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### **abstract**

This paper reviews the history of the church growth movement with the underlying question: Can such happen in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? The origination of the church growth movement is explored with a challenge to recontextualize the posture of church growth initiatives. A key to this process is the development of leaders through both missional and relational processes. Returning to our missional roots and becoming more and more incarnational as we walk alongside the next generation of leaders will have historic impact not only for church, but for the world, for the marketplace, and for all the new ways God may want to engage with people

Already some of you are thinking this title is too hopeful, too unrealistic. First century church growth in the twenty-first century? Is that really even possible? Could the spread of wildfire that was first century Christianity happen again today? Maybe we should just be satisfied with not losing ground—or even not losing it as quickly.

Yet when we look to church history, we've seen countless ebbs and flows. We saw the heady rush of the first few centuries, followed by a lull during the

post-Constantine era. We saw the Dark Ages followed by Martin Luther and the Reformation. We saw the nineteenth century revivals and then the deadening of the state churches across Europe. We've seen the rise of Christianity across South America, Africa, and Asia.

Definitive statistics on the number or percentage of Christians for each generation are hard to come by, yet clearly there are ups and downs. The Church Growth Movement was one of the ups, but it has since lost its way. Many today consider the Church Growth Movement replaced by the missional movement. Younger leaders view it as irrelevant, or worse—dangerous.

172 Recently I was sitting in on a meeting of some church growth scholars. After listening to some of the dialogue, I said, “You know what this conversation reminds me of? You sound like an older church in decline, trying to figure out how to attract new members. But the younger generation—those who consider themselves missional—wouldn't want to come to this conference. Your registration form doesn't even mention church planters as a category—just pastors, denominational leaders, and seminary professors. You're shouting out to missional folks that they're not wanted here.”

I've seen this same situation many times when I've done consulting: churches in decline, feeling stuck, uncertain how to move forward in what feels like a new and alien world. And whenever I begin working with a new group, I study the history and values of that group. What were the original governing principals when God birthed the movement? It's usually quite easy to see what was dynamic at the beginning, what was working. The problems come when we depart from those roots.

### **wesleyan roots**

One such group I worked with was a branch of the church that could trace its ecclesiastical heritage to roots of John Wesley. When it comes to biblical roots, few denominations or groups have as rich a history to draw from. The original statement of mission was to spread scriptural holiness across the land. And spread it did. The evangelistic revivals of John Wesley, the emphasis on personal holiness and sanctification, the return to simple, Spirit-led worship, the preaching of the Word to the poor, social acts of compassion, the spread of the gospel, the multiplication of churches . . . all of these actions speak to the rich and fruitful history of this strand of the Christian church.

Notice the many ways these emphases are rooted in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Inarguably, the extent to which these practices are rooted in Scripture and in the teaching of Jesus resulted in a period of explosive

church growth. Holiness being both personal and social hearkens back to loving God and loving others. Additionally, growth is viewed as both educational and evangelistic: go and make disciples, baptizing them, and teaching them. The original mission was clearly rooted in both the Great Commandment and Great Commission: love God and love others as you go and make disciples.

John Wesley, a ministry leader with strong apostolic gifts, was the original founder of Methodism. Over time, he came to believe that ecclesiastical order is a means, not an end. It is a means that is valuable only insofar as it serves the end: salvation. Wesley's ecclesiology was staunchly mission-driven. When asked why Methodism had arisen in England, Wesley said, "To reform the nation, and in particular the church; to spread scriptural holiness over the entire land." The denomination existed to serve that purpose. In the U.S., Methodist ordination started when Anglicans left and someone was needed to administer the sacraments . . . a response to a need rather than a form or an institution existing for its own sake.

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Wesley said that the original design of Christ's church was "to save each his own soul, and then to assist each other in working out their salvation." According to Clarence Bence, a Methodist scholar, "Social holiness is the penetration and permeation of the gospel into all aspects of the social order with the intent of changing that order into the kingdom of God."

The bottom line theme apparent from Wesley's views on the church is that the church must be flexible enough to bend to fit the mission. For if the mission is lost, the church has no reason for continued existence.

### **what about now?**

We are at a similar point of decision today. What do we do when it's obvious that the world has changed? To what degree are we willing to change ecclesiastical theory and structure to further the original mission of the church?

Today we face the new challenges of postmodernism, both from outside the church and from within it. Young leaders have changed. They engage in a different way. There are many younger Christian leaders who are excited and motivated to make a difference for the kingdom. I know they exist—I've met them. But sometimes when one of those younger leaders talks with someone my age or older, it's like they're speaking two different languages. You know what I mean; you've likely experienced that. And it's not they who should learn our language, but we who should learn theirs. For theirs is the language of today's unreached harvest fields.

The good news for the Church Growth Movement—like the Methodists—is that it was originally built on solid theological principles. The roots are missional: a compassion for the lost and a desire to reach the harvest for Christ. The solution, then, is to return to those roots and recontextualize the basic principles for a new generation. That new generation can then become a rallying point for the next bout of growth. Church growth was originally missional. To reinvent it for next generation, we have to return to those missional roots.

### **returning to the roots**

What were the original roots of the Church Growth Movement? They're found in the Great Commission: reaching people for Jesus.

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19–20)

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And notice the very end of the Great Commission: Jesus will be with us on this mission to the very end of the age. It was not just for the first century: it's until Jesus returns.

The roots of the Church Growth Movement include:

- recognizing that the fields are ripe for harvest
- embracing the DNA of mission
- multiplying disciples as a core of ministry
- developing emerging leaders
- focusing on Jesus
- having a servant mindset

The early Church Growth Movement recognized that, at the very core, church growth is a spiritual process. Jesus did not tell *us* to go build His church. He said, “*I* will build my church” (Matthew 16:18).

By returning to the roots and embracing core principles like these, we can get back to the basics of what church growth was all about. Once we agree on these essential non-negotiables, we are freed to engage the process of recontextualizing those principles into the framework of today's world.

### **recontextualizing the roots**

What brought you success in a previous period is precisely what will *not* bring you success in the next period. In the previous generation, what brought success? We used to bring in a consultant or expert. The expert would diagnose the problem or

the blockage, then give advice and directives. And that worked beautifully. But things have changed. It's not working anymore. So what should we do? Keep trying it? Keep looking for better experts? No, we need a new way.

We need an approach suited to this new generation, an approach that is God-directed, relational, incarnational, and contextual. We need to exegete culture around us and explore the social networks to discover how people relate and connect to each other.

Many challenging issues need to be addressed in this new world. How do you minister to gays? How do you reach them? One church planter was knocking on doors, and a woman answered the door—but that woman hadn't shaved for a while. Is there room in the church for a transsexual? These are not only theological questions, but practical ones. The Great Commission means we are to reach everyone, not just those who fit our categories. So how on earth do we do that?

Today's missionaries need to ask tough questions—with sometimes even tougher answers—to contextualize the gospel. What sinful habits need to be abandoned? What cultural issues need to be cooperated with? Where do you even begin? Even more than a list of rights and wrongs, the spirit of God needs to guide the contextualization process.

As far back as Acts, missionaries have had to engage and reengage these questions. What about meat sacrificed to idols? What about those who eat pork? What about those who don't? What about circumcision? What about the Greeks? What about the women? What is essential to the gospel? What is not? Where do you draw the line?

Questions like these, as challenging as they are, have always been true to the focus of church growth and the Great Commission. Church growth in the classic, best sense of the term happens when the gospel spreads across social networks, when it crosses cultural boundaries and the kingdom advances.

Whenever we see that kind of organic growth, we begin reaching people who have sanctification issues and people with cultures and assumptions different from our own. So then we must begin applying this process of contextualizing and reinventing church growth. We need to focus on discipleship and life transformation. What does following Jesus result in? We need to clarify the outcomes. What type of disciples are we trying to produce?

### **practitioners and researchers**

Because of questions like these, the future of the church growth movement in this generation hangs heavily on what we choose to do now. This is our best chance: we

need to network the researchers with the practitioners to serve them for ministry multiplication. Both research and practice are essential in moving forward at this juncture, and those activities need to be done in tandem.

To the church growth researchers: one thing that's critical is that you personally engage in the harvest. You have to actively live out the Great Commission in your context in your own way. Whether that activity is fruitful in terms of new disciples or not, you need to be engaged in such a way that you're touched and God is at work in your life. This practice of involvement in the harvest fields will propel your research forward in incalculable ways.

To the practitioners among you: reflect on your approaches and measure your results. This information will provide researchers with a wealth of data. When I planted a church the first time, our leadership team spent two days in prayer and reflection once a month for eight years. This time was focused not on the details, but on the bigger picture. What is God blessing? What are we learning? How do we keep in step with what God is doing? Taking time to reflect is essential. Working with a coach can help you reflect, discern, and learn from your experiences.

Essentially, practitioners need to be more reflective, and researchers need to be more practicing. As I'm writing this, I'm writing as both a church growth researcher and as a practitioner, so I need to do both. I practice and then reflect in order to learn new principles. I've recently helped start ViaCordis, a network of missional house churches in the greater Los Angeles area. The vision is for growing a network of multi-cultural leaders who journey together to start and multiply communities of Jesus followers.

ViaCordis has been extremely rewarding and transforming for me personally. It has helped me wrestle with the same challenges that practitioners are engaging in, allowing me to be more in tune with the culture around me. One thing I have learned I want to share with you here. When you work with younger leaders, posture matters. Leadership looks different in this generation.

### **the new leadership posture**

We need to come alongside and serve younger leaders in a coaching posture, not in a consultant/expert posture. This means spending time listening, asking good questions, unpacking what we hear them saying, and helping them generate their own solutions that will work in their context. The time of copying other people's strategies is over: younger leaders need to come up with their own ideas.

This whole approach is more relational and less authoritarian. Since it's not what many seasoned leaders are used to, this new posture can present problems.

We as older leaders are uncomfortable in this posture, sometimes afraid that “just” listening will make us look less than competent. We may feel disrespected when our advice is not sought or our strategies not copied. We may be afraid that taking a learning posture will make us look as if we have been wrong.

The truth is we have something very important to offer—but it’s not our information. It’s ourselves. Younger leaders crave not our advice but our relational support as they move forward with what God has called them to do.

Lately I’ve been talking with a colleague about how to coach young church planters effectively. How do we, from the previous generation, gain credibility by approaching the relationship in a different way? My colleague has found that by listening and helping leaders unpack their own ideas, he can gain credibility. He finds common ground in the books they are reading and the language they are using. He stays current, with a posture of openness, yet still draws from his years of experience. It’s not either/or, but both/and. He asks them to dig deep to really unpack the core of what God is calling them to. “What is it you are trying to produce? What do you want to accomplish? If God really showed up, what would that look like?” By connecting young ministry leaders deeply to their *own* values, they can move forward effectively with a new sense of clarity. And you can help them do that.

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### **connecting with values**

What does it mean to connect with your values? As Christians, don’t we all share the same values? Yes and no. In some ways, our values are all built on the same foundation: Jesus Christ. But we also put our own unique fingerprints on the process. No two churches are exactly alike, even within the same denomination. We all have different emphases and different visions—and that’s good.

One church I helped to connect with their values discovered that they could break the values down into four categories: compelling faith, missional living, transforming communities, and intentional development. They brainstormed under these areas, fleshing out what they meant. Then with these four categories as a grid, they looked at everything they were doing to raise up disciples through that grid.

By understanding their values, they were able to discern the foundational principles by which those values could be lived out. It provided them with direction and forward motion. Even when we don’t know what the form needs to be, we know we need to produce followers of Jesus. It’s just a matter of helping people figure out what that looks like in their context.

## **go forth and come alongside**

So you, as researchers and practitioners, can come alongside to help one another through this process. Using an action-reflection model, reflect on the context and serve the people. Doing that will help you figure out what needs to be researched. Then put the research into action and see what God is blessing. Where is He at work? Investigate principles that hold true in all contexts. Measure the results. Modify what you're doing. Measure the results and modify again. Repeat what's more productive; eliminate what's less productive. Like a farmer tries different approaches to see what kind of harvest is yielded, live out the principles of John 15:1–8:

<sup>1</sup> “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

<sup>5</sup> “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

How do we adapt without losing our way? We adapt rapidly and in frequent cycles of reflection-action . . . but with a clear compass of following Jesus. The foundation of the Great Commandment and the Great Commission remains, but they must be contextualized to those we are trying to reach. As we guide others, posture matters, but principles stay the same.

## **what will make the difference?**

What makes the difference? What we do. Will we return to the roots of Christianity, leaving sacred cows behind? What might some of those sacred cows be? Worship service style, organizing the structure of church based on a congregational model, an emphasis on facilities, keeping score based on the number of people in the seats and the amount in the offering basket, and insisting on certain leadership roles and structures. These are all non-essentials—things that change over time.

You're no longer the guru. Leave the mountaintop and go back to the grassroots as a servant. Realize that you don't know the answers in these new situations. Historically church growth scholars were the revered leaders sought out for their advice. Church growth has now caught on to the point where seminaries have professors and even departments in this area. Because of that, it's now our tendency to wait for people to come and ask us for our wisdom. Instead, we need to repent and take the position of a servant who comes alongside to help and to learn.

We need to get out of the classroom, get out of our studies, and back into harvest field. We need to start personally engaging and personally building redemptive relationships with people who need Christ. We need to become the hands and feet of Jesus in the world around us . . . because that's what all believers do. As those gifted to be scholars, our best contribution is to come serve alongside practitioners to see what is needed.

By actively engaging in such a way, we will become facilitators of the discovery process, helping new leaders measure what's working and what's not working. We can help them apply foundational principles to their new situations. We can find out from them what would be helpful and what they need. In this way, we can act like the missiologists that we are—discerning in whom God is working and helping them along the way even when their path looks different from ours. In this way, the Church Growth movement will begin to look more like it did in the beginning, with scholars coming alongside practitioners to serve them and help them develop more fruitful ways.

Returning to our missional roots and becoming more and more incarnational as we walk alongside the next generation of leaders will have historic impact not only for the church, but also for the world, for the marketplace, for all the new ways God may want to engage with people. New directions for the future are always on the horizon. If we can look beyond ourselves to see the vision God may be planting in those who come after us, our own vision will be broadened and enriched in the process. We will become a part of something much bigger than ourselves. Church growth is not about our own comfort or what we are used to. It's about the kingdom of God in all its fullness and variety. There are many possible paths to be traveled, and more yet to be discovered.

Imagine what the world would look like if first century church growth really took off again here and now. What would it look like if non-followers of Christ were being developed into followers of Christ, or if those followers of Christ were being developed into leaders who were multiplying themselves and their ministries across the globe? Churches would be facing the challenges of growth rather than

the challenges of decline. Individuals would be discovering their gifts and finding ministry roles that are significant and empowering.

From where we are right now, we can see only a fraction of what God wants to do. But as we continue to develop leaders in ways that are both relational and missional, whole new vistas will be opened up to our view. We will see the world and all its needs. We will see the vast potential in each human being to contribute to the world. We will see the face of Christ being reflected back into all of His creation. We will see how much God wants to do, how big that could be, and how we can be a part of it all.

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