

# An Analysis of the “Church Growth Movement” and Its Theology

By: Ronald Muetzel

Two years ago Sunrise Bible Church erected a sign on the lawn in front of its building. Sunrise was a new church in the community; its attendance was increasing rapidly. The sign provided information about the church: name of congregation, time of seance, phone number. name of pastor.

Members of Martin Luther Evangelical Lutheran Church (WELS) noticed the sign immediately. Before long there were suggestions that Martin Luther ought to put up its own sign. The matter was placed on the church council agenda. Council members agreed that a sign seemed to be a good idea. One member of the church council contacted Sunrise to get their opinion of the sign’s value. Other “signed” churches in the community were surveyed to determine if they felt a sign was helpful.

Eventually, someone agreed to donate the materials, build the sign and erect it. The generous offer was enthusiastically accepted. Martin Luther Evangelical Lutheran Church now has its own sign. Members are pleased to see how much easier it is for non-members to identify the building and to obtain basic information about the church. It is even expected that the church sign will be a plus for the congregation as it reaches out with the Gospel to the community.

Whether Martin Luther’s members and pastor realized it or not, the process through which they decided to have a church sign was pretty much a “church growth” approach.

It’s very difficult to find anything to criticize in the way this hypothetical congregation handled the matter of a church sign. Certainly, WELS churches have used a similar approach many times over; perhaps it is by this very process that our churches generally have decided to identify themselves with a sign?

On the other hand, the “church growth” approach to a church sign may not be as innocuous as it first appears.

Suppose, for example, that Sunrise Bible Church supported its use of a church sign with a misinterpretation of Scripture! (They liked to cite Acts 2: 19, “I will show wonders in the heaven above and **signs** on the earth below.” Emphasis theirs.) One part of this paper will address a very dangerous tendency in the Church Growth Movement to misuse Scripture.

Suppose, too, that some members of Martin Luther mistakenly considered the church sign a **means** by which they would be able to make people Christians (Emphasis mine.)! Another part of this paper will examine the confusion which exists in the Church Growth Movement with regard to the Means of Grace.

Finally, suppose that Martin Luther’s pastor watches Sunrise Bible grow more rapidly than Martin Luther even though both churches have signs; suppose the pastor envies the growth at Sunrise Bible and decides it might help to make his doctrines more like theirs! Yet another part of this paper will discuss the way in which the Church Growth Movement gives growth a higher priority than truth.

## The Church Growth Movement’s History and Identity

The brief history of the Church Growth Movement can pretty well be told by simply citing the names and work of several men.

Donald McGavran is regarded as the “father” of the Church Growth Movement. McGavran was born in 1897 and served many years as a Disciples of Christ missionary in India. He was disturbed by slow growth or no growth in his own mission field and gave most of the rest of his life to a study of church growth throughout the world, excepting North America.

McGavran started to put his observations in writing as early as 1955. In 1961 he established the Institute for Church Growth in Eugene, Oregon, and had only 56 students in four school years. His ideas found greater acceptance in 1966 when he moved his institute to Pasadena, California, and was made the founding Dean of Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission. McGavran’s most significant writing, *Understanding Church Growth*, was published in 1970 and has been called, “the Magna Carta of the church growth movement”. The original publication dealt exclusively with church growth in foreign missions. A 1980 revision applied church growth principles also to North America.

How important McGavran has been to the Church Growth Movement becomes evident when one listens to a student of McGavran, C. Peter Wagner:

Church growth is a movement rooted in Donald McGavran. He forever established a paradigm and, as I see it, anyone who does not accept the McGavran paradigm is not a church growth person... No one is forced to agree with everything McGavran ever said or wrote. But if you don't accept his way of looking at the Church—if you have any major conflict with *Understanding Church Growth*, our basic text—then you should use some other name because you're not part of the Church Growth Movement.<sup>i</sup>

C. Peter Wagner studied under McGavran and is largely responsible for “North Americanizing” the Church Growth Movement. Wagner now fills the McGavran Chair of Church Growth at Fuller School of World Mission, a position established in 1984. He is said to be an engaging teacher and is obviously a prolific author. It can be assumed that Wagner must also be a voracious reader judging from the number of books that carry his picture and endorsement.

The name of Win Arn is associated with the Church Growth Movement. He has established the Institute For American Church Growth in Pasadena. The Institute says its goal is: “... to provide direction, leadership and a constant flow of practical resources to local churches and denominations to bring a deepened commitment to the Great Commission, increased laity involvement, and growth.”<sup>ii</sup> To accomplish this goal the Institute makes available a large supply of books, periodicals, videos and programs.

The Church Growth Movement's existence has been brief; its impact large. The fact that Lyle Schaller is identified as a “church growth” consultant, is no reason to disagree with his observation:

The most significant development on the American religious scene during the past half century was the emergence of the Charismatic Renewal Movement during the 1960s. In a more recent and shorter time frame the most influential development of the 1970s was the emergence of the Church Growth Movement.<sup>iii</sup>

The Movement has had considerable impact in confessional Lutheran circles, especially in the LCMS, and also in the WELS and the ELS. Seminary professors, executives and/or pastors of all three synods have gained first-hand knowledge of the Church Growth Movement via attendance at seminars and workshops. The LCMS and many of its districts are actually conducting “church growth” programs.

Kent Hunter is an LCMS pastor who has authored a number of books on “church growth”, serves as a church consultant and heads the Church Growth Analysis and Learning Center in Corunna, Indiana.

In Trenton, Michigan, Pastor Wayne Pohl serves a fast-growing LCMS church and conducts seminars in which many “church growth” principles are presented and endorsed.

The name of Waldo Werning is familiar to many in our synod because of this conservative LCMS clergyman's work and writing in the area of stewardship. He has also authored at least two books that attempt to apply “church growth” thinking to Lutheran congregations.

This is not to imply that the LCMS gives unqualified approval to the Church Growth Movement or to its own “Lutheran” variety of “church growth”. There is criticism aplenty. Perhaps the opposition's best-known spokesman is Dr. Kurt Marquardt of the Concordia Seminary in Fort Wayne. Marquardt participated in a February, 1986, campus debate on the pros and cons of the Church Growth Movement; he took the contrary position.

What about WELS? It's no secret that many pastors in our own Synod are enthusiastic about certain concepts and ideas for church work that come from the Church Growth Movement.

The *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* has offered a number of generally favorable reviews on books written by “church growth” people. In a 1981 article Prof. Ernst H. Wendland familiarized Quarterly readers with the Church Growth Movement and concluded:

Whatever our own personal inclinations toward the church growth principles of McGavran and other evangelicals may be, the subject of church growth itself is not one that we in our Synod will want to ignore.<sup>iv</sup>

The subject is not being ignored. Prof. David Valleskey of the Seminary faculty taught a 1986 Summer Quarter course (P. T. 418 - The Church Growth Movement - An Evaluation) which both analyzed the Church Growth Movement and suggested ways of using “church growth” insights in our WELS congregations. The “WELS Evangelism” resource binder which recently became available is chock full of “church growth” ideas; the binder’s suggested bibliographies list many “church growth” books.

Of course, the passion for orthodoxy in our Synod means that the Church Growth Movement has also received considerable criticism. In an unpublished paper that explains and evaluates the Church Growth Movement our Synod’s Executive Secretary for Evangelism, Pastor Paul Kelm, (himself an advocate of “judicious use” of “church growth” insights) writes:

...honesty compels me to state that “The Church Growth Movement” has an identity (however ill-defined) that is not entirely neutral. I hope to point out much within the movement to commend, some basic premises to endorse, some practical ideas to adapt, but also some questionable principles of sociology and heterodox principles of theology.<sup>v</sup>

While Pastor Kelm advocates the use of Church Growth insights, he is careful to add: “But to ‘buy into’ the Church Growth movement would be to ‘sell out’ truth we hold dear.” Kelm recognizes that serious problems exist also with “church growth” that has been “Lutheranized”. He writes: “Even ‘Lutheran Church Growth’ has its slip showing on occasion.”

There are others in our Synod who appear to believe that the Church Growth Movement deserves harsher criticism, even condemnation. In a 1984 conference paper (Dakota-Montana) Pastor Robert Koester concluded:

If we were Reformed, I would recommend joining the Church Growth Movement today. But the Gospel we hold will not fit into Church Growth categories . . .

The future of our Synod is going to be decided on whether we adopt the spirit of the Church Growth movement, or define evangelism in terms of the Spirit.<sup>vi</sup>

Obviously, very much has already been written and said in our Synod about the Church Growth Movement. The conference paper in your hands is not breaking new ground. The amount of “church growth” material that could be studied and analyzed for such a paper is nothing less than overwhelming. To do an analysis of the presence of “church growth” in our own Synod would be a sizeable assignment in itself. At the least, it would require a conference-size condensation of Prof. Valleskey’s 30-hour Summer Quarter course. All of this makes it a difficult and humbling experience to attempt to provide an analysis of “church growth” which is fresh and truly helpful.

Four pages into the paper and still no definition of the Church Growth Movement! It’s not an easy thing to define. Perhaps that’s why C. Peter Wagner feels compelled to tell what the Church Growth Movement is not:

Church growth is not some magic formula which can produce growth in any church at any time. It is just a collection of common-sense ideas that seem to track well with biblical principles which are focused on attempting to fulfill the Great Commission more effectively than ever before.<sup>vii</sup>

Here’s a more precise definition given by the “church growth” people themselves:

Church growth is that discipline which investigates the nature, expansion, 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 nations" (Matt. 28: 18-20). Students of church growth strive to combine the eternal theological principles of God's Word concerning the expansion of the Church with the best insights of contemporary social and behavior sciences, employing as the initial frame of reference the foundational work done by Donald McGavran.<sup>viii</sup>

What makes definition so difficult is that "church growth" is, as the Movement so often tells us, not simply another program, but a process. The process is expected to touch and shape the entire life and work of the church. "Church growth", then, is not just this idea or that idea; it is an attitude, a mind-set, with which one thinks about the church. It's been said that a person must spend at least 150 hours reading "church growth" literature or attending "church growth" seminars before he begins to see the process and develop the attitude.

The assigned title of this paper asks for an analysis of the Movement and its "theology". So, what is the Movement's theology? No easy answer to this question either! In fact, the impression is sometimes given that "church growth" really has no theology of its own. "Do not attack church growth as theologically inadequate," is the way McGavran puts it. "Make it adequate according to the doctrine emphasized by your branch of the Church."<sup>ix</sup>

How "church growth" can be theology-less and still fit well with biblical principles is a puzzle, to be sure. Fact is the literature of the Church Growth Movement does reflect a theology. It isn't very difficult to identify the theology as essentially Reformed. Paul Kelm provides a brief list of the Reformed errors:

...the elevation of reason alongside Scripture, the centrality of God's sovereignty rather than His grace, the confusion of law and gospel (especially in understanding the movement's central doctrine of the Great Commission), the degrading of the Means of Grace and the elevation of the human will in conversion.<sup>x</sup>

Add to this list an obviously Reformed failure to distinguish between the Holy Christian Church and visible churches!

### **"Church Growth" Misinterprets and Misuses Scripture**

The Church Growth Movement has been described as a reactionary movement. It is that. It's a reaction against a social gospel which ignores the importance of a person's relationship with Jesus' Christ; by contrast the Church Growth Movement concerns itself with salvation of the individual. It's also a reaction against an ecumenical movement which has emphasized cooperation among churches and in doing so diminished the importance of the local congregation; by contrast the Church Growth Movement holds that Christianity's future depends on having strong and vibrant congregations. And it's a reaction against theological liberalism which has removed the Bible from its place of authority; the Church Growth Movement claims to have a high regard for the Bible and quotes the Bible as though it is authoritative.

Naturally, we look with favor on these reactionary features of the Church Growth Movement and even applaud. It may seem that we have a common spirit with them. Before we draw such a conclusion closer examination ought to be given, especially to the use of Scripture in the Church Growth Movement.

There is a problem, for example, with the interpretation of parables in "church growth" literature! Win Arn cites the familiar "Parable of the Sower" (Matthew 13:1-23) as Scriptural basis for the "church growth" principle that the church's efforts at Gospel proclamation should be concentrated on "receptive" people. He writes: "There seemed no doubt in Christ's mind that the 'seeds' should be planted in 'fertile soil'."<sup>xi</sup>

This parable's interpretation is not open to debate because Jesus has interpreted it for us. Jesus never said that the parable teaches us to plant the seed in fertile soil. According to Jesus, the parable only teaches that the sowing of the Word will meet with a variety of responses. Nothing Jesus said in the parable or in His

explanation of the parable supports the “church growth” understanding that we should evaluate the receptivity of the soil before sowing the seed. In fact, Jesus often found that He had sown the seed where the ground was hard, or rocky, or infested with thorns. It’s often the case in “church growth” literature that parables are interpreted to say things they don’t really say.

There’s another problem of interpretation in the strange meaning McGavran gives to “*ta ethne*” in Matthew 28:19. Essentially, McGavran understands the “*ta ethne*” to be ethnic units of humankind. This is the basis for “church growth’s” principle that Gospel outreach ought to be concentrated among ethnically similar people. There are many who criticize McGavran on this issue and the critics rightly point out that there is no basis in Greek usage for McGavran’s understanding.

The problem runs deeper than Greek usage. The more “church growth” writing a person reads, the more uncomfortable a person becomes as he sees how Scripture is used to support preconceived notions; the Scriptures are not often used as the authority from which truly valid principles are to be drawn. The preconceived notions are almost always based on sociological observations. For example, “church growth” people observe the sociological principle that churches tend to grow more rapidly when there is ethnic similarity among the members; then, the peculiar interpretation of “*ta ethne*” is used to make the sociological observation “Biblical”.

The same sociological principle causes fault to be found with the God-commanded outreach of the Apostle Paul. Paul’s difficulties at joining ethnically different Jews with Gentiles are seen as “Biblical” evidence that modern churches will do better to limit their outreach to “their kind of people” (people who are culturally similar). Forgotten in the process is that Paul was a Jew who was set aside by God to bring the Gospel of a Jewish Messiah to Gentile people. It is forgotten that Paul was imitating the Messiah’s example: “He came and preached peace to you who were far away (Gentiles) and peace to those who were near (Jews)” (Ephesians 2:17).

The Church Growth Movement’s dependence on numbers also comes in for its share of criticism. There’s no question but that the Movement’s interest in measurable, statistical growth has led it to search the Scriptures for numbers. The “growth” numbers in the Book of Acts are then used to show that numbers are “Biblical” and that it is “Biblical” to expect the numbers will be on the increase. There’s no disagreement that the Bible cites numbers, but one wishes for balance and that attention would also be given to numbers that dwindle. What about the “five thousand” plus that went down to “Twelve” at the time Jesus spoke His “hard teaching” (John 6)?

This is not to imply that all of the sociological observations are without any validity whatsoever. However, it does seem to be an ignorant and unstable distortion of the Scriptures (Second Peter 3:16!) when the Bible is used as what one writer calls a “sociology textbook”.

The interpretational problems mentioned thus far may seem to deal with peripheral passages that are only incidental to the philosophy of the Church Growth Movement. The writer of this “analysis” believes, however, that the Church Growth Movement makes a serious error in the interpretation of its foundational passage, Matthew 28:18-20. The passage is quoted frequently in “church growth” literature and the Great Commission is cited as evidence that “it is God’s will that His Church grow.”

We are accustomed to making a distinction between Church with a “C” and church with a “c”. Of course, we use this to distinguish between the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints, and the church as a visible assembly of people gathered around Word and Sacrament which includes some believers and some unbelievers, some saints and some hypocrites.

Does the Church Growth Movement make such a distinction or even understand it? It seems not. If the Movement already grasped the distinction, why would Lutheran Church Growth’s spokesman, Kent Hunter, bother to identify the distinction between Church and church as a contribution that Lutherans can bring to the Church Growth Movement? If the Movement already understood this distinction, there would be no need for Prof. Valleskey’s observation that “Church leaders need to be more concerned about what makes the Church grow than what makes churches grow.”<sup>xii</sup>

No wonder “church growth’s” literature, its use of measuring devices to gage the health of visible churches, even the Movement’s name, consistently give the impression that the church as a visible assembly of people should be growing or there’s something wrong! No wonder the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 is cited as conclusive evidence that this is the way it should be!

We are very ready to say: God’s Church will grow. God’s Holy Spirit will use the Gospel to work with relentless grace around the globe and across the centuries and so He will grow God’s Church. We don’t base that assertion so much on the Great Commission, as on the vision supplied by God through a prophet like Isaiah. In the lesson that is properly assigned by the ILCW to the Festival of Epiphany we catch the vision:

“Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.  
See, darkness covers the earth  
and thick darkness is over the peoples,  
but the LORD rises upon you  
and his glory appears over you.  
Nations will come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (Is. 60:1-3).

However, to say that God will grow His Church is quite different than saying that every visible congregation will grow and prosper. In fact, to make such an assertion would seem to ignore all that Scripture says about “many” turning away from the faith and “many” being deceived by false prophets and wickedness increasing and the love of “most” growing cold (Matthew 24:10-12).

It should be explained at this point that the interpretational problem is not a simple disagreement over the relative importance of quantitative or qualitative growth. In fact, “church growth” people often express a healthy interest in improving the quality of discipleship. Nor does the interpretational challenge call into question the will of “God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (First Timothy 2:4). There is also no question but that God assigns all Christians the role of being Christ’s witnesses/ ambassadors and that we are to take that assignment seriously.

The problem is with a logic that uses a people-oriented command (“Make disciples!”) to draw conclusions about an earthly institution like the church. Technically, Matthew 28:18-20 doesn’t say anything about the church as an earthly institution; the Great Commission only gives the disciples in those institutions their assignment.

In Scripture and in the history of the Church there seems always to be a tension between God’s loving interest in drawing people into His family (registering people as citizens in His kingdom, making people disciples of His Son, Jesus Christ) and the gathering of those people into organized religious institutions.

Disciple-making involves this: By His Word Jesus summons people to be His disciples and reconciled children of the Father. Those who become children of the Father by repentant faith know their place in God’s family was secured at the cross by the substitutionary work of God’s Son and their older Brother. Children of the Father know their place in God’s Family depends on His continuing and loving forgiveness. Children of the Father look to their older Brother and listen to His Word in order to learn how they should live, think, speak, pray and die as family members. They know that being fully like their older Brother is the goal of their living and the goal of their dying. It is the joy of every disciple to help other family members grow and mature. It is the joy of every disciple to use his words and life to summon others into the family of God, that is, to make them disciples.

Yes, the church is ideally a fellowship of Jesus’ disciples committed to the task of making disciples. The church is ideally a spiritual family which displays to the world all the evidence of love and joy and peace that can exist only in the family of God. The writings of the apostles urged the church to have a whole-hearted interest in one another and in others and so to draw people into the family of the Father and the Son.

However, the church as it exists in this world is also an institution. It so easily happens that the church shifts its concern from being a fellowship of God's people to its institutional self. Maintaining the institution (buildings and budgets), growing the institution (programs and evangelism for the sake of evangelism), keeping control of the institution (power struggles and politics), perpetuating the institution (institutional loyalty)---we always struggle in the church not to give these a priority higher than the people who are loved of God.

The Pharisees stand out as an awful example of religious people who had become wholly institutionalized. They had it as their purpose to maintain their religious institution no matter what the cost in money or life. (Incidentally, the Pharisees were "church growth" people who would travel over land and sea to win a single convert for their institution.) When Jesus was perceived as a threat to their institutional control; they plotted to get rid of Him. It was the institutionalized church at its worst.

We like to join Jesus in speaking "woe" to the Pharisees. We prefer to think that their sins aren't at all a problem among us. But the legalistic mind-set of the Pharisee was born inside each one of us. It is as easy for us as it was for the Pharisees to cross over the line from viewing the church as a fellowship of God's loved people to measuring the church by institutional standards. When the Church Growth Movement interprets the Great Commission in institutional terms (measured growth and visible success) it encourages all of us toward a dangerous and Pharisaic institutional mind-set.

It is doubtful whether many people have ever breathed more deeply the spirit of the textbook on discipleship that was written by Matthew than did Martin Franzmann. Listen to the way Franzmann concludes his classic work on discipleship! The quotation is lengthy, but notice how different his Christ-like concern for people sounds from the institutional concerns of "church growth"!

"Make disciples" was the last command that Jesus gave to His own. He know little or nothing of how Matthew fulfilled that command in his lifetime. But we do know how his book has gone on making disciples in all ages. It can make disciples of us again in our uncertain century and give us a disciple's certainty again, if we will give him a hearing. If we will do him the honor of hearing him out on his terms, we can hear again the call which he once heard. And the Spirit which works in his book can make us capable of heeding that "Follow Me!" too. The Christ who called Matthew can be our Christ, to shape and mold our wills with His whole gift and His whole claim of grace. He will write the Law into our hearts, make pure and acceptable our worship, and put serene confidence into our bread-and-butter lives. He will equip us for conflict with the irreligious and the falsely religious world about us and make us capable of doing what His disciples must do, without harshness and without feverish selfwill, with prayer and with love. He will give us courage for the narrow way and the strait gate. He will close our ears to seductive prophecy and close our eyes to the false splendor of "successful" churchmanship. He will enable us to live our lives of eschatological responsibility under His Messianic word, a life in which hearing and doing are one.

The Christ whom Matthew proclaims will send us out on missionary paths that run through all the world, paths of defeat and persecution, perhaps, but also paths on which we can witness to Him, speak in the power of His Spirit, and win His victories according to His will. He can and will make us strong to face the divisions and confusions of our day undismayed. He will give us eyes to see the Kingdom where men see it not, in the Sower who goes out to sow His seed. He will give us ears to hear the footfalls of His judgment in the noisy clutter of our world and teach us to know with fear and trembling the precarious preciousness of the grace of God.

He will fit us for fellowship by removing all greatness and all hardness from our hearts, by giving us an eye for His little ones, a heart that can forgive wholly and again and again, and a love which has the courage to tell a brother his fault.

He will plant in our hearts a high hope which will make us faithful to Him within the orders of this world, where He has placed us and where we stand, while we await Him and the new world which He brings. He can give us courage to confess Him and proclaim Him. And He can give us the wise sobriety which can read all history as the trumpets of His advent and the world's rebirth.

He will judge us with His cross and forgive us with His resurrection. He will melt down the stubborn stuff of our heroic manhood and remold us into men of God.

He will make disciples of us; He will make of us the holy, Christian, apostolic church. It will not be a very brilliant church perhaps. Perhaps we shall not be a large church, this church created by the Christ of Matthew; perhaps not a very successful church, not so well integrated in our communities, not so well accepted as we once were. Perhaps we shall even be a persecuted church again.

But we shall be church, real church, His church; and we shall live forever. We shall rise from our graves and break through the gates of death when He shall come and cry once more, "Follow Me!"<sup>xiii</sup>

Surely, we would agree that Franzmann's understanding of discipling fits Matthew's Gospel far better than does "church growth's". Franzmann's simple vision of the church as a fellowship of Christ's disciples rightly permits him to be blind to all the institutional measures of success which so fascinate the Church Growth Movement.

An interesting observation is made by ST. Gaede, an observation that is all the more interesting because Gaede is a professor at Gordon College and obviously not a WELS Lutheran. He writes:

Nor is it possible to demonstrate that the growth of the local church is a biblical imperative. We are implored to love God and our neighbor, spread the gospel, and live lives that glorify the Father, but we are not told, "Seek first the growth of the local body." Nor are we told that the church should not grow, or that stability is good, or that declension is the proper model. We are simply not given any specific guidelines on this issue from Scripture.

But if growth in the local church is neither an absolute good nor a biblical imperative, is it possible that it is the logical outgrowth of being an effective Christian community? In other words, is it the consequence of obedience to God's Word? If so, then should we not be pleased with church growth, and is it not a valid objective?

Once again, the problem here is that no absolute link exists between "true Christianity" and church growth. It may be that loving one's neighbor or sharing the Good News will result in the growth of our particular church (or congregation). If so, we ought to rejoice---not in the growth of our church---but in the growth of Christ's church and the obedience of his people. But we must remember that obedience to God may lead to very different consequences. It may result in the growth of another parish, for example. Or, it may not result in church growth at all. The Bible requires us to say some very unpopular things, especially in the modern world. Confronting modernity with the biblical message on materialism or individualism, for example, will not endear us to its populace. We should not necessarily expect, therefore, that the biblical message will result in either a round of applause or the growth of our local church. Indeed, one might argue that a popular church in the modern world is, by virtue of that fact, suspect.

But that argument would neither be fair nor helpful in our quest to understand the value of growth. For the conclusion we ought to draw is that growth, on its own, is an uninterpretable statistic and somewhat meaningless. It tells us nothing, for example, about the viability, effectiveness, or genuineness of the



Christian community. It may be an indication of evil (as in Jonestown) as well as good (as in Acts 2:37-42). It should bring us neither great joy nor sadness, neither pride nor humiliation. The fact of growth, in and of itself, ought to leave us unmoved.

And yet, for most of us occupying leadership positions in the local church, growth is neither meaningless nor unmoving. It is, instead, intoxicating. It makes us feel good about our church and leads almost inevitably to the conclusion that “we must be doing something right.” It is fun! The question we ought to ask ourselves is, “Why is that so? Why is it that even though growth is neither biblically prescribed, nor inherently good, nor necessarily an indication of true Christianity, we receive such a charge out of it? The answer, I’m afraid, is clear. Though growth says nothing about the veracity of our witness, it says everything about the effectiveness of our organization within a competitive church market. We feel good because we are proud; we are proud because our organization is succeeding; we think we are succeeding because growth is a fundamental indicator of success in a market.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Gaede’s perceptive comments take us right back to the point where we sense a tension between Christianity that is people-oriented and a Christianity that is institution-oriented. Gaede rightly insists that the Bible never says it is God’s will that the institution grow. To imagine that it does is to foster a Pharisaic pride.

We must be deeply troubled when Lutherans blindly accept as true the basic premise of the Church Growth Movement that it is necessarily God’s will for churches as institutions to grow. To buy into this premise is to purchase no end of confusion, false pride and needless discouragement.

Gaede also provides this sober-minded conclusion, and balance, to his previously quoted comments: Bridling the spirit of seeking growth for growth’s sake in the modern church will not be easy. We are too thoroughly drenched with the assumption of the value of growth---in everything from business (where it might be a proper goal) to zucchini squash (where there ought to be limits!)---to check its march with hope alone. On the other hand, to stubbornly resist growth at every turn is not only to blunder into an equally problematic error, it is also to impute to growth an overly ominous quality. Like those who desire growth, those who despise it are giving it a value it simply does not deserve.<sup>xv</sup>

### **“Church Growth” Confuses the Means of Grace**

Consider the contrast between: 1) the pastor depicted in Martin Luther’s “Sacristy Prayer” who administers the Word with fear and trembling and depends on God for every blessing; and 2) the pastor who has absorbed all that “church growth” has to offer, coolly calculates every move and shrewdly manages his church toward growth and success. Is it by the humble use of the Word that the Church grows or by the best business methods?

The president of Goshen Biblical Seminary, John H. Yoder, charges that “church growth people assume you can make Christians the way you make cars and sausages.”<sup>xvi</sup>

How are people made Christians? How does the Church grow? How does it happen that people are led to become disciples of Jesus Christ? Our Lutheran Confessions answer: “The Father will not do this without means, but has ordained for this purpose His Word and Sacraments.”<sup>xvii</sup> The Bible teaches: “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). The Bible is also filled with examples that show how every person who ever became a disciple of Jesus Christ was drawn to discipleship through the Word.

The Church Growth Movement at least implies that other “principles” must be put into practice if people are to become Christians. The impression is even given that these sociological principles are the means which bring people into the church and by which the church grows. When pressed on this point, “church growth” people will credit the Holy Spirit with the work of making Christians. Lutheran “church growth” people like to say that a greater appreciation for the Means of Grace is a contribution Lutherans can make to the Church Growth Movement. Obviously, “church growth” is not entirely clear on the Means of Grace.

If there's a problem with the Means of Grace, there's certain to be a problem with the understanding of man and his innate spiritual hostility toward the Gospel. It's not surprising to hear the "church growth" assertion that people's opposition to the Gospel is more "social" than it is "theological"!

If there's a problem with the Means of Grace, there's also going to be a misunderstanding of mankind's greatest need, forgiveness. It's not surprising to note the importance "church growth" attaches to sociological surveys which rate "reaction to guilt and fear" as twelfth among the reasons why people join the church. Nor are we surprised that a "church growth" man like Robert Schuller would make the sociological discovery that people's greatest felt need was for self-esteem and then would grow a church by meeting that need. We aren't surprised because we understand that people don't "know the thoughts of God" except the Spirit reveal those thoughts to them through the Word.

It's encouraging to note the sensitivity to the Means of Grace that generally exists in Lutheran "church growth" circles. But is it a solution to simply add the Means of Grace to everything that is "church growth"? The problem is more complex. The whole emphasis in "church growth" is not on the Spirit or the Means of Grace; it's on discovering and identifying those sociological principles which promote the growth of churches and those which hinder growth. The task, then, simply becomes one of implementing the right practices, eliminating the harmful ones, and watching churches grow.

If we are only talking about what some call "common sense" approaches to the work of the church or good "tactics" that the church can use, there is no problem. However, "church growth" elevates the principles above approaches and tactics. "Church growth" gives the unmistakable impression that the church must use "church growth" insights if the church is truly to obey the Great Commission.

A long time ago J. Ph. Koehler wrote: "As far as the gospel is concerned no forms are needed beyond the word and sacrament." He went on to say: "For any other forms and decrees there is no such institution of the Lord; to deduce God's decree from historical happenings and examples out of the life of the apostolic church is ill-advised; and all such matters are covered by the word of the apostle that we should not allow ourselves to be satcheled and shackled to the external scruples of man."<sup>xviii</sup>

The observation Koehler made in the second decade of this century still has validity for the present decade. To say that "church growth" principles, programs and procedures must be used is to be "satcheled and shackled to the external scruples of man."

This understanding is important for several reasons: 1) We want no one subtly led to believe that the church is growing because he is doing all the "right" things rather than by the power of the Spirit working through the Means of Grace; 2) We want to retain the freedom to use forms and methods that seem appropriate to our individual churches without being criticized for their use; 3) We don't want to burden another's conscience for failing to use forms and methods that are of human origin not divine.

### **"Church Growth" Gives Growth Priority Over Truth**

Robert Schuller writes:

What the church needs, more than anything else, is a new reformation---nothing less will do! Without a new theological reformation, the Christian church as the authentic body of Christ may not survive . . .

Yes, what we need in the worldwide Christian church today is nothing less than a new reformation. Where the sixteenth-century Reformation returned our focus to sacred Scriptures as the only infallible rule for faith and practice, the new reformation will return our focus to the sacred right of every person to self-esteem! The fact is, the church will never succeed until it satisfies the human being's hunger for self-value . . .

Somehow in our sincere effort to reform our church theology today, we must avoid the destructive and divisive results that occurred within the church in the sixteenth century. Where the Protestant Reformation was a reactionary movement, the twentieth-century Reformation must be a reconciling

movement. Luther and Calvin, we know, looked to the Book of Romans in the Bible for their primary inspiration. Here they, unknowingly, possessed more by the spirit of St. Paul than by the Spirit of Jesus Christ? Are we not on safer grounds if we look to our Lord's words to launch our reformation?<sup>xix</sup>

The theology of Robert Schuller and his attempt at a new reformation are not the concern of this paper. Schuller's own comments, though, make it clear that his theology is not the theology of a church which is still one in spirit with the Lutheran Reformation.

His theology notwithstanding Robert Schuller is endorsed by "church growth" leaders; his church is cited as a "how to" when it comes to growing a church. Why? It can only be because Robert Schuller's church has grown so rapidly.

How can a Lutheran "church growth" spokesman like Kent Hunter be so naive as to write:

Whereas Martin Luther and the reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century brought about a reformation of theology, many people today believe that the Church Growth Movement is bringing about a reformation in practice. If this is correct, the church today is in the midst of another reformation. The Church Growth Movement doesn't reform the theology of the Reformation. It is based on it. Church growth puts into practice the great truths of Scripture which were emphasized by Luther and the reformers.<sup>xx</sup>

When a "church growth" man like Robert Schuller expressly indicates his desire to reform the theology of the Reformation, it is nonsense for a Lutheran to maintain that the Church Growth Movement "doesn't reform the theology of the Reformation." About the only conclusion one can draw is that the consuming passion for growth blinds people to new theologies.

This conclusion appears valid when we consider the "church growth" attitude toward charismatic churches. Charismatic churches have been growing. In "church growth" eyes that means they must have something. No wonder C. Peter Wagner is "open-minded" when it comes to the validity of the Charismatic Movement! No wonder there is so much confusion about charismatic gifts in "church growth" literature! No wonder there is openly expressed concern within the LCMS with regard to Kent Hunter and his position on spiritual gifts!

It's a sad and dangerous day for Christianity when a church or a denomination is evaluated by purely pragmatic questions like: "Is it growing?" or "Do its programs work?" This is especially frightening when we recall again how Jesus described the signs of the end: "...and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people." Jesus made it clear that growth in numbers is not always synonymous with spiritual health. And certainly not in these times!

### **"We Can Learn from the Sectarians Too."**

Admittedly, the tone of the paper has been negative to this point. The reader might expect a round condemnation of everything that smacks of "church growth", even the call for a crusade to tear down church signs. No such condemnation will be forthcoming. J. Ph. Koehler makes the sane observation: "We can learn from the sectarians too." In fact, Koehler reminds us that the business methods now in use and accepted in our U.S. Lutheran churches "were primarily absorbed from the sectarians."<sup>xxi</sup>

It is a sane position and a reasonable paraphrase of Koehler to say: "We can learn from the 'church growth' people too." Obviously, there are many in our Synod who find value in certain "church growth" insights and those insights will keep popping up in our circles. If our exposure to the Church Growth Movement causes us to examine again the way we go about the work of making disciples in our own churches, then there's been benefit. If reading a "church growth" article leads us to eliminate some way-of-doing-things that had nothing to do with Scripture truth, but turned people away from our church, then there's been benefit.

The negatives have been emphasized in this paper out of concern that we handle "church growth" with great care. We will likely find value in certain tactics, methods and insights that are learned from the Church Growth Movement. It would be a serious mistake, though, to accept their supposedly Scriptural philosophy that

“growth” and “success” are God’s will for every congregation. To impose “church growth” methods on our congregations as a new set of forms which must be used to spread the Gospel would be disastrous. Nor dare we value growth so highly that we would in any way be willing to compromise God’s truth.

It isn’t the purpose of this paper to provide “one-hundred-good-ideas” from the Church Growth Movement. It may be of value, though, to share a set of “theses” developed by Prof. David Valleskey. The theses are intended to help sift through “church growth” concepts and develop an approach to “church growth” which is truly Lutheran and Biblical. Prof. Valleskey first offered the theses in his Seminary Summer Quarter course. He emphasizes that they are offered for discussion and consideration, not as a final statement. The theses appear in this paper with his permission.

### **Toward A Biblical, Lutheran Theology of Church Growth**

- 1) Without Christ mankind is without hope and totally lost and condemned (Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:22; Eph 2:12).
- 2) Mankind’s greatest need is the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God (Rom 6:23; Eph 2:3b).
- 3) Through the message of the Law, God reveals to the world its sin and convicts it of its lostness (Rom 3:20; Rom 7:7).
- 4) Through his perfect life and willing death Christ has redeemed the world (Rom 5:6-8; 3:23-24; 5:18-19).
- 5) As a result of Christ’s work of redemption God has declared the whole world to be not guilty (universal, objective justification) (Rom 5:18-19; 2 Cor 5:19-21).
- 6) Through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, God brings to the world the message of the finished work of Christ (2 Cor 5:18-19).
- 7) The Gospel in Word and Sacraments is the living, powerful Means of Grace by which God saves lost and condemned people (Rom 1:16; Heb 4:12; 1 Pet 1:23; Tit 3:5; 1 Pet 3:21).
- 8) Christ has commissioned his Church to make disciples by using the Means of Grace (Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15-16; Lk 24:47-48).
- 9) The Church is to make disciples of “all nations.” Christians, therefore, should not limit their disciple-making outreach to “our kind of people.”
- 10) A disciple is a believer in Jesus Christ (Mt 28:19-20; compare with Mk 16:15-16) (individual, subjective justification).
- 11) The Church’s commission is to plant and water the seed of the Word, trusting in God to make it grow and produce disciples. This is “church growth” in the biblical sense (1 Cor 3:6-7).
- 12) Conversion is a miracle of God, solely the work of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and not in any way a self-determined decision of an individual or group of individuals. The conversion of others close to me will not make it easier for me to be converted. (Eph 2:1; Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 2:14; 1 Cor 12:3).
- 13) One who has been converted by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel has been born again and has become a member of the Kingdom of God, that is, the Holy Christian Church (Jn 3:3,5).
- 14) While there may be converted people outside of visible gatherings of people around the Means of Grace (normally local congregations), there are no converted people outside of the Holy Christian Church, the *Una Sancta*.
- 15) Church leaders need to be more concerned about what makes the Church grow than what makes churches grow.
- 16) It is God-pleasing to appeal to a convert to join with others who have united in a fellowship around the Means of Grace, i.e. a local Christian congregation. This appeal, however, is in the realm of sanctification rather than justification (Heb 10:24-25; 2 Pet 3:18).

- 17) Care must be taken to maintain the distinction that sanctification follows justification rather than coincides with or is identified with justification, that sanctification is seen as that which is necessary, but not that which is necessary for salvation (1 Jn 4:19; Rom 3:28; Jn 15:1-8).
- 18) The social sciences, which make observations about people and societies in God's creation, may be put to judicious use as servants of the Gospel provided that they do not contradict or eclipse the teachings of the Scriptures on church growth.
- 19) It needs to be borne in mind that, the social sciences in and of themselves can produce only growth of churches but not growth of the Church; only the Gospel produces true Church growth.
- 20) The social sciences can be used to measure that which is visible to the eye, mg, growth of churches, but not that which only God can see, e.g., faith and growth in faith.
- 21) The social sciences are especially helpful and will find their greatest application in the area of what has been called "pre-evangelism," which does not have to do directly with the proclamation of the Gospel.<sup>xxii</sup>

Samuel H. Nafzger, Executive Secretary of the LCMS CTCR, has provided another helpful tool for analysis of "church growth" concepts and programs. His "Questions to Ask" appear in an unpublished paper that was presented to an LC-MS Evangelism Convocation in 1985. The questions are as follows:

- 1) Does this program or technique present the Gospel of Jesus Christ so as to suggest that human beings have the ability within themselves to make a decision for Christ?
- 2) Does this program or technique either directly or indirectly focus attention on what is taking place within the individual rather than on what took place on the cross of Jesus Christ? ... Does it foster the impression that faith itself is a good work that merits God's favor?
- 3) Does this program or technique suggest that there are at least three categories of people—unrepentant sinners, believers or those who have accepted Jesus as Savior but not Lord, and disciples or those who have accepted Christ as both Lord and Savior?
- 4) Does this program or technique give the impression, either directly or indirectly, that spiritual growth is always visible to the human eye and can therefore be measured by statistics and plotted on charts and graphs?
- 5) Does this program or technique create the impression that the acceptance of the Gospel by sinners is attributable to the use of this program or technique?
- 6) Does this program or technique lead to the conclusion that lack of positive results, when this occurs, is attributable to the way it has been implemented?

When we must answer such questions as those listed above positively, then there is the danger of the mixing up of sanctification and justification and thereby of falling into work-righteousness. But we must also be on guard against the opposite error—the separation of faith and good works which results in apathy, lethargy, and indifference. We must therefore also ask ourselves:

- 1) Is the lack of numerical growth in our congregation the result of a failure to prepare carefully and to execute a plan for reaching those people in our community who do not know Christ?
- 2) Is a lack of new members attributable, at least in part, to our failure to keep records and to make use of statistics and measuring devices to spot weaknesses and discover trends?
- 3) Have we made full use of the resources and insights at our disposal -for example, the social sciences, the arts, etc., in proclaiming the Gospel and in furthering Christian nurture?
- 4) Are we guilty of excusing our apathy and indifference for sharing the Gospel through a kind of "glorification of littleness"?
- 5) Do we tend to attribute an absence of numerical growth to "faithfulness" rather than to laziness and inactivity?

When these questions can be answered positively, then we are in danger of separating justification and sanctification and thereby falling into the error of “cheap grace” or indulging in sin.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In conclusion, a personal observation! Without a doubt the greatest value that came out of my work on this paper was listening through the tapes of Prof. David Valleskey’s course on “church growth”. The greatest frustration was that time spent writing the paper prevented me from putting into practice the insights drawn from the course.

It is important and will be beneficial for us to think through “church growth” in our own Synod and congregations. As with every other undertaking, we will do it as sinful human beings encountering always the opposition and deceit of Satan. Godly caution and wisdom are required every step of the way. The assignment still stands:

Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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 28:18-20).

---

<sup>i</sup> “Global Church,” Vol. XXII, No. 1, Jan-March 1985, p. 9.

<sup>ii</sup> “Growth Resource Catalog,” American Institute for Church Growth, p. 2.

<sup>iii</sup> Lyle Schaller, from Forward of C. Peter Wagner’s *Church Growth Strategies That Work*.

<sup>iv</sup> Ernst H. Wendland, “Church Growth Theology,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 78, No. 2. April 1981, p. 117.

<sup>v</sup> Paul Kelm, “The Church Growth Movement: An Explanation and Evaluation,” unpublished paper, p. 2.

<sup>vi</sup> Robert Koester, “Law and Gospel in the Church Growth Movement,” Conference Paper, Dakota-Montana Pastoral Conference, Sept. 1984, p. 29.

<sup>vii</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church To Growth*, (Ventura: Regal Books, 1984) p. 43.

<sup>viii</sup> North American Society for Church Growth, “Growth Partners,” Vol. 3, No. 3, May/June 1986, p. 1.

<sup>ix</sup> Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 8.

<sup>x</sup> Paul Kelm, p. 3.

<sup>xi</sup> Win Arn and Charles Arn, *The Master’s Plan for Making Disciples* (Pasadena: Church Growth Press, 1982), pp. 26-27.

<sup>xii</sup> David Valleskey, “PT 418 – The Church Growth Movement – An Evaluation.” Unpublished class outline, p. 37.

<sup>xiii</sup> Martin Franzmann, *Follow Me; Discipleship According to Saint Matthew* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1961), pp. 225-226.

<sup>xiv</sup> S.D. Gaede, *Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985) pp. 184-186.

<sup>xv</sup> S.D. Gaede, pp. 187-188.

<sup>xvi</sup> Quoted by Ernst H. Wendland, p. 112.

<sup>xvii</sup> “The Formula of Concord, Thor. Decl.” *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921) p. 1087.

<sup>xviii</sup> J. Ph. Koehler, “Our Own Arts and Practices as an Outgrowth of the Law (translation of *Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns*, as it appears in the *Proceedings* of the 35<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 1959), p. 25.

<sup>xix</sup> Robert H. Schuller, *Self Esteem: The New Reformation* (Waco: Word, 1982) pp. 25, 38-39.

<sup>xx</sup> Kent Hunter, *Foundations for Church Growth* (New Haven: Leader, 1983) p. 16.

<sup>xxi</sup> J. Ph. Koehler, p. 25.

<sup>xxii</sup> David Valleskey, pp. 36-38.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Samuel H. Nafzger as quoted by Valleskey, pp. 38-39.