

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth

Volume 6
Issue 1 *Church Growth at the End of the
Twentieth Century*

Article 12

10-1-1995

Church Growth-- “Quo Wadis - whither goest thou”

Elmer L. Towns
Liberty University, eltowns@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/jascg>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Towns, E. L. (1995). Church Growth-- “Quo Wadis - whither goest thou”. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 6(1), 121-134. Retrieved from <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/jascg/vol6/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by APU Digital Archives. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* by an authorized editor of APU Digital Archives. For more information, please contact mpacino@apu.edu.

Church Growth-- "Quo Wadis - whither goest thou"

Elmer L. Towns

I have been an observer of Church Growth ever since I graduated from seminary and began my professional ministry. In August 1958 I received the M.A. degree from Southern Methodist University and the Th.M. degree from Dallas Theological Seminary and began teaching Christian Education at Midwest Bible College, St. Louis, Missouri. I brought to my Christian Education classes a new enthusiasm for the local church evangelism that was not previously seen among the Bible churches which were the clientele of Midwest Bible College. I had received a Southern Baptist orientation to Christian Education at the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas and in other Baptist churches where I had served my Christian service assignments for Dallas Theological Seminary.

In October of 1958 I was invited to hold a Saturday seminar at First Baptist Church, Pittsfield, IL to teach my Sunday School enthusiasm that I had instilled in my classes at Midwest Bible College. The first class I taught was called "The laws of Sunday School growth," which grew out of the writings of A. V. Washburn, president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School board, 1957-1978, and the "Flake Formula," the orientation for church growth that came from Arthur T. Flake, President of the Southern Baptist Sunday School board, 1920-1936. Since Church Growth is a discipline that determines the principles by which churches grow, the principles of growth that I taught this church gave it strategy and purpose in outreach.

First Baptist Church in Pittsfield grew from approximately eighty in Sunday School to over three hundred in the next three

years. I went back to the church every six months for an additional Sunday School seminar, but I recognized the church's growth did not come from just the Sunday School growth techniques, the evangelistic fervor of Pastor Wesley Hunt was a necessary contributing factor to growth.

Obviously, Dr. Donald McGavran is father of the modern Church Growth Movement. The philosophized strategy of Church Growth that forms the core of the Movement was formulated by McGavran and his colleagues at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, specifically C. Peter Wagner and others.

History Of Church Growth Development

McGavran originally served with the United Christian Missionary Society (Disciples of Christ) in India from 1923-1955. A significantly new era unfolded for Dr. McGavran from 1934-1935 through the influence of Bishop J. Waskom Pickett, a Methodist observer of "people movements" in India. Donald H. Gill gives this commentary in an article "Apostle of Church Growth. "

This (observation of growth) led McGavran to further research which indicated many of the reasons why the church in 136 districts had grown by 11 percent in 10 years while in 11 other districts it had grown by some 200 percent in the same period.¹

Prior to his experience with Bishop Pickett, McGavran considered the individualistic "one-by-one" approach to evangelism as the most biblically based and pragmatically fruitful. He had heard of large groups of "peoples" claiming to have undergone Christian conversion and baptism but viewed them as suspect. In fact, his term for this was "half-baked mission work"!

In an interview with John K. Branner for *Evangelical Mission Quarterly*, he confides:

In 1934-35 I began to see that what we had heard was quite wrong. What we had deemed "unsound, half-baked work" was really one great way in which the church was growing quite effectively. God was blessing that way of growth. They were becoming better churches than ours. It was heresy to say that in 1935.²

Resigning his position as executive secretary in 1937, he

spent three years as a researcher in Chattisgarh and served as principal of mission schools as well as superintendent of the leprosy home and hospital. According to Donald Hill, another cornerstone event occurred in 1953 when McGavran and his wife agreed that she would manage the mission while he absented himself for a month to a retreat site about twenty-five miles away to compile research notes and write a book, *The Bridges of God*. Furlough time, scheduled to begin in 1954, allowed him to share his manuscript with Sir Kenneth Grubb in London. As a result, World Dominion Press published both this book and *How Churches Grow* (1959).

The history of how McGavran left the field, went to Oregon and then to Pasadena is well-known among Church Growth devotees. It might be quickly noted, that not everyone quickly jumped on the "Church Growth bandwagon." Even Dr. McGavran had difficulty getting his ideas across. "In 1959, a profound discouragement seized me, and I was on the point of quitting . . . What I had to say had not caught fire . . . and my efforts seemed futile."³

The Core Of Church Growth

The first to suggest the core of Dr. McGavran's Church Growth philosophy was J. Robertson McQuilkin, President of Columbia Bible College who reduced the concepts of church growth into five areas: (1) numerical growth, (2) focus on receptivity, (3) people movements, (4) use of science as a tool, and (5) right method guarantees large response. In Robertson's book *Measuring the Church Growth Movement* each of the five principle categories are classified as either (1) biblical mandate, (2) biblical principle, or (3) extrabiblical. McQuilkin, speaking as a "friendly outsider" concludes, "The Church Growth Movement would be changed completely in character if any of the five basic presuppositions were omitted."⁴

As I observe the Church Growth Movement over 20 years later, I have the advantage of a backward look that includes more data, hence I agree with most of McQuilkin's interpretation of the core, but have sophisticated it somewhat.

<u>The Philosophic Strategy of Church Growth's Core:</u>
--

1. The homogeneous principle
2. The people movement
3. Focus on receptivity
4. Use of the scientific methodology to establish principles and methods.

The following outline reveals what I believe to be the three major areas of research in Church Growth and the three areas that must be separated in one's thinking to properly understand Church Growth.

1. 1950 and 60's Development of Philosophic Strategy
2. 1970's Development of Church Growth Principles
3. 1980's Development of Methods

The Philosophic Strategy of Church Growth is the pre-suppositions or self-evident truths of the movement. Everything in Church Growth flows from this core. The next circle contains the principles by which ministry is done. These principles are eternal, which means they do not change from culture to culture, nor do they change with time. The third circle involves methods and they change with time and they change from culture to culture. A method is the application of a principle to culture.

A History of our Pilgrimage

It seems to me that the original writings about Church Growth were in the area of core concepts and/or its philosophical foundations. I assume that these core concepts were first identified by Robertson McQuilkin as he studied the writings of McGavran. This philosophic strategy became the indisputable foundation for what we believe. These writings took place in the 1950's and 60's.

Next it seems that church growth authorities began to write in the area of principles, i.e. in the 1970's. I define these principles as eternal and/or unchangeable laws. These principles are different from philosophy, in that they grow out of philosophy and are the extension of Church Growth philosophy to reflect its operational nature. Like rays of sun extend from the sun, so

principles reflect Church Growth philosophy. Church Growth principles do not stand alone. I place the following books by C. Peter Wagner in the area of principles: *Your Church Can Grow: 7 Vital Signs of a Health Church* (Regal, 1976), *Your Church Can Be Healthy* (Abingdon, 1979), *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow* (Regal, 1979), *Our Kind of People: The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth in America* (John Knox, 1979) [this book may belong to the philosophical foundation for it is perhaps the best definitive description of the homogeneous principles]. Books by McGavran and by Win Arn that fall in the principle categories are *How to Grow a Church* (Regal, 1973) and *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (Harper and Row, 1977). Dean M. Kelley, wrote *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (Harper and Row, 1972). This book identified conservative churches but really talked about the death of liberal churches. At the same time I wrote *Is the Day of the Denomination Dead?* (Thomas Nelson, 1973), which was really an analysis of why conservative churches are growing. C. Peter Wagner used this as an early text in his church growth course. The book that I feel originally contributed to our knowledge of principles of Church Growth was the *10 Largest Sunday Schools* (Baker Book House, 1969) [C. Peter Wagner calls this the first book on the mega-church and the first scientific approach of Church Growth applied to the American church scene because from data of 10 churches were drawn principles to grow a church]. Another book that should fall in this category is *The Complete Book of Church Growth* I wrote with John N. Vaughan and David J. Seifert (Tyndale House, 1981). This includes a strong case study approach to Church Growth attempting to examine the various paradigms of Church Growth/worship styles. Flavil Yeakley published his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Illinois, 1976 in the area of Speech Communications, "Three Views of Communication and the Relation of These views to Practice, Perception, and Results in Religious Communication." Technically, this was not a Church Growth dissertation, but the principles that were identified and verified by Yeakley became foundational in our understanding of how churches grow in the area of motivation, communication, drop-outs, and bonding. This dissertation has never been published in a popular format that has adequately been communicated to Christian leadership, although its findings are generally understood and accepted.

I am sure I have left out some books that made a contribution to the understanding of principles. However, it seems that after 1980, there were few new significant books on Church Growth principles. Most new books were re-interpreting Church Growth philosophy and principles for denominations and they were published in denominational publishing houses, or other sources, i.e. within the new Church Growth organizations that came into existence in the 1980's.

After 1980 I see the movement of Church Growth entering a third realm, i.e. into the area of application and methods. A method is simply defined as the application of principle to culture. Since Church Growth deals with cross-cultural evangelism, therefore the understanding of the place of methods became paramount to understand the Church Growth Movement. In the 80's leaders began dealing with Church Growth methods, applying them to every area so churches would grow.

When I look into the area of methods, I would like to divide them into spiritual factors and natural factors that contribute to growing churches. While making this designation, I want to immediately add that all spiritual factors are tied to natural expressions, such as management, organization, and administration; and natural factors of church growth lose their validity when they are detached from the spiritual factors.

Controversy Around Church Growth

Some of the controversy surrounding Church Growth stems from the apparent detachment of the spiritual from the natural factors, and *vice versa*. However, the validity and the growth of these factors, which I call methods, is seen when they are examined in light of the definition of Church Growth. The standard definition of church growth is:

Church Growth is the science which investigates the planting, multiplication, function and health of Christian churches as they relate specifically to the effective implementation of God's commission to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19-20). Church Growth strives to combine the eternal theological principles of God's Word concerning the expansion of the church with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences, employing as its initial frame of reference, the foundational work done by Donald McGavran.

In explaining the nature of Church Growth, I use the following three points to help people understand Church Growth. The first which is the most obvious, also creates the largest basis for false expectations, hence the source of much criticism against Church Growth.

1. *Church growth is numerical increase.* The very nature of church growth is to carry out the Great Commission and contribute to the growth of churches, i.e. whether local churches or denominations, or the total body of Christ in an area, such as the Christian Church within India. Obviously growth in this area involves expansion in attendance, membership, baptisms, income, enrollment, and are observable, measurable, and repeatable phenomena.

2. *Church growth is church planting.* The very heart of Donald McGavran was reaching across linguistic, ethnic, and class barriers to bring people to Jesus Christ. We who have attended the American Society for Church Growth heard him repeatedly say in the early days at our annual banquet, "mathetesata panta ta ethne," which is, "Make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). Donald McGavran taught us that the best way to make disciples of every ethnic group was, and is, to plant churches in that group so the church can reach lost people for Jesus Christ. Hence, church planting became the natural expression of cross-cultural evangelism, church planting resulted in a homogeneous unit that nurtured people in Jesus Christ, and church planting worked through the "People Movement" motivation by bringing people to Jesus Christ. All of us remember his oft repeated statement, "People like to receive Christ without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers".

3. *Church growth as a science.* I feel that the greatest contribution of Church Growth to modern day evangelism is not just principles that we communicate for evangelism, nor is it the multitudes of methods that we have uncovered. Rather, the greatest contribution of church growth, is that we have established a scientific basis for determining the biblical principles and how they are best applied to reach the various people groups of the world. Notice, I didn't say we have made these principles or even formulated these principles, we have used the scientific method to discover the biblical principles that were in the Bible from the very beginning. C. Peter Wagner, in *Church Growth: More Than A Man, A Magazine, A School, A Book* lists six elements as the irre-

ducible minimum of the movement. He says, "Social and behavioral sciences are valid tools in measuring and encouraging church growth."⁵ Later in an abbreviated version, McGavran also noted this mandate "Apply the sciences as tools to help win the millions without Christ."⁶

The use of science as a tool to help establish principles and determine valid methods of evangelism has also brought Church Growth under attack. Some of our critics have said we are based on the social sciences not in the Word of God. However, I disagree with their observations. The very nature of the scientific method, if it will be objective and consider all data, including the biblical data from the Word of God; will arrive at conclusions that are in harmony with the Word of God. Remember, the scientific method is usually perceived as five steps, i.e. (1) beginning with a problem, (2) gather data to solve the problem, (3) construct a hypothesis (a potential solution to the problem), and (4) test the suggested hypothesis, with a view to, (5) establishing a principle.

Since I am a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, I go back to Lewis Sperry Chafer, its founder and first President for my definition of Systematic Theology. In his eight volumes of theology, Chafer defines, "Systematic Theology is a collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting and defending of all facts from any and every source concerning God and His works."⁷ Notice in this definition of Systematic Theology that the principles of theology are drawn from every source, AND the principles of Church Growth are also drawn from any and all sources. Obviously, "any and all" refer to the behavioral sciences such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, geography, as well as biblical revelation. This means arriving at conclusions after examining data from Natural Revelation and Special Revelation. However, since truth is that which is consistent with itself, then any truth that is established with Systematic Theology OR Church Growth must be consistent with both the Word of God and truth found in the natural world.

Because of this, in my thinking Church Growth falls under the area of practical theology, as does Christian education, homiletics, evangelism and church organization. I do not see Church Growth as an independent discipline; if you please, an orphan, without a home, without parents, without support or defenseless. Church Growth and its sister discipline evangelism, go

hand in hand.

All of us have heard Donald McGavran tell how he arrived at the term Church Growth for this discipline. As McGavran observed the efforts of evangelism in India, he was displeased with the baggage that had been piled on evangelism, causing many people to misunderstand the nature of evangelism. People had made evangelism a church membership class, baptism of children or adults, or even becoming westernized before they became Christianized. McGavran's logic followed this sequence. First, we win a man to Christ, second, we baptize him, third, he becomes a member of the church, and fourth the church grows. Then McGavran said why don't we make the "output" term the descriptive term, i.e. call it Church Growth. Since the purpose of evangelism resulted in church growth, McGavran reasoned that we could correctly create a new title, i.e. "Church Growth." The term is a synonym of evangelism, but like most synonyms, does not mean the exact thing.

Now, do we see a reversal of the term and a return to the fifties? When several of my colleagues and I put together an encyclopedia of Church Growth, we realized we could not prepare an encyclopedia in one area and exclude the other. Therefore, we had to include professors of both evangelism and Church Growth on the Executive Editorial Committee. Then, when it came to the selection of a title, it was called *Evangelism and Church Growth: A Practical Encyclopedia*, (Ventura: Regal Books), 1996. Note the return to the 50's, the term Evangelism comes before Church Growth. Also, most of the new Church Growth institutes that are being founded in conjunction with Southern Baptist seminaries are following the same format in titles. They are putting the title evangelism before the term Church Growth. Will we as a movement leave our name Church Growth and go back to the title evangelism? What's in a name? Since a name reflects the uniqueness of a position, I think we ought to recommit ourselves to helping churches grow, recommit ourselves to the scientific principles by which we determine principles of church growth, and recommit ourselves to our discipline. Instead of abandoning the name because of its critics, let us make the name meaningful to us and let us communicate a correct understanding of Church Growth to our clientele. We are married to both Church Growth and evangelism and that bond should not be broken.

To go back to evangelism without church growth, might mean that we are disavowing our foundation of scientific research, or we might only return to evangelism as “spiritual factors” without a solid foundation of “natural factors.” I remember in one of McGavran’s addresses where he referred to “voodoo evangelism” as that which appealed to the “spirit of evangelism” without principles, without methods, without foundation, and without verifiable, repeatable, observable methodology. This is not to criticize any outreach to the unsaved that is not grounded in solid methodology (we are for any and all evangelism that brings people to Christ) but in purpose, evangelism and Church Growth must always be bonded together.

Pulling At The Edges

Where is church growth today? I do not see us doing original research in the core which are the philosophical strategies of Church Growth. Those areas seem to be complete, not in the sense that Scriptures are finalized; but they are finalized in the sense that; (1) there seems to be a common agreement on the foundation, (2) there seems to be an understanding of what should be included, (3) and there appears to be little research to expand, take away, or alter the basic core. Second, when we come to the basic principles of church growth there seems to be a general consensus to the identification of most principles and how we understand them. But still, researchers are attempting to expand the boundaries, especially when they get new insight into the area into which they are doing research. However, if we understand principles are eternal and unchangeable, then the principles of Church Growth are established by God in Scripture, and we only add to them as we discover them, classify them and give them a name. I feel there will be more research into methods in the future than have been previously researched. This is the “cutting edge” area of research in Church Growth and this is the area where we are continuing to push out the boundaries.

Natural Factors Methods

In the *Natural Factors* I would like to make a few observations about certain understandings that have been added to Church Growth, whether or not all people agree that these methods in fact are Church Growth related.

First, the area of marketing and user-friendly churches has

been criticized by some, the critics thinking this is the entire area of Church Growth. The critics are wrong, both in their warped perception of what marketing claims, and in their partial understanding of the nature of Church Growth. One observer claimed, "Church growth is applying marketing methods to the Great Commission." Marketing is not the core nor the principles of Church Growth, it is a method in its application to outreach and growth.

Second, some would make leadership and/or leadership training the heart and core of the Church Growth Movement. They make leadership everything, and in fact some would make it synonymous with Church Growth. In one sense, leadership influences all that we do from the very core of Church Growth, out to its farthest method. However, leadership training, leadership development, and the understanding of leadership is a modern day method that must be added to the Church Growth curriculum to develop people who in turn will carry out the Great Commission.

The third area in *Natural Factors* involves the seeker services, some would equate this as the ultimate expressions of Church Growth. While seeker services, (both seeker driven and seeker friendly) will apply the principles of Church Growth, they are not the single expression of growing churches, nor are they the best representation of Church Growth; they are simply one method to win people to Christ, and in many places; a very effective method. Just as there are strengths in every weakness, and weakness in all strength; so the strength of seeker services is bringing the lost to Jesus Christ; also there are some implied weaknesses, such as lack of emphasis on Bible preaching, worship, etc.

Spiritual Factors/Methods

On the other side of the illustration are the Spiritual Factors that lead to Church Growth. To listen to certain advocates of these applications of modern day Church Growth methodology, one might conclude that these are the most imperative, and sometimes the only factor of Church Growth. But as in all things, every method must be considered in light of the total work of Church Growth; and every method must be evaluated in light of its strengths and weaknesses.

First, spiritual warfare is advocated by some as a necessary

principle for all to follow in Church Growth. The same might be said for identificational repentance, power evangelism, mapping and removal of territorial spirits before evangelism can take place in an area. I see research into spiritual warfare that is helping to determine principles of application. Whether one agrees with what is happening in spiritual warfare, it is a movement that is applying scientific research to itself with a view of better ministry. Therefore, it is an illustration of Church Growth as a science. The scientific method is being applied to these areas to determine principles whereby Christians can do both ground level and strategic level warfare, and demonstrate power evangelism for Church Growth.

When it comes to the area of prayer walking, prayer journeys and prayer expeditions, the vital contribution of Church Growth is in establishing principles whereby prayer can be more effective than we have known. As an illustration, Sadaam Hussein sent SCUD missiles at Israel with no particular target in mind, only to terrorize Israelites during Desert Storm operations. This is likened unto the way some Christians pray, i.e. in a generalized fashion, but not following specific principles for the most effective results. The new prayer movement is compared to those dropping laser bombs that could be guided straight into the smokestack of an opponent's industrial plant. And so the Church Growth Movement has provided a foundation of scientific research to determine specific types of prayer in specific places, following specific principles that lead to specific results.

I place Promise Keepers in the area of methods for one reason. Christians have always been called to commitment and the exercise of the will in obedience to Jesus Christ. But Promise Keepers have applied specific commitments of the will, to specific needs in American men at a specific time. Hence, the success of determining spiritual principles of evangelism and Church Growth are applied to the men of America.

I have just concluded research into the various ways of fasting, each fast has an unique purpose to solve a specific problem, and each fast follows a different, but specific prescription. Whereas the church has generally just fasted, and we have seen God work in response to fasting and prayer (Matt. 17:21), now with the application of Church Growth research orientation, we can be more specific than in the past.⁸

Bright Future

We have not seen the end to the movement began by Donald McGavran. The future is as bright as the many Church Growth leaders who will apply the research principles to a specific problem with a view of reaching more people for Christ than ever before. The future is bright. We can still build the largest and most powerful church since Pentecost. We can better plant more churches and better nurture more believers than ever before. We can still have revival that sweeps a nation or the world. We serve a God who can do anything He desires. Let us trust Him for greater results and work to that end in our Church Growth Movement.

Writer

Towns, Elmer L.: *Address*: School of Religion, Box 20,000, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia 24506. *Title*: Dean, School of Religion. Dr. Towns has lectured in over 50 theological seminars in the United States and abroad. He has published 50 books with four listed on the Christian Booksellers Best Selling list. In 1995 Dr. Towns received the coveted Gold Medallion Award for the Book of the Year, *The Names of the Holy Spirit*. Co-founder of Liberty University, with Dr. Jerry Falwell in 1971, Dr. Towns is a highly respected leader in the Church Growth Movement.

NOTES

1. Donald H. Gill, "Apostle of Church Growth," *World Vision*, vol. 12, no. 7 (September 1968), p. 11.
2. John K. Branner, "McGavran Speaks on Roland Allen," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 3 (Spring 1972), p. 173.
3. Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 5.
4. J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Measuring the Church Growth Movement* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), pp. 73-76.
5. C. Peter Wagner, "'Church Growth': More Than a Man, a Magazine, a School, a Book," *Christianity Today*, vol. 18, no. 5 (7 December 1973), pp. 11, 12, 14.
6. Donald A. McGavran, "Why Neglect Gospel-Ready Masses?" *Christianity Today*, vol. 10, no. 5 (29 April 1966), pp. 17-19.
7. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Semi-

nary Press, 1947), Vol. 1, p. 4.

8. Elmer L. Towns, *The Nine Disciplines of Fasting* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1996). This book lists nine fasts:

1. The Disciple's Fast: to break sin's addiction.
2. The Ezra Fast: to solve problems.
3. The Samuel Fast: for revival and soul-winning.
4. The Elijah Fast: to overcome habits.
5. The Widow's Fast: to care for the needy.
6. The Saint Paul Fast: to make decisions and gain insight.
7. The Daniel Fast: for healing and physical health.
8. The John the Baptist Fast: for testimony and influence.
9. The Esther Fast: for protection.