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# A Wesleyan Perspective on Church Growth?

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by Howard A. Snyder

A great deal of energy and money has been devoted to church growth in the past ten years. Today church growth as a movement and as an approach to the life and mission of the church is probably at its peak of influence. Many denominations and thousands of local churches in North America are “into” church growth in varying degrees. In the light of this, it is appropriate for *The Asbury Seminarian* to devote this issue to the growing church growth movement.

Does church growth represent an authentic moving of the Holy Spirit in the church today? And is there a particular Wesleyan perspective on church growth?

One approach would be to take the church growth movement on its own terms and measure its impact statistically. Has church growth had any significant impact on North American church membership? This is a legitimate question and should be answered on the basis of thorough research. Church growth leaders have done a good job of evaluating the statistical effectiveness of Evangelism in Depth, Here’s Life America, and the Billy Graham crusades. (Note the work especially of Peter Wagner and Win Arn.) The same kind of analysis needs to be undertaken to assess the impact of church growth.

The major focus here, however, is not on statistics. Rather, it is on theology — and particularly on ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. Without going into a major analysis, I would like to make several brief points about the church growth movement and attempt to show where the major issues lie, as I see them. Perhaps this can serve as a helpful introduction to the discussion of church growth contained in this issue of *The Asbury Seminarian*.

1) The first and most obvious point is that *John Wesley himself provides an important perspective on the whole church growth question*. It is unfortunate that John Wesley is so little read today,

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even by “Wesleyans” — although there are signs that his theological and practical importance is being rediscovered. Both Wesley’s *Journal* and his sermons provide insights for several questions raised by church growth advocates in our day.

A couple of examples from his *Journal* for 1747 show Wesley’s understanding of the dynamics of church life and discipline. In one place he notes that “the society, which the first year consisted of above 800 members, is now reduced to 400. But, according to the old proverb, the half is more than the whole” (*Journal*, March 12, 1747). On another occasion Wesley learned that the little society at Tetney was giving substantial contributions to the poor. The leader told Wesley, “All of us who are single persons have agreed together, to give both ourselves and *all we have* to God: and we do it gladly; whereby we are able from time to time, to entertain all the strangers that come to Tetney; who often have no food to eat, nor any friend to give them a lodging” (*Journal*, February 24, 1747). These accounts reveal something not only about discipline but also about structure.

At the practical level, we see several things in Wesley which today would be called (rightly or wrongly) “church growth principles.” To name just a few: (1) taking the gospel to the masses; (2) using unordained itinerant preachers and other indigenous leaders; (3) providing useful structures for *koinonia* and discipleship through the class meetings, bands, etc.; (4) providing for accountability of designated leaders; and (5) adapting methods and structures to the cultural patterns of the people one is working with. Wesley’s work among the growing groups of industrial workers in his day could provide interesting input regarding the “homogeneous unit” theory.

Two key issues in any revival/renewal movement are unordained “lay” leadership and the forming of restricted, intimate fellowships within the larger church (*ecclesiolae in ecclesia*). What is the “official” status of the leaders and the sub-communities which emerge in a renewal movement? These are basic issues in the contemporary charismatic renewal, especially within the Roman Catholic Church, as suggested by the title of Steven Clark’s book, *Unordained Elders and Renewal Communities*. At these points a study of early Methodism (as well as Moravianism and Continental Pietism) could have much to say to the contemporary church scene.

Behind these matters are several ecclesiological questions relating to the priesthood of believers, the gifts of the Spirit, and the understanding of the church as a reconciled and reconciling community.

At a more fundamental level is the question of Wesley's basic theological perspective and its relevance for church growth. My own belief (building on Albert Outler and Werner Jaeger) is that Wesley's wide reading put him in touch with a dynamic pre-Augustinian theological tradition tracing back to Gregory of Nyssa and other Eastern fathers. This tradition was mediated to Wesley principally through Macarius and Ephrem Syrus. Its leading ideas were love as the essence of Christianity; perfection as the restoration of the image of God in believers; and the possibility and necessity of human cooperation in the work of sanctification (synergism). To these elements Wesley added a strong ethical and social dimension ("Do all the good you can") and a strong emphasis on the new birth and assurance. One could argue, therefore, that Wesley reached back not just to the Reformation, but back to a broader and more dynamic Christian tradition that preceded the Augustinian-Pelagian controversy, and that Wesley therefore provides a helpful perspective for a contemporary re-examination of the question of human agency in the life and growth of the church. This is a fundamental but largely unexplored question in church growth thinking.

2) A Wesleyan examination of the church growth movement suggests, secondly, that *the key issue in church growth today is the question of discipleship and sanctification*. Wesley provides us with a strong affirmation of gospel proclamation and Christian persuasion. But then, so does George Whitefield. Wesley, however, was never content merely to make converts; his passion was that new Christians should press on to perfection. Both Wesley's methods and his message were geared toward the practical matter of Christian growth and discipleship. This is a concern which is affirmed by church growth advocates, but early Methodism provides a model which suggests just how deep this concern can and ought to go. One may say with some justification that while the twentieth century has its contemporary George Whitefield in Billy Graham, so far it has no John Wesley.

3) A corollary church growth issue is *the interrelationship of evangelism, church growth, discipleship, and sanctification*. Particularly, how do we as Wesleyans relate the concerns of discipleship and sanctification? Are they the same, complementary, or fundamentally different? Wesley seldom uses the word discipleship, although he does say at one point that persecution is "the very

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badge of our discipleship” (Sermon XVIII, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, First Series, 1944, p. 230). Wesley’s much misunderstood doctrine of entire sanctification included many of the ethical, social, and lifestyle concerns being raised today by the advocates of radical discipleship. If we will read Wesley himself, and not just his interpreters, we will find that Wesley has a good deal to say about the dynamics of discipleship. And conversely, Wesleyans may find that the contemporary concern in some quarters for discipleship provides a new angle for re-examining Wesley.

4) Looking at Wesley and the church growth movement together suggests, in the fourth place, that *the ecclesiological questions involved in church growth need to be made explicit*. Ultimately, it won’t do to see church growth merely as a set of insights or methods or emphases which can simply be laid over all kinds of churches, regardless of their theological or ecclesiological traditions. It is inevitable that an ecclesiology — fundamental presuppositions as to the nature of the church — is woven into church growth thinking. Differing ecclesiological traditions are struggling now to come to grips with the church growth emphasis and understand it from their own perspectives. Can Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, Mennonites, Lutherans, and Methodists all mean the same thing by “church growth”?

The point is that underlying ecclesiological issues need to be examined and made explicit. Basic presupposed understandings and models of the church need to be explored, compared, and evaluated biblically if we are to speak intelligently about church growth. This means that Wesleyans need to do what they (like most Protestants) have never really done, and that is develop a biblical doctrine of the church and of the kingdom of God.

5) Finally, *the church growth movement today needs to be seen in the broader perspective of the contemporary Christian church worldwide*. One may compare church growth with two other movements: the charismatic renewal and the radical discipleship emphasis. These three movements are trans-denominational and international in scope. Each has its own perspective and “mindset,” and one could argue that each is saying something that the others — and the whole church — need to hear. It may be that through them the Spirit is speaking to the churches.

The emotive element is more prominent in the charismatic movement, and the emphasis is on praise. The volitional element

predominates in the radical discipleship movement, where the stress is on obedience. In church growth the cerebral aspect is primary, with the emphasis on rational planning. One could argue that Wesley — with his emphasis on Scripture, reason, and experience — managed to hold these three aspects in fruitful balance. Wesley was perceived as an “enthusiast”; he was a man of reason; and he stressed radical obedience to the Word. It may be that he has more to say to the contemporary situation of the church than we have realized.

We should not look either at Wesley or at the church growth movement uncritically, however. But we should look at them together. And as Wesleyans, perhaps the most productive thing we can do, ultimately, is to re-examine Wesley in the light of today’s emphasis on church growth and to look carefully at church growth in the light of Wesley’s own views. Why? Principally so we may widen our perspective enough to be totally open to the Spirit and the Word for our day. ■