ELT*).

The golden age of Church Growth was both exciting and refreshingly challenging, because we were doing something not done before. We were thinking outside the box by applying the laws we discovered in the box—in God’s Word and in His world.

We dared to think of a church running 10,000 in attendance, then we dream of 100,000 in attendance, and ultimately a congregation of 750,000 believers. We dared to dream of mega churches reaching mega world-class cities within the 10/40 window.

We were not just thinking of numbers alone; we dared to think of a church of contemporary people, reaching contemporary people right in our own neighborhood. We dared to think of a church where we could express our unique spiritual gifts in our own spiritual community. We dared to think of our transformation into the image of Christ.

Now let’s keep the dreams of Church Growth alive. Since one church reached 750,000, why not dream of a church of one million people who saturate their city for Christ? Why not dream of using the internet to reach, win, and bond people to Jesus Christ who are half a world away? Why not dream of many churches touching over a million people each? Why not dream of connecting to them through an iPad or cell phone?

When we read of millions upon millions of worshippers surrounding the throne in heaven, all worshipping God, why can’t a church on earth be a prequel to heaven?

And the 144,000 sang a new song with these words:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and break its seals and open it.

For you were slaughtered, and your blood has ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation.

And you have caused them to become
a Kingdom of priests for our God.

And they will reign on the earth.”

Then I looked again, and I heard the voices of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and of the living beings and the elders.

And they sang in a mighty chorus:

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered—
to receive power and riches

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and wisdom and strength

and honor and glory and blessing.”

And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They sang:

“Blessing and honor and glory and power
belong to the one sitting on the throne
and to the Lamb forever and ever” (Rev. 5:9–13, *NLT*).

Dr. Elmer Towns is a college and seminary professor, an author of popular and scholarly works, a popular seminar lecturer, and dedicated worker in Sunday school. He has published over 175 books listed in the Library of Congress with 8 listed in the Christian Booksellers Best Selling List.

He is co-founder of Liberty University with Jerry Falwell in 1971, and today Liberty University has over 14,000 students on campus and 90,000 in the online program. He is the Vice President of Liberty University and Dean of the School of Religion, and Dean of Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary. He is still an active teacher in the classroom.

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