

1992

The Church Growth Movement: A Wesleyan Critique

Alan G. Padgett

Luther Seminary, apadgett@luthersem.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Padgett, Alan G., "The Church Growth Movement: A Wesleyan Critique" (1992). *Faculty Publications*. 259.

https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/259

Published Citation

Padgett, Alan G. "The Church Growth Movement: A Wesleyan Critique." In *Mission of the Church in Methodist Perspective: The World Is My Parish*, edited by Alan G Padgett, 137–47. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty & Staff Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. For more information, please contact tracy.iwaskow@gmail.com, mteske@luthersem.edu.

7 THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT: A WESLEYAN CRITIQUE

Alan Padgett

The Church Growth movement has engendered a great deal of support among church leadership in America. Numerous books and articles in the religious press, as well as a variety of seminary presentations, testify to the continuing interest which this topic is capable of generating.¹ Adherents include a variety of pastors, scholars, and denominational leaders, making it impossible to be *au courant* about the American church and not know about the Church Growth Movement.

The attraction inherent in the Church Growth movement lies in its programmatic approach to fulfilling the mission of the church. The principles which inform the movement are straightforward, the goals pragmatic yet praiseworthy. More importantly, the tenets of the Church Growth movement provide clear standards for determining the health of a church, and by extension, for evaluating the effectiveness of the leadership of a church. Given the distinctively non-quantifiable nature of most pastoral endeavor, this movement can provide a welcome sense of direction. It is little wonder that when Church Growth founder Donald McGavran retired from his position at the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1981, he ranked among the most important missiologists in the world.

¹ For a representative sampling, see E. L. Towns, *et al.*, *The Complete Book of Church Growth* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1981).

In this chapter I offer an analysis and critique of this popular movement.² I have chosen to approach this material at the methodological and theological level, even though the majority of Church Growth literature has a distinctly practical bent. I am particularly interested in the principles and goals of this movement: its underlying assumptions, theological justification, and understanding of the church and its mission to the world, as well as its stated goals and purposes. In the spirit of the many "lists" in the literature concerning signs of health or illness in a church, I end this chapter with a list of "danger signs" for the Church Growth movement.

To begin with, we might ask if the concerns of a chapter like this is, as such, legitimate. If the Church Growth principles "work," why should we care about abstract questions concerning theology? This is the typical response of a pragmatic American Christian. Yet in order to know if something "works" we must know what we wish to accomplish. An airplane works, to take an example, when it flies us safely to our destination. My question for the Church Growth movement is exactly this: is it safe, and do we want to go where it is taking us? One way to test the soundness of the movement is to compare it with a proper, Biblical and theological understanding of the church and its mission in the world.³ This is what I propose to do here.

1. History

While the Church Growth movement has affected American church leadership, its roots are not found in the United States, but in India. From a socio-historical standpoint, there is no question that the origins of this movement are found in the life and vision of one man: Donald A. McGavran (1897-1990).⁴ McGavran was the son and grandson of missionaries. Born in India, he served for

² The author would like to thank his wife, Sally Padgett, for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

³ I take as foundation for my ecclesiology and missiology the Bible and the Tradition of the church, especially (after the 17th century) the Wesleyan tradition. For further, helpful discussion of these issues see Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 321-371 and Don Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). The nature of the church is fully discussed by Oden in volume three of his systematics, *Life in the Spirit* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

⁴ For details about McGavran's life, see his "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 10 (1986), 53-58.

thirty years was a Disciples of Christ missionary to that country. For a portion of his time in India, McGavran was a Christian educator and principle of a missionary high school (he earned a Ph. D. in education from Columbia University). In India he met and worked with the Indian Methodist Bishop, J. Waskom Pickett (1890-1981). This collaboration was to change his life. As McGavran himself wrote: "In the 1930s as I read Waskom Pickett's *Christian Mass Movements in India*, my eyes were opened."⁵ After further research with Pickett, they published a book in 1938, *Christian Missions in Mid-India*.⁶ About this time McGavran was appointed as missionary to the Satnamis class, a field he labored in for eighteen years. His research into the how and why of people movements and group conversion lead to his publication of the book which brought him world-wide attention: *The Bridges of God* (London: World Dominion, 1955). From 1956-1959 he worked around the world for the United Christian Missionary Society, where he extended and applied the lessons he had learned from Pickett. This lead to the publication of *How Churches Grow* in 1959.

In 1961 McGavran, fired by his vision for world-wide church growth, established the Institute of Church Growth at Northwestern Christian College in Eugene, Oregon. In 1965 he was invited by President David A. Hubbard to move the school to Fuller Theological Seminary. There he purposed to build an outstanding faculty of missiologists, working in the Church Growth paradigm. He was joined by the Methodist missionary Alan Tippet, as well as such notable missiologists as Ralph Winter, Arthur Glasser, Charles Kraft, and C. Peter Wagner. The School of World Mission brought intellectual depth and world-wide fame to the movement. In the 1970s, they applied the Church Growth paradigm to the United States, and this resulted in the spread of this movement throughout American ecclesiological circles.

Under God, Don McGavarn was clearly the founder of the Church Growth movement. His was the vision and drive that founded this important school of

5 McGavran, "My Pilgrimage," 56.

6 *Christian Mission in Mid-India*, by Pickett, McGavran and G. H. Singh (Jabalpur, India: The Mission Pr., 1938). This is a study of mass movements ("people movements") in nine areas of India. The book was expanded and re-published as *Church Growth and Group Conversion* (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Pub. House, 1956; rpt. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1962).

missiology. His books became "standard" literature in the field, and attracted world-wide attention to the Church Growth view of missions.⁷ If McGavran is the "father" of this movement, the ideological "grandfather" of Church Growth is the Methodist Bishop Waskom Pickett. A careful reading of Pickett's three books published in the thirties, one of which he co-authored with McGavran and others, exhibits most of the features of the Church Growth paradigm, in embryonic form at least.⁸ It is also clear that this early missionary literature from India suffers from few of the problems which I will discuss in my critique of the Church Growth movement as it developed under the hands of McGavran. In particular, Pickett did not divide social justice from evangelism, and training in obedience (sanctification) from conversion (justification). I suspect this is because of his Methodist background, but that cannot be proven. He was willing to live with a plurality of mission emphases, as long as the discipleship of the nations, through "mass movements," was not neglected. It was this neglect that he fought the most.⁹ While he found the homogeneous unit principle (as McGavran called it) helpful, and numerical growth important, it was not, for him, the chief criterion of church health as it was for McGavran. But we get ahead of the analysis. What is the "Church Growth paradigm" in missiology which these two men developed?

2. Axioms

What are the characteristics of the Church Growth approach to missions? There are several assumptions, or axioms, which ground the Church Growth paradigm. The first of these is theological. God desires that people who are not Christians should "put on Christ" and join the Kingdom of God through faith in the Messiah Jesus. Since I wholly share this emphasis with the Church Growth movement, and since their own literature abounds with justification for it, I will focus on the remaining assumptions of the movement.¹⁰

7 The first such volume to attract world-wide attention was his *Bridges of God* (London: World Dominion Pr., 1955). This was followed by *How Churches Grow* (*ibid.*, 1959).

8 *Christian Mission in Mid-India*, and his earlier *Christian Mass Movements in India* (Nashville: Abingdon/Lucknow, India: Lucknow Pub. House, 1933) and also *Christ's Way to India's Heart* (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Pub. House, 1938).

9 For more on Pickett, see J. T. Seamands, "The Legacy of J. Waskom Pickett," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13 (1989), 122-126.

The second axiom is methodological as well as theological. God desires "church growth," that is numerical growth. The methodological outcome or corollary to this axiom is: If a church is being faithful in its mission and is "healthy," then it is growing in membership. The first thing to be said, no doubt, is that Church Growth literature has too narrow an understanding of "church growth." Numerical growth is not the only sort of growth that can or should happen to a church.¹¹ While Church Growth authors sometimes acknowledge this point in principle, in the majority of the works they "church growth" becomes mere numerical growth. This is a rhetorical device that, I believe, the Church Growth movement must abandon; it leaves the reader with false assumptions about church growth. Growth can occur in missionary outreach, Biblical understanding, spiritual life, depth of worship, understanding of liturgy and the learning of hymns, social justice, etc. Congregations do not "grow" in membership numbers alone. In this chapter, then, I will speak of numerical church growth, or just numerical growth: by this I mean "church growth" as these terms have been used in the Church Growth movement.

This second axiom of the Church Growth movement is logically equivalent to: If a church is not growing in membership, then it is not healthy and/or it is not being faithful to God. I agree with the basic axiom, that God desires numerical church growth. But is numerical growth always healthy? To adopt the analogy of the human body, sometime growth in weight is good and normal, but at other times it can be a result of illness, or lead to illness. How can we tell the difference in the church, between good numerical growth, and unhealthy numerical growth? This is a question which church growth theorists have not, to my mind, considered carefully. Any numerical growth is taken to be good, and surely this is naive. Churches can grow for the wrong reasons: after all, Jim Jones' church, The People's Temple, had great numerical growth! The late Latin American theologian, Orlando Costas, has suggested that numerical growth is healthy when accompanied by growth in other areas: spirituality, evangelical outreach, biblical and theological

10 For further discussion, see William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

11 This point is made clearly and often by Orlando Costas, e.g., in *The Church and its Mission* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1974).

depth, and struggle for peace and justice.¹² This is surely a good beginning for ecclesiastical reflection on sound and unsound numerical growth. More thinking and research is needed in this area.¹³

What of the soundness of the principal that a church which is not growing numerically is not being faithful? I believe this is true in general, but should not always be applied in any and every context. Like the so-called "laws of nature" in the physical sciences, this principle is only true when we add the phrase, "other things being equal" (philosophers of science call this a *ceterus paribus* clause). *Ceterus paribus*, objects fall to the earth at an acceleration of 9.8 m/s². This does not hold, however, when we consider air resistance, as in the case of a falling leaf. In the same way, there may be circumstances which mean that the church is indeed being faithful, but nevertheless is not growing in numbers. As Marie-Louise Martin has written:¹⁴

a church may come under pressure and persecution and thus share in Christ's suffering and Cross. When the heat of persecution is turned on, many become weak and leave the church, and yet this church is infinitely stronger in its witness to Christ and in its life than a numerically strong church with members who in reality have moved away from Him.

Church Growth literature, then, is too certain that numerical growth is always a good sign, and lack of numerical growth is always a bad sign. I am much happier seeing numerical growth as one sign of church health, but not sufficient in and of itself. For missionary considerations in particular, lack of numerical growth must also function as a sign of possible problems which need to be addressed. McGavran was more on target on this issue when he was considering the spending of resources in mission strategy: a "test to see where opportunity lay."¹⁵ In a more

12 *The Integrity of Mission* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

13 One book which does develop a wholistic, Christocentric model of church life is Howard Snyder, *Liberating the Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983). This volume is a good beginning, theologically. Methodologically, see one of the last works of the late Orlando Costas, "A Wholistic Concept of Church Growth," in W. R. Shenk, ed., *Exploring Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 95-107.

14 "Does the Church Need Fantastically Growing Churches," in McGavran, ed., *The Conciliar-Evangelical Debate: The Crucial Documents 1964-1976* (South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1977), 156. This volume was originally published as *The Eye of the Storm* (Waco, TX: Word, 1972).

15 *How Churches Grow*, 3.

cautious mode, he once wrote: "Numerical increase is not the only criterion of success. Other matters must be taken into account." However, at the same time he insisted that growth in membership be "regarded as a chief consideration in estimating church welfare."¹⁶

A third axiom of the movement is the so-called "homogeneous unit" principle. This has been the subject of a great deal of critique and debate.¹⁷ In general, "homogeneous unit" is McGavran's phrase for what Pickett called a group or "mass movement" or "people movement." McGavran does not give a very careful definition of a homogeneous unit, but based in part on the work of sociologist Alfred Schutz, C. Peter Wagner defines it as a group which has similar socioeconomic class, race, religion, geography, national origin, and "assimilation factors."¹⁸ A strict definition is not really required here -- a general understanding of what is meant is all we need. The principle itself is rather simple to state: "People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."¹⁹ Effective evangelism, then, will pay attention to various homogeneous units in a society, and to the various responses such groups make to the Gospel. Responsive groups require greater resources to be allocated. This is only common sense, given the limited resources for evangelism.

The problem comes when a principle for missions and evangelism gets turned into a principle for ecclesiology. Wagner writes: "Disciples are more readily made by people within their own homogeneous unit" -- and he is surely right about this. But then he goes on: "and congregations develop into healthy communities when they concentrate on only one kind of people."²⁰ There is a great deal of

16 *Op cit.*, 16.

17 For example, the works of Costas, already cited; papers by Samuel Escobar and Rene Padilla given at the Lausanne Congress in 1974, printed in J. D. Douglas, ed., *Let the Earth Hear his Voice* (Minneapolis: World Wide Pub., 1975), with further discussion in *The Pasadena Consultation -- Homogeneous Unit*, Lausanne Occasional Papers # 1 (Wheaton: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1978); Padilla, *Mission Between the Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), and C. Peter Wagner, *Our Kind of People* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979); as well as such articles as W. McClintock, "Sociological Critique of the Homogeneous Unit Principle," *International Review of Missions* 77 (1988), 107-116; David Smith, "The Church Growth Principles of Donald McGavran," *Transformation* 2/2 (April-June, 1985), 25-30; Philip Lewis, "Caste, Mission and Church Growth," *Themelios* 10/2 (Jan. 1985), 24-29.

18 *Our Kind of People* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979), ch. 3

19 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 163.

sociological research to back-up the first part of this sentence; there is virtually none to back-up the second part. There is little reason to believe that only culturally homogeneous local churches grow, or grow best, *in culturally diverse communities*. At an ethical level, we should be wary of insisting on a racially or socially "pure" church, as Charles Taber warns:²¹

It is one thing to have a homogeneous church where other kinds of people are absent or far away; it is quite different thing to maintain such a church in a heterogeneous community where relations between groups may be *the* community agenda, as in many modern cities. In such a case, the purity of the group easily becomes an idol.

Even from a merely pragmatic perspective, the "homogeneous unit" can be preserved by small group ministry within the wider local church: this model in fact represents the make-up of some of the largest local churches in the world.²²

3. Emphases

Having considered three axioms of the Church Growth movement, I would now like to move to some of the emphases and characteristic practises which this movement employs.

I have already noted the danger of over-emphasizing numerical growth, and the homogeneous unit, in the above section. There are two other characteristic emphases of the Church Growth movement I would like to consider. First of all, Church Growth theorists stress the need for careful, sociological research into the target population for evangelism. This emphasis goes straight back to the work of J. Waskom Pickett in India. The various "peoples" should be identified, and the history of the culture, and any previous evangelistic outreach, studied. I wholly approve of this strategy. There remains, however, one defect.

From a Wesleyan perspective, as Ted Campbell's chapter documents, merely sociological and historical analysis of the target population is not enough.

²⁰ *Our Kind of People*, 4.

²¹ "Contextualization," in Shenk, ed., *Exploring Church Growth*, 127, his italics.

²² This last point is made by Lyle Schaller in his "Commentary" to Dean R. Hodge and David A. Roozen, eds., *Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950-1978* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979), 344-358.

Missionary strategy also requires a careful religious, moral analysis: in short, a Christian critique of the "pagan" elements of the culture that fall short of Biblical principles. Such an analysis must be crucial to wholistic, well-rounded church growth in the local churches, yet it is never mentioned in Church Growth literature: is this an example of blindness to issues of peace and justice?²³

A second strategy of the Church Growth movement consists in separating evangelism from social action, and making evangelism and numerical growth the first priority in missionary planning. McGavran, in particular, is unhappy with what he called the "parallelism" philosophy of evangelism as one ministry among others, believing that where parallelism flourishes, church growth languishes. Parallelism, claimed McGavran, is the antithesis of New Testament mission.²⁴ There is a similar division in McGavran's thought between "discipling" and "perfecting". Discipling refers to preaching the gospel and winning the lost, incorporating them into the church. Perfecting refers to the longer task of education, and growth in discipleship, grace and obedience.²⁵ Church Growth theorists likewise insist on dividing the tasks of evangelism and social action (or "Christianizing"), emphasizing the former at the expense of the latter. "It [the "biblical school" McGavran follows] maintains that Christianizing the social order is a fruit of new life in Christ and of church multiplication and must, therefore, receive a lower priority."²⁶

I find this separation of the Christian life into boxes disturbing. No Wesleyan can possibly allow such a strict division between justification and sanctification, nor between personal and social holiness. One of the weaknesses of the Church Growth movement has been its "justice blindness" (even as it accuses

23 Take as one example the excellent article by Charles Taber, just cited. His insistence that contextualization leads to a critique of the target culture from the perspective of the gospel, including those "demonic" structures, "political, social, economic, cultural -- which shape, distort, and distort human lives" (p. 120). This must therefore include moral and theological critique of the culture, although Taber does not say as much, nor bring out this side of the needed missiological analysis.

24 *How Churches Grow*, 71-76.

25 *Understanding Church Growth*, 123f.

26 *Op. cit.*, 22.

others of "people blindness," referring to the homogeneous unit).²⁷ The emphasis on evangelism is a good point, but this point can be overemphasized as well. The most helpful theological corrective in this regard is the recent emphasis in missional theology on the Kingdom of God as "first priority" in missions. Making "spreading the Kingdom" a first priority in missions would already include both evangelism and social action.²⁸

Waskom Pickett certainly did not make such a dichotomy in the tasks of the church in the world. In his pioneering volume, *Christian Mass Movements in India* (1933), he noted:

The effort should be to minister to spiritual and physical needs from the beginning. Neither aim should be undertaken as preliminary to the other. The data assembled in this study make it perfectly clear that these aims belong together; that either one is largely ineffective without the other (p.347).

Likewise with respect to "discipling" and "perfecting" as missional priorities, he wrote:

[M]any have failed to comprehend that the amount and quality of care given to a group of converts after their baptism is a major element in determining not only what they will become, but whether others are to be won to Christ (p. 246)

Both these points, made by the "grandfather" of the Church Growth movement, should be taken to heart by more recent advocates of Church Growth. Talk of "first priorities" apart from a biblical emphasis on the whole gospel, and the whole Kingdom, does not forward reflection on and action toward true church growth.

4. Pitfalls and Helpful Hints.

So far we have been considering Church Growth at the theoretical level. There is a great deal of popular literature about Church Growth in print, both books and articles, for the leadership of the local church and missionary agencies. I cannot here review all of this literature, nor would such a review be edifying. However, taking a page from such literature myself, I would like to conclude this

²⁷ For "people blindness," see Ralph Winter, "The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism," in Douglas, ed., *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 236.

²⁸ For further discussion, see chapters 1 and 5 of the current volume.

essay by making two lists concerning the popular side of the Church Growth movement, pro and con.

A. Helpful Emphases of the Church Growth Movement.

1. Emphasis on evangelism, with a refusal to accept the "status quo" non-growing church.
2. Focus on receptive groups in the community, and the use of the social sciences in understanding the local context.
3. Careful planning and strategy for winning women and men to Christ.
4. The indigenous and contextual nature of the church, its worship, and its leadership, is celebrated.
5. Discipleship, and not just "decisions," is the end goal of evangelism.
6. Accountability in missions and evangelism: when the goal is evangelism and church planting, solid statistical data should be available for evaluation and future planning.

B. Potential Pitfalls of the Church Growth Movement.

1. The emphasis on "how to" can easily become a mechanical programming of the Holy Spirit.
2. The preaching of the gospel can be watered down with cheap grace. The ethical standards of the gospel must not be compromised in the drive to bring in the numbers.
3. An overemphasis on numerical growth can down-play the need for other types of growth.
4. The "circulation of the saints" syndrome: mere numerical growth in a particular congregation or denomination, does not mean the Kingdom is growing. How many new members are also new converts?²⁹

²⁹ This question is raised by the empirical research of R. Bibby and M. B. Brinkerhoff, "The Circulation of the Saints Revisited," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22 (1983), 253-262.