

THE INIQUITY OF CHURCH GROWTH

CAGING THE KINGDOM

It is clear that emphasizing the growth of the churches divides the camp. It is really a divisive topic. How strange when all are presumably disciples of the Lord.

—Donald McGavran, letter to his wife, Sept. 8, 1961

JOHANN FRIEDRICH BOTTGER WAS A GERMAN alchemist who lived between 1682 and 1719. Although Bottger made bold claims, including the ability to make gold, his talents are noted in history by the discovery of the porcelain-making process. The first facility to manufacture this “white gold” was set up in Dresden in 1709. Before long, the Royal Porcelain Manufacture gained a worldwide reputation, with its distinctive pure-white-and-cobalt blue design. Ironically, Bottger’s achievements as an alchemist brought an unexpected consequence. Because of his boasts and early success, August the Strong imprisoned Bottger in order to protect this marvelous new invention and moved the alchemist’s operation to his castle fortress in Meissen. There Bottger was held prisoner so his genius could stay in close proximity to and total control of the king.

Two notes are worth highlighting about Bottger’s life. The first is that you can’t deny his success even though some of his claims are undeniably exaggerated. After all, true gold was never made. Secondly, he was, rather ironically, held captive thanks to his greatest success.

As we turn our attention to the two little words “church” and “growth,” we encounter two realities mirrored by Bottger’s story. The first is the mixed reaction of church leaders over the past four decades to the success of the church growth movement. Despite its accomplishments, the question still looms: Are the greatest purveyors of church growth geniuses or charlatans? Voices stand on both sides. In 1961, the movement’s founder, Donald McGavran, wrote his wife, as we’ve seen, “It is clear that emphasizing the growth of churches divides the camp.” In 2005, Paul Engel and Gary McIntosh wrote, “For nearly half a century proponents and detractors of the Church Growth Movement have presented their viewpoints in various forms. . . . Research has determined that there are five main positions.”¹ If you boil down the positions, it seems that two groups come to the forefront: those that emphasize what the church growth movement accomplished and those that emphasize what it overpromised.

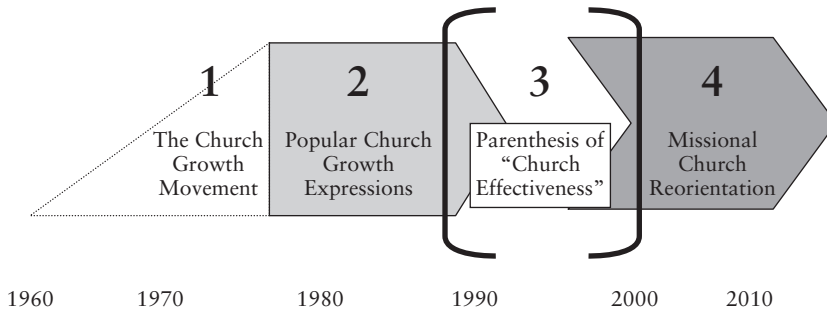
I want to add to the conversation while keeping in mind the importance of visionary leadership. As we recast vision in Part One, my primary concern is rooted in the fact that church growth specialists have always thrown around the *vision* word. This begs the question: Are legitimate critiques of the movement therefore also valid criticism of being visionary? My answer is a vehement no. Yet I am very concerned, as younger leaders move past the church growth paradigm, that they not abandon the development of their minds and hearts for visionary kingdom building.

With such polarity of opinion about church growth, I want to explore the connection to visionary leadership today by looking at both sides of the equation. On the one hand, the movement has made an unquestionable contribution to church history. In this sense, there is true visionary work represented by it. On the other hand, and as with Bottger’s legacy, it seems the greatest hazard for church growth proponents is being held captive by their own success. I suggest that it is not the principles of church growth that deserve the sharpest critique but the hearts of leaders who are imprisoned by too narrow a definition of numerical growth. Visionary leaders today must be wary of such a trap. By defining the primary limitation of church growth, we clearly separate problems associated with the movement from the need to live as a visionary outside of the movement. As a first step, let’s first turn our thoughts toward a definition of church growth.

Zooming Out on “Church Growth”

To better understand how teachings on church growth have evolved, let’s scan the popular perspectives of church growth and leadership in the latter half of the twentieth century. Figure 3.1 shows four components

Figure 3.I. Popular Perspectives of the Church, 1960–2010



or stages. In reality, these stages overlap, but allow my clean lines to present a simple model. I trust you will find this diagram quickly situates any of the books on church leadership you have read. Let's review each stage.

Stage One: The Church Growth Movement

The formal start of the movement traces back to the life of Donald McGavran, a third-generation missionary born in 1897. After three decades of missionary labor, primarily in India, McGavran published *The Bridges of God* in 1955. (In 1956, it was the most widely read book on mission theory.) At this point, two important aspects of McGavran's life are noteworthy. First, he was no ivory-tower thinker. His insights were born out of a deep passion and demonstrated sweat for the Great Commission. Second, he was a voracious learner. For example, he was driven to understand why churches in one village grew 200 percent while churches down the road grew only 10 percent. His passion and learning eventually opened doors for him to teach back in the United States—at a time in life when most kingdom players retire. In 1965, he was invited to become the founding dean at Fuller's School of World Mission. In 1970, he published what is considered to be his magnum opus, *Understanding Church Growth*. It is noteworthy that until 1970 much of McGavran's work and teaching was targeted toward international missions. But more and more pastors from North America were expressing interest in his growth principles, so in 1972 the seminary offered a course for pastors cotaught by Peter Wagner, a professor and former missionary. The following decade brought the strongest days of the movement, with organizations, publications, and influential leaders waving the banner.

McGavran's teaching was driven by trying to answer four basic questions in his ministry:²

What are the causes of church growth?

What are the barriers to it?

What are the factors that can make the Christian faith a movement among some populations?

What principles of church growth are reproducible?

One popular principle espoused by McGavran was the homogeneous principle—the idea that “the gospel spreads more naturally among people through their language and the indigenous forms of their culture, than through alien languages and cultural forms.” Another example of his teaching shows the emphasis on people groups: the idea that “apostolic ministry is more effective when we target people groups than when we target political units of geographic areas.”³ Principles such as these became the staples of pastoral training in our seminaries for decades.

The movement proper began to lose steam, starting with McGavran's death in 1990. Though the words *church growth* would continue to multiply in popular usage, the continuity of a singular “movement voice” waned by the turn of the century.

Stage Two: Popular Church Growth Expressions

With the success of the church growth movement came an explosion of popular church growth expressions, including seminary classes, seminar offerings, books, periodicals, and consulting approaches. You might know a name or two who received their doctor of ministry degree from Fuller at the height of the era. The impressive list of alumni includes Elmer Towns, Kent Hunter, John Vaughan, John Maxwell, Rick Warren, Bob Logan, Bill Sullivan, Leith Anderson, Paul Ford, and Eddie Gibbs. By the late 1970s, the movement had expanded to the point that everyone talked about church growth whether they espoused the specific teachings of McGavran or not. Here are just a few of the books using the words *church* and *growth* either in the title or subtitle, between 1978 and 2000:

Design for Church Growth, by Charles Chaney (1978)

Church Alive! A Fresh Look at Church Growth, by Francis Cotterell (1981)

Leading Your Church to Growth, by Peter Wagner (1984)

Balanced Church Growth, by Ebbie C. Smith (1984)

44 Ways to Increase Church Attendance, by Lyle E. Schaller (1988)

Beyond Church Growth, by Robert Logan (1989)

- The Bonsai Theory of Church Growth*, by Ken Hemphill (1991)
How to Break Growth Barriers, by Carl George (1993)
Kingdom Principles for Church Growth, by Gene Mims (1994)
The Purpose Driven Church, by Rick Warren (1995)
The Church Growth Handbook, by William Easum (1996)
Book of Church Growth, by Thom Rainer (1998)
The Every Church Guide to Growth, by Elmer Towns (1998)

Not only were books proliferating under the church growth banner but entire disciplines became associated with the category. Most notable are survey researchers (George Gallup and George Barna), church marketing (a new industry that created a dozen companies with a national platform), and application of business management to the church (strategic planning).

As the category broadened, criticism grew. It included a preoccupation with “numbers,” inappropriately overlaying “business practices” on the church without theological critique, and observations that most growth was primarily “transfer growth” from neighboring churches and not true “conversion growth.”

But it was hard to tell when criticism was valid or even warranted because much of it didn’t have a clear target. Church growth became a large and nebulous category. Gary McIntosh writes, “The conceptual broadening of the term *church growth* to embrace more and more sub-specializations of ministry and more and more organizations has created to a large extent a popular misunderstanding and wrongful criticism of the Church Growth Movement.”⁴ Examples of subspecialization are church planting, small groups, spiritual warfare, conflict management, change management, marketing, strategic planning, and fundraising. Nevertheless, the movement multiplied. Even though the 1970s represented the strongest decade for the movement proper (stage one in Figure 3.1), the 1980s represented the height of church growth’s popular expression (stage two).

Stage 3: The Parenthesis of “Church Effectiveness”

As the influence of both the formal movement and popular expressions of church growth reached a climax, innovative practitioners began avoiding church growth language, giving rise to the third stage. Ed Stetzer and David Putnam speak to the transition away from growth in this statement: “The movement was filled with methodological mania. Every book promised if you did what they said, your church would grow. Unfortunately, they told you to do different things. Soon pastors were frustrated. They wondered to which guru they should listen.”⁵ Savvy

pastor-leaders began writing about “church health,” bringing the corrective tone of *quality* to the impulse toward quantity. The cover flap of Rick Warren’s *Purpose Driven Church* read, “The issue is church health, not growth!” Warren declared, “If your church is healthy, growth will occur naturally.”⁶ Christian Schwartz’s popular consulting approach, Natural Church Development, also emphasized health over growth. Stetzer and Putnam even refer to a “church health movement.”⁷

A simple Web search, however, reveals more books written on ministry effectiveness than any other topic, including church health. Because there was never an organized movement, I think it is best to view this as a parenthesis, by which I mean to emphasize that effectiveness teaching has no centralized leader or organization as its source, and that its emphasis was relatively short-lived. Some books that mark this window:

Maximizing Your Effectiveness, by Aubrey Malphurs (1995)

Effective Evangelistic Churches, by Thom Ranier (1996)

The Twelve Keys to an Effective Church, by Kennon Callahan (1997)

The Habits of Highly Effective Churches, by George Barna (2001)

Seven Practices of Effective Ministry, by Andy Stanley, Reggie Joiner, and Lane Jones (2004)

A massive backdrop was emerging for this effectiveness emphasis of stage three as a result of large-scale cultural shifts. This is indicated by the gap or break between the parentheses in Figure 3.1.

The shifts have been described as the end of modernity and the dawn of postmodernity.* Within this shift we have and are experiencing the close of “the era of Christendom” and the rise of a “post-Christian era.”

*Again, I am assuming the reader’s understanding; see *The Missional Church* by Darrell Guder and Lois Barrett. Guder writes in his introduction: “In Great Britain during 1983 by the publication of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin’s short monograph *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Church* the concerns raised by the bishop were certainly not new. But as a missionary statesman and leader who had returned after decades in India to minister in Britain, Newbigin analyzed with penetrating clarity the challenge presented by the changing context of Western society. In a word, what had once been a Christendom society was now clearly post-Christian, and in many ways anti-Christian. Newbigin brought into public discussion a theological consensus that had long been forming among missiologists and theologians. He then focused that consensus on the concrete reality of Western society as it has taken shape in this century. His conclusions have mobilized Christian thinkers and leaders on both sides of the Atlantic” (p. 3).

In the era of Christendom, the rise of the church influence in the West gave the Judeo-Christian worldview a level of cultural prominence.* In the post-Christian era, there is no starting point and no embedded influence toward Judeo-Christian values, latent within the culture. Practitioners in this transition increasingly realize the problems of church as usual (the primary indicators being the continued decline of church attendance and the validation that those professing Christianity reflect little difference in life-change factors from those who reject Jesus⁸).

Stage Four: Missional Church Reorientation

As the post-Christian era dawns, a new perspective, stage four, has developed and is accelerating fast. I call it a reorientation because it has emerged from the ashes of Christendom as a new paradigm—not a mere improvement over what preceded it. The idea of the missional church has single-handedly captured the imagination of church leaders of all backgrounds and denominations. Take your pick: from the boomer power pastors of suburbia to the preaching punks of “emergia” and the collared intellectuals of “liturgia,” everyone wants to be missional. But what does it mean? Essentially it is a way of thinking that challenges the church to re-form and reforge its self-understanding (theologically, spiritually, and socially) so that it can relearn how to live and proclaim the gospel in the world. Perhaps the best motto of the reorientation is the imperative to “be the church.” Church is not something you do or a place you go to, but *what you are*.

The missional church concept was being formulated in the ranks of academics decades before it hit the street. The pull-back of this academic rubber band finally released in 1998 with publication of *The Missional Church*. Its author, Darrell Guder, asserts, “The basic thesis of this book

*A short recounting of my dinner conversation tonight with Judy, a woman in her late seventies, illustrates the point. We were at dinner learning about the Protestant Reformation. I thought she was an evangelical, but during dinner I learned that she is not. She explained her dislike of Jesus’ teaching in that he claims to be “the way, the truth, and the life” in John 15. She is put off by Jesus’ assertion of being the “only way.” The remarkable thing is that she also shares a deep interest for Scripture and has attended church regularly her entire life. My point is that although Judy is not a believer, she grew up in the cultural environment of Christendom. Jesus is not Lord of her life, but she would be offended to be considered not Christian. The point of distinguishing the post-Christian era is the reality that people like Judy for the most part will not exist. By and large, people who don’t follow Christ will find little interest in church.

is that the answer to the crisis in the North American church will not be found at the level of method and problem solving. We share the conviction of a growing consensus of Christians in North America that the problem is much more deeply rooted. It has to do with who we are and what we are for. . . . Either we are defined by mission, or we reduce the scope of the gospel and the mandate of the church. Thus, our challenge today is to move from church with mission to missional church.”⁹ Since these words were penned, many have jumped on the missional bandwagon—I believe, for good reason.

FROM DOING TO BEING. The missional reorientation represents an important shift in focus from methodology to identity. Within the first three stages of Figure 3.1, most of the church’s questions dealt ultimately with how-tos of evangelism. Assuming the influence of Christendom, methodology questions ask, “What can we do to reach more people?” In contrast, the church’s question of identity in the disorientation of the post-Christian era asks, “Now that our influence is gone, how do we reshape our self-understanding so we can be like Christ in the world?” Again, this reflects a shift in emphasis away from doing toward being.

The theological launch pad for this emphasis on a re-formed identity of the church is the identity of God Himself. Guder quotes one of the seminal works by David Bosch: the missional church “is put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [is] expanded to include yet another ‘movement’: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church in the world.”¹⁰ Therefore the church’s new identity is a reclarification of its “sentness.” Sending is not something you do, but being sent is something you are.

ATTRACTIVE VS. INCARNATIONAL. There are plentiful implications of this stage four reorientation. One of the most common is the move away from an “attractive” mind-set to an “incarnational” one.¹¹ Attractive means that the church’s basic strategy for reaching the lost revolves around getting “seekers” or the “unchurched” into the church building. Once inside, the opportunity to present the gospel defines the primary opportunity for evangelism. This paradigm reflects the common assumption for most popular church growth expressions. In contrast, the incarnational emphasis of the missional mindset focuses on living and sharing the gospel “where life happens.” (Just as for Jesus, who “walked across the street” between heaven and earth by putting on

“flesh”—to incarnate.) The importance is placed on the church “disassembling” itself for the primary work of evangelism in the nooks and crannies of everyday life. In the attractional mode, big church buildings are important, and the church gathered is the consummation of evangelism. In the incarnational mode, fluid and flexible communities of faith are important; the church scattered is consummation of evangelism. The rallying cry against the attractional model is that the church should be measured by its sending capacity, not its seating capacity.

LOST PEOPLE: PROSPECTS, OR THE PEOPLE JESUS MISSES MOST? To further illustrate the distinction, a church’s language about the people it wants to reach quickly exposes an attractional or incarnational mind-set. Southern Baptists have traditionally referred to potential members as “prospects.” This sales term does little to edify the relational development with unbelievers outside of church walls. Rather, it defines success as “selling” the church and getting people to join, that is, getting them inside the church building. Years ago, Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church articulated a core value of “Lost people matter to God, therefore they matter to us.” I have always appreciated Hybels’s evangelistic fervor, but this articulation connotes an attractional mind-set. The value is a propositional statement, not a gesture of affection. As a hard, impersonal fact it underscores their primary strategy to get people to the “seeker service.” Recently, Willow Creek completed a capital campaign for more than \$100 million to expand their facility to this end. But the heartbeat of the missional church has found different language to carry a renewed identity of being sent. A growing church plant outside of Phoenix calls unbelievers “the precious.” This term cuts to the heart. It sends people out on the constant journey to know, to help, and to love precious people every day. Or take the approach of Jim Henderson, a megachurch pastor of evangelism who got fed up with typical methods. He suggests that the emphasis in the parables of the lost coin and sheep is not on what the sheep and coin feel but what God the Father feels. Rather than referring to unbelievers as lost people, he adapted his language to say “the people Jesus misses most.”¹² The shift in language assumes that followers of Christ will likewise have people they miss most. The difference in word choice may seem subtle, but it moves the idea of evangelizing from something we do—church-inspired and project-oriented—to something we embody—personally inspired and life-oriented. These small shifts in terminology represent quantum shifts in identity, because they lead Christ followers to be the church and not just go to church.

Unwrapping the Bad Rap

Having put church growth in context, what are the iniquities of the church growth movement that make it inadequate for today? If you listen to the critiques, I believe you'll find that the answer lies in not what the movement taught per se, but in the questions that the movement was trying to solve. As Donald McGavran and his followers developed church growth methodology, it seems that they were doing important kingdom work, *given their set of problems and presuppositions*. Their problems started by trying to understand dramatic variations in evangelism effectiveness on the mission fields of India and ended with trying to reverse declining church attendance in North America. Their presuppositions were bound within Christendom; they worked when Christianity was a viable, latent force within Western culture. They were not dealing with the postmodern shift that we face today. Rather, they were trying to figure out better evangelism *methodology* within the paradigm of accepted Christianity. Keep in mind that McGavran's earliest thinking, which I've previously referenced, was chiseled from his missionary work in India as early as the 1920s. Approximately fifty years after McGavran's influence began, it became clear that change was imminent. One of the most significant events in identifying the shift to a post-Christian era came in 1983 with publication of Bishop Newbigin's *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Church*.¹³ This short monograph recognized the changes that were occurring and initiated conversation about the future of the church.

Now if the set of problems and presuppositions change (to new ones we are now facing), does this make the conclusions of the church growth era wrong? No, it just makes them less applicable. For example, do I rag on my grandfather if he can't figure out how to wind-up his quartz watch? Of course not. Instead, I gently tell him that the darn watch doesn't need to wind up anymore.

People often make bullet lists of positive and negative contributions of the church growth movement, but I propose a critique that I hope is as useful as it is simple. First, let's salute Donald McGavran as a man who labored for the gospel before the dawn of the post-Christian era. Dare I say that this missionary had some brilliant observations? Second, let's identify the real problem more clearly.

Church Growth vs. Growth Idolatry

Much of the bad rap for church growth stems from the concern over a preoccupation with numbers. The idea is that too much focus on

quantity—getting people through the doors of the church—dilutes some other emphasis on quality (however the church chooses to define it, for example as spiritual growth or theological depth). But does an inordinate focus on church attendance come from the growth principles themselves, or from something deeper within the leader’s heart? Is it possible that the real culprit is not the movement per se but a “growth idolatry” lurking in the leader’s life? Growth idolatry is the unconscious belief, *on the soul level*, that things are not OK with me if *my* church is not growing. I have struggled with this sin, and I know many other leaders do too.

An idol is anything we add to Jesus in order to make life work. The irony is that in the call to preach the gospel many ministers fail to apply the gospel personally in ways that free their heart from a performance trap. This performance, of course, is measured most easily by church attendance, so the temptation to compare is always as close as our heartbeat. For some, the competition nurtured through sports fanaticism or market indicators magnifies the intensity of having to grow. When it’s time to attend a pastor’s gathering, deep emotions are connected to how the church is doing. If it’s growing, we can’t wait to find subtle ways to tell our ministry colleagues. If it’s not, we hope no one asks (or we just don’t attend the group). One of my closest friends in ministry confessed to me that the worst year of his life was the first year his church did not grow. Addicted to a track record of 15 percent attendance growth over ten years, he saw the first year of attendance plateau, hitting him like the black plague.

Show Me the Bigger Box!

The result of growth idolatry is the default vision of the “bigger box” church. The ever-present vision for campus expansion and larger buildings is the epitome of the attractional model. Are there other ways to expand the kingdom? Yes, but growth idolatry strongly persuades us that kingdom growth must mean numerical growth of our local church. So I ask, who really wanted the bigger box: the church growth principle? the people in the church? the pastor? As Larry Osborne of North Coast Church always says, “People like it small, but leaders like it big.” Thus we return to Bottger’s ironic dilemma of being imprisoned because of his own success. The problem in applying some good methods to grow is that they work. When they do, we open a door to the possibility of becoming a slave to the growth in attendance at our church. Howard Hendricks understood this when he exhorted us as young pastors, “I am not fearful for your failure; I am fearful for your success.”

I see growth idolatry reflected most often in three scenarios. The first is when churches exhibit little financial generosity outside of their local ministry. One pastor I know has a vision of planting thousands of churches in his lifetime. But with each year of success and more resources to invest in planting, the mother church seems to grow ever stingier. The second is when churches get their bigger building but don't know what to do next. I did a funeral with a pastor in St. Louis years ago. As we drove from the gravesite, he confessed that after moving into their \$10 million facility, he was completely at a loss when it came to the church's vision. Instead of discovering his Church Unique and clarifying a new vision, growth idolatry had demanded the bigger box. The third scenario is rapid expansion of the multisite movement. Although multisite is a strategic option for many, it can serve the growth idolatry of some who would be better off planting churches than leveraging one teacher across other local venues.

A poignant statement in the vein of growth idolatry was made by Gordon MacDonald. He posed the issue years ago at the Willow Creek Summit in this way: "I have wondered if our evangelical fervor to change the world is not driven in some part by the inability to change ourselves." Pointing the drive of more impact back to a brokenness within, God used his question to help me see my own idolatry that day. Reggie McNeal offers another reflection on the same problem: "Unfortunately it [the church growth movement] fell victim to an idolatry as old as the Tower of Babel, the belief that we are the architects of the work of God. As a result we have the best churches men can build, but are still waiting for the church that only God can get the credit for."¹⁴

Visionary Leadership Transcends the Church Growth Movement

The ultimate take-away from this chapter comes from the question asked earlier: Is the importance for developing visionary leadership necessarily tied to the heyday of church growth? Popular church growth practitioners threw around the vision word all the time. But the art of vision didn't originate within it and is in no way bound by it. For now, I hope that you can separate out any critiques of church growth from the practice of being visionary. In summary, I would suggest:

- The church growth movement was a visionary movement that offered helpful principles within the context of the era of Christendom.

- It's hard to critique the movement because eventually so many popular methodologies used the language of church growth that its definition was significantly blurred.
- The primary culprit of popular church growth methodology—the iniquity of church growth—is not the teaching in and of itself but the tendency to nurture growth idolatry in the pastor's heart.
- The need for visionary leadership must be separated from both nuanced critiques of the church growth movement generally and from the root problems of growth idolatry.

The next two parts of this book continue to place the practice of visionary leadership in a sphere that transcends the church growth teaching of the past fifty years. At this point, it suffices to acknowledge Jesus as the greatest visionary who ever lived. Whose footsteps ever showed a clearer sense of origin, mission, and destiny? If we aspire to follow him, let's not falter in our vision work because of a short season in church history marked by growth idolatry.

We thank the Lord that *He* promised to build *His* church. The Lord is the builder; we are not. The Lord is the owner; we are not. The power of Hades will not prevail against Jesus our Savior and our Visionary.