

DR. DONALD A. MCGAVRAN AND THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

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In 1959, in the introduction to Donald A. McGavran's *How Churches Grow*, the highly perceptive Hendrik Kraemer wrote, "This is an excellent and much needed book. It will be of great use in the overhauling which missionary strategy must receive. . . . The emphasis on a more spontaneous, mobile way of mission is greatly needed." The increase of interest in "Church Growth" in mission is well marked by the number of publications which expand the theme and which apply its methods to field situations.

Notable among books which assist in this reworking of missionary strategy are *Church Growth in Mexico* by D.A. McGavran, John Huegel and Jack Taylor (Eerdmans, 1963); Bishop J. W. Pickett's *Dynamics of Church Growth* (Abingdon, 1962) and *Church Growth and Group Conversion* (Institute of Church Growth, 1964); Clark Scanlon's *Church Growth Through Theological Education* (ICG, 1962); James Sunda's *Church Growth in West New Guinea* (Lucknow, 1963); Keith Hamilton's *Church Growth in the High Andes* (Lucknow, 1963); William R. Read's *New Patterns of Church Growth in Brazil* (Eerdmans, 1965); and McGavran's recent joint effort with Calvin Guy, Melvin L. Hodges and Eugene A. Nida, *Church Growth and Christian Mission* (Harper and Row, 1965). Now fresh from the press come two more significant works in this channel of thought. J. B. Grimley and G.E. Robinson give us *Church Growth in Central and Southern Nigeria* (Eerdmans, 1966) and R.E. Shearer *Wildfire: Church Growth in Korea* (Eerdmans, 1966). The *Church Growth Bulletin* from the Institute of Church Growth, 135 North Oakland, Pasadena, California, 91101, is the prime organ of thinking in this important area.

The foundational concepts of "Church Growth," so well embodied in Dr. McGavran's earlier work *Bridges of God* and then more fully in *How Churches Grow* (1959), is most succinctly presented in the introductory and concluding chapters of *Church Growth and the Christian Mission* (1965) and in the article "Wrong Strategy, The Real Crisis in Missions" (*IRM*, Oct., 1965, pp. 451-461). Dr. McGavran has a glowing optimism at

the heart of his writings, an optimism which draws deeply on the Christian doctrine of hope. He feels that the Sovereign God who has commissioned the church will not leave it adrift without the means for fulfillment. His sense of history is strong and his experience of faith in the God of history is likewise strong.

"Church Growth" urges the missionary strategist to be opportunistic. Where there are fields ripe to harvest the forces and funds of missions ought to be poured in to reap. The resources are limited and must be deployed for the maximum effect in church planting. God-given opportunities should not be treated lightly. Kraemer's appreciation of the need for "a more spontaneous, mobile way of mission" is in reference to this. If one is to read the signs of history and contemporary urgency rightly, thorough survey must be made. The missionary leader can see in "hundreds of matchless laboratories which 160 years of modern missions has provided" what leads to productive labor, and at the same time scan the fields of the world to discover which areas might be those most responsive to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is why "Church Growth" books abound in charts and statistics. Where is the church growing? At what rate does it grow? Why does it grow or why does it not? Of McGavran it has been said "He wants to know what is happening on every mission field, why it is happening and what can be done to fulfill the true aim of missions in a greater measure," and that aim is "the conversion of peoples and the growth of the church."

Opposition to a static view of mission is intrinsic in "Church Growth" thinking. After quoting from the *Willigen Report* of 1952, "the missionary enterprise is in great measure a colossal system of inter-church aid, with relatively little pioneer evangelistic advance," McGavran notes with regret that this "terrific assessment frightened no one" especially since it meant "that missions are doing much more important things than winning men to Christ and multiplying churches" (*How Churches Grow*, p. 12). "Church Growth" consistently deals strongly with the dangers of institutionalism in mission. Without de-emphasizing the significance of "Church Building" McGavran insists on "Church Planting" as basic and not to be subsumed under any other generally less significant heading on the agenda of missionary business, for "regardless of how effective a church may be in its educational, social, or community program, if it is not definitely increasing its outreach

with the message of Christ to new peoples who accept Him as Lord, then the church is already a static institution" (Howard A. Yoder's Introduction to *Church Growth in Mexico*, pp. 6 and 7). McGavran again uses history to gain perspective for missionary strategy as he points out that the five great drives of missions from 1925 to 1955 have not led to an advance in church planting. These included turning mission into service of mankind, turning the church over to national leadership, specialization in methodology, founding of agencies such as I.M.C., and the ecumenical drive. These were often good in themselves, says McGavran, but ineffective in the foundational task of discipling men for Christ.

The "Church Growth" emphasis often finds itself in conflict with the more academic or theological presentation of the mission of the church. A reader of *Church Growth and Christian Mission* observed that "this is Hocking's *Rethinking Missions* in reverse" (p. 232). A most obvious example of this is McGavran's reply to Professor J.C. Hoekendijk's article *The Call to Evangelism* (*IRM*, April, 1950; and WCC Dept. of Missionary Studies II #7). Hoekendijk's treatment of mission, while erudite, unnecessarily complicates the issue of evangelism and in fact obscures it in his insistence on the integration in evangelistic operation of *kerygma*, *koinonia* and *diakonia*, a widely quoted triad. McGavran in his *Discussion on Evangelism* (WCC Dept. of Missionary Studies III #2) replies, "is this not needlessly involved? Will 'the saints' in ordinary churches consider this a clarion call to evangelism? Can the illiterate multitudes grasp this complicated concept? And is it biblical? I do not thus read my New Testament. . . . Peter and Paul would never have said 'The hollowness of your koinonia cancels the effectiveness of your kerygma. Stop and perfect yourselves before you say another word about Jesus Christ'" (p. 7). He adds "a section of Christian Mission today is wandering in a maze. . . . In some circles everything is called mission. . . . In other circles, correct theological doctrines are substituted for an objective reconciliation of man to God. . . . How can we find our direction again? The way out. . . is to recognize that the actual planting of countable churches is a chief end of mission. Evangelism is not correct theory. Evangelism is seeking and saving sinners. . . . Evangelism is all Christian acts done with intention to transmit the treasure we have in earthen vessels" (p. 9. See also *Church Growth Bulletin* Vol. 1 #2).

“Church Growth” methodology is entirely compatible with the main missionary thrusts of our time. It fits well with the indigenous principle and certainly with the Evangelism-in-Depth effort, since much that is involved in planning and executing a nationwide outreach is a natural avenue for “Church Growth” stress. The “people movements” idea is part and parcel of Dr. McGavran’s emphasis and this not to the exclusion of individual commitment to Jesus Christ, for men need Christ and not just Christian influence in their society or the crossfertilization of religion.

A valuable caution is issued in *Church Growth and Christian Mission*. The name “mission” is by no means a guarantee of success in World Evangelism. In conservative circles there has often been an unquestioning acceptance of anything named “mission” if its theology falls into the orthodox pattern even if it lacks vision to undergird its zeal. In non-conservative ranks there has been considerable confusion as to what evangelism is. “Classically, evangelism has meant proclaiming Christ and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church. But today we read about ‘industrial evangelism’ and ‘inner city evangelism’ whose primary aim seems to be neither to win men to Christian discipleship nor to multiply self-propagating churches, but rather to have existing Christians enter into dialogue on important ethical and moral issues with the key leaders of industrial society. Should this be called evangelism?” (*Church Growth and Christian Mission*, p. 231).

There is no question that “Church Growth” is a healthy corrective to many of the evils that befall the church in its endeavor to evangelize the world. There is a needed sharpening of focus here, a call for commitment, a stress on essentials which should aid remarkably in missionary thinking and practice. This is reflected in the books we look at here.

Wildfire: Church Growth in Korea, by Roy Shearer, is a meaningful book because it sprang from the author’s desire to answer the question, “How, if possible, can a Western missionary actually be involved in helping a younger church to grow?” (p. 9.) It was written during a first missionary furlough and took its form from contact with the Institute of Church Growth, then in Eugene, Oregon. The book deals primarily with the Presbyterian work since the author is a Presbyterian and this denomination has experienced the greatest numerical growth in Korea. There is, however, a chapter on the

Methodist Church in Korea and one on "Other Protestant" churches.

Some interesting facts emerge in the picture of church growth in Korea. The environment of evangelism is rural and religionless, since 90.25% of the South Koreans claimed no religion in 1962. In this setting the church in Korea did grow like WILDFIRE. This was, however, limited to certain areas of the country. Further the revival of 1907 was a tremendous event for the church, but it did not directly lead to great church growth. Rather it seems to have been a consolidating event, a spiritual deepening given to a church already involved in evangelism. Shearer also takes some exception to the theory that the "Nevius method" is solely responsible for rapid growth in Korea, though he sees it as a notable factor.

In the call for "missionary action" the author asks, "When we find that one area is growing while another in the same country is not, what do we do about it?" To this he replies, "we should use those approaches which most effectively communicate the Gospel" and "we should concentrate our limited forces on areas where there is response" (p. 220). As to the overall effect, "nothing wins men to Christ like good Church growth" (p. 221). The answer to the author's question posed in the introduction lies here. The young missionary is to give himself to church planting carried out in wisdom derived under God from thorough examination of opportunities available.

The book is filled with valuable charts and maps which support its purpose. It is also a good introduction to the history of Christianity in Korea and, in fact, to much that is going on in modern missions.

Church Growth in Central and Southern Nigeria, by John B. Grimley and Gordon E. Robinson, is actually two books. Grimley gives the first 236 pages on Central Nigeria and Robinson presents Southern Nigeria in pages 237-379. Each is a complete unit in itself, with its own introduction and bibliography; they share the table of contents and the index.

Central Nigeria has been evangelized since 1920, mostly by missions from the United States. Since 1950 a change has been noted, for while prior to this the work was given to the "mission station approach" after this came the beginning of people move-

ments as numbers turned to Christ. The field is ideal for the study of "Church Growth."

The author, a 20-year veteran of Church of the Brethren work in the field, travelled extensively in compiling his materials. His time as a Research Fellow at the Institute of Church Growth in 1962-1963 aided him in his work as an observer.

The book is well laid out: Part I, "The Setting for Church Growth;" Part II, "Indigenous Church Growth;" Part III, "The Dynamics of Church Growth." The last is most interesting in principles and thorough documentation. Grimley sees that "the supreme dynamic is the power of God to salvation" and that "the power of prayer cannot be emphasized too greatly and the infilling of the Holy Spirit" (p. 125). To this he adds the sacrifice of African and missionary members of the Church. Then he notes, "some significant forces that make for church growth, however, have not been recognized. These are the cultural and social forces that determine how societies change, how innovations occur, how churches grow, and how peoples become Christian" (p. 125). The author feels that as in the Book of Acts, so today there should be "movements to Christ" among the people of areas. His account of Central Nigeria shows much of what should and can happen.

The foreword to Robinson's *Church Growth in Southern Nigeria* is written by Sir Francis Ibiam, Governor of the Eastern Region of Nigeria, and a Christian. In it he is critical of earlier missions. "One gets the impression that the authorities had no idea that missions should metamorphose to living churches and that these churches should grow to such heights as would require Nigerians in turn to be evangelizers of their own country" (p. 240).

All of Robinson's six chapters are of interest. He takes into account "Prophetism and Church Growth" as well as the usual Church Growth services. "How Nigerians Become Christians," a part of the last chapter, is a vital part of the author's study and takes meaning from the statistic that four to seven million nominal Christians are part of a receptive population. These have already set themselves apart from Islam and Paganism and their children are a ripe field for church growth.

Among problems that need solution Robinson sees the "failure to keep accurate record of progress and make adjustments in policy, emphases and budget distribution needed to secure maximum church growth," and "evangelism . . . and the actual planting

of Churches, is neglected far too much. Church leaders, missionaries, pastors and laymen involve themselves in multitudinous activities that are good but are not bringing people to personal commitment to Christ" (p. 364. Cf. "Eliminating the Underbrush" in *Church Growth and Christian Mission*). His findings thus underscore the central theses of "Church Growth." The reader cannot help but feel that the problem is not one which exists on distant fields alone.

This joint book is a "must" for the missionary strategist and thinker but it reads well and would be valuable placed in the hands of the concerned layman. It serves to give a strong sense of what mission is about, a sense of participation in world evangelism, and it provides that which the enlightened mind must have to pray to the Lord of the Harvest.