
Church Growth and the Conciliar Movement

by Donald McGavran

As the church growth movement sweeps America, focusing attention on the country's 150 million citizens far from God, and encourages congregations and denominations to *do* theology, search for lost sons and daughters, and return them to the Father's House, one question emerges: will the conciliar movement throw its weight into sinner-converting, church-multiplying evangelism/church growth?

The conciliar movement may be loosely defined as a belief which developed among most denominations in the first half of the twentieth century that common tasks could be done better by joint action, and that the denominations were parts of a larger Christian presence — an association, a federation, or a council of denominations. As these interchurch organizations were formed at local, state, national and international levels, the conciliar movement became more than a belief. It became a way of acting, a respectful and even an obedient attitude toward headquarters. The World Council of Churches repeatedly declares that it is not a church (much less a super church), but it does lay down policies which affect every aspect of the life of denominations and congregations.

The main supporters of the conciliar movement are the old-line (mainline) denominations. Until 1950 or a little later, these for 150 years had thrown themselves into evangelization and had multiplied themselves into congregations and denominations across America and in all continents. They were vigorously *pro*-church growth. But between 1950 and 1966 the leaders of the World Council of Churches devised a new theory and theology of mission. The old concepts of evangelism, conversion and salvation were thoroughly reinterpreted.

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I have described the process in detail in the last chapter of *The Conciliar Evangelical Debate: The Crucial Documents 1964-1976*. Here it is sufficient to say that the key concepts were bent so that the great resources of historic missions would be diverted from evangelism and church growth and devoted to social action, development and unity. These goals, conciliarists firmly believed, were those which under today's conditions were the right goals. Evangelism and church growth had been right goals 100 years ago, but were wrong goals today.

The picture is complex. Enfolded in the conciliar denominations are hundreds of thousands of evangelicals. That the good men at the top are down-playing evangelism and church growth is unimaginable to them. Solzhenitsyn in *Gulag III* says "The Communist regime . . . is inhumanly strong, in a way *as yet unimaginable* to the West." *As yet!* But the time is soon coming when the eyes of conciliar evangelicals will be opened.

However it came about, and my paragraphs above are tremendously condensed, the leaders of the conciliar denominations and missionary societies today are decidedly cool to evangelism and church growth. They speak about evangelism, to be sure, and devote whole issues of the *International Review of Missions* to it, but the most cursory inspection shows that what they are really saying is that any evangelism is phony which is not welded to immediate social action. The thing that really counts in the conciliar mind is not belief in Christ, but right actions toward men. The total number of missionaries sent keeps on going down. Evangelistic missionaries are *not* sent. Despite three billion who have yet to hear, new mission fields out beyond the younger churches are *not* opened. Conciliarists urge Christians to boycott banks which do business with South Africa, but do *not* urge them to send 10,000 missionaries to evangelize the three billion.

The whole educational apparatus of the movement is dedicated to emphasizing justice, brotherhood, and development, and to diverting resources from evangelism to these "urgent contemporary causes." That men perish in a famine of the Word of God (Amos 8:11) is never stated by conciliar leaders. That the spiritual need is the direst of all needs, is apparently not believed by them. Denominational and interdenominational magazines of the conciliar movement play up all kinds of this-world improvements (good works, mind you) to the virtual exclusion of world evangelization,

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people movements to Christ, and multiplying churches among receptive units of society.

A full-blown theology to justify this shift to “salvation today” (this-world improvements) as a *sufficient* end of mission has been developed. The data available to support the statement is vast. Here I have space for only one significant passage. *Drafts for Sections: Uppsala 68* says:

In another time, the goal of God’s redemptive work might best have been described in terms of man turning toward God Man understood . . . that his future lay with God The purpose of mission was Christianization, bringing man to God through Christ Today the fundamental question is much more that of true man (p. 24).

When men believe *that*, evangelism/church growth is necessarily denigrated.

Recently the bitter fruits of this tremendous shift in direction (declining numbers of communicants, diminished income for conciliar causes) have convinced some conciliar leaders that they must modify their position and swing back to some recognition of evangelism. The Geneva secretariat, which set up the fifth assembly of the World Council of Churches (1975), wanted no emphasis on evangelism. When, however, large numbers of delegates to Nairobi insisted on it, finally five small resolutions on evangelism were passed. Each, however, welds evangelism to social action. If the apostle Peter had known about these resolutions, he would have told Colonel Cornelius of the Italian regiment at Caesarea that to believe on Jesus Christ he must immediately join the Zealots in their struggle to liberate Judea from the Roman yoke. Peter would have known that only evangelism welded to social action was credible and authentic.

My judgment is that pressures to modify will mount. The next few years will see a swing back to biblical evangelism which believes and proclaims that the most important thing is accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The believer, when grafted into the body, will of course manifest the new divine life in dozens of ways. He will change his speech, habits, ideas of leisure, and convictions concerning sex, money and race. But these changes are the *fruits* of his conversion. The conversion is something else. Conciliar theology is going to have to swing away from the extreme position that no one can be a

Christian unless he follows exactly the ethical preferences of the hierarchy in his denomination or council. To be sure, the Holy Spirit may tell the new Christian to follow those preferences, but again He may want the Christian to do something much closer home, like quitting liquor or spending more time with his wife. In any case, the Christian is saved by faith in Christ, not by ethical actions.

Complicating the picture is a new doctrine which has no biblical base, but has come to be a rigid orthodoxy — namely, that initiative for all evangelism overseas rests with the national church in each land. The United Methodist Church in America ought not initiate any evangelism in India, let us say, which is not requested by the Methodist Church there. Now, as a kindly move to recognize the Indian church as a full sister, worthy of all respect, one must applaud the intent of the move. At the same time, one must insist that the basic purpose of mission is not to respect a sister church, but to disciple the nation of India. Since the Methodist Church in India numbers less than a million, drawn mostly from the oppressed and poverty stricken castes, it simply cannot evangelize great sections of the Indian population of more than 600 million. It has its hands full looking after its own congregations. It ought not practice dog-in-the-manger comity: we cannot evangelize and we won't let you! When the Holy Spirit leads Christians in America or Korea to start new missions in several castes in India, from which no one has ever become a Methodist, the Methodist Church in India will certainly rejoice. When the hungry need food, no true church will say, "We will respond to desperate human need only if a sister church asks us to! Paul did not go to Rome because the churches there saw the need in Spain and invited him.

Dr. G. Thompson Brown, mission executive for the Presbyterian Church U.S., has recently declared that no church anywhere has territorial rights. This is true. All populations not being effectively evangelized should be considered open. The three billion who have yet to believe on Christ are sufficient reason for any denomination (Korean, Filipino, Indian, Norwegian, Brazilian or American) to send multitudes of missionaries. They need to ask permission of no one but Christ, but will, of course, act in cooperative helpful ways.

As evangelicals in conciliar denominations bring pressure on their leaders to engage in genuine evangelism, we shall probably see conciliars throwing evangelistic sops to their evangelicals. For example, out of a total annual budget of, say, \$20 million, they will

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start an evangelistic thrust costing \$50,000! Or add to their non-evangelistic missionary force of 240 three new evangelistic missionaries! Evangelicals give thanks to God for small favors, but will not conclude that three out of 243 is a godly proportion.

In all this many-sided neglect of evangelism, one must remember a root cause. During the early years of the twentieth century a low view of the Bible swept the leaders of the mainline churches. They constructed a complex new Christianity, based on a Bible adjusted to a universe strictly controlled by unchanging laws, a universe in which miracles and a personal God are really impossible. They believed that such a Christianity would appeal to modern man. In a world come of age, only such a Christianity would (they believed) be credible. However, the new Christianity did *not* appeal. Modern man was smart enough to see that since in new Christianity belief in a personal God and His real revelation was gone, all that was left was empty god-talk. Mere humanization couched in god-talk was not attractive. Inevitably decline set in.

Decline was delayed, however, because of several factors. The new Christianity was cunningly arrayed in the clothes of authentic Christianity. Many in the mainline denominations still adhered to genuine Christianity. Christ, the living Lord, in great mercy saved and indwelt some whose theological formulations hid Him behind masses of verbiage, or actually denied Him. The momentum of the great organizations, conferences, missionary societies, and councils prolonged the life of the ailing church. Certain sections of the church — notably those in Asia, Africa, and Latin America — were by conviction evangelicals and had a high view of Scripture, though they *were* tied to the declining denominations by millions of dollars. Now and again, genuine outpourings of the Holy Spirit, revivals and awakenings (made possible by the large number of evangelicals in the conciliar denominations) renewed sluggish congregations. Finally the pentecostals on a plain biblical base showed amazing life and blessed many denominations through the charismatics.

Into this ecclesiastical scene comes the church growth emphasis. What is the conciliar movement doing with it? Two replies come to mind:

1) Conciliar congregations and denominations are manifesting interest in church growth. They protest that they are not really against evangelism. Dr. Win Arn recently conducted a church growth seminar for a strong conciliar denomination. About 200

ministers assembled. A program which in evangelical denominations issues into renewed evangelism, among these conciliars issued in much talk. Maybe a third of them bought what he was saying, another third listened, and another third was plainly bored. No significant action resulted.

The Christian Century reviewed my little book *Ten Steps to Church Growth*, saying "Some churches may profit from this emphasis, but read it with caution." Church growth stands on such a different theological and biblical base from the conciliar movement that you must not expect the latter to plunge into church growth with enthusiasm. Yet conciliar churches are declining. The Baptists in England have dropped from 250,000 to 180,000. If they do that once more, they will be in very bad shape.

Consequently, conciliars need the church growth movement. Some sincerely want it. Among United Methodists, a remarkable thrust headed by Dr. George Hunter is awaking the whole denomination to church growth and uncovering many new opportunities for growth. It is also creating spin-offs which favorably affect church growth overseas. It is quite possible for evangelical segments of conciliar churches to emphasize growth.

2) But, alas, sub-biblical convictions dog conciliar steps. A large conciliar congregation in the midwest recently woke to church growth. It showed a couple of church growth films. It enrolled 27 in a group which studied a church growth book week after week for ten weeks. The minister hoped that at the close of the course the group would surge out in regular effective evangelism. His hopes were not realized. As the class worked its way through the book, its members repeatedly got hung up on biblical positions necessary for evangelism *which they did not believe*. For example, every time the book spoke about "the lost," the members explained at some length that they could not believe that anyone was lost. At the end of the ten weeks no one surged out in any kind of evangelism.

Another group of conciliar leaders from several city churches met to plan five new congregations. Several members of the group, however, insisted that each new congregation from the day of its beginning, must be multi-racial. From day one each must demonstrate brotherhood. Naturally, not a single new congregation was begun. The man who most vehemently declared "I will never help plant anything other than a fully-integrated church" did not lift a finger to bring his dream to life.

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Another group was genuinely aroused to the need for evangelism and church growth. I had great hopes that these conciliarists would break through into substantial growth. Their good resolves, however, foundered on the views, apparently strongly held, that what the Bible says about the need to confess Christ before men and to be found in Him was applicable in those far-off cultures, but not in ours. It suited the Hebrew mind and culture, not the modern American!

Our Lord declared that grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles. One wonders to what extent enduring evangelistic passion *can* develop on humanistic, relativistic doctrines? To be sure, conciliar congregations and denominations do not necessarily have to espouse such doctrines, but so many of the leaders do that the question does arise.

Two big questions remain. First, can enough conciliarists recover enough faith in the living God and His inspired authoritative revelation, the Bible, to enable *ongoing* evangelism/church growth? Or will conciliarists continue their curious affirmations that the Bible is not the Word of God, but rather in some mysterious way is the vehicle bringing God's Word to the inner self? Will they grant that propositions of evangelicals about the triune God, sin, salvation, grace, heaven, and hell, based on the plain meaning of the Bible, have at least as much chance of being objectively true as the elaborate conciliar constructs?

The second big question is more important than the first. Will evangelical congregations and denominations pour enough men and money into discipling the nations, at home and abroad, to reap the whitened harvests? Evangelicals hold true and reasonable biblical positions. Will they create the massive machinery of harvest which these new days call for? Will they pour in the blood and treasure, the sons and daughters? Will they pay the price?

I pray that the conciliar movement, already full of so many good works, will by the church growth movement be encouraged to return to its first love and become *effectively* evangelistic. God grant that multitudes of men and women may through the prayers and proclamation of conciliar churches find Him who is life abundant and eternal, and become responsible members of conciliar churches. If this miracle is to happen, the evangelical members of the conciliar denominations will have to be specially active. They will have to work forward without ecclesiastical approval, asking for no reward save that of knowing that they do God's will.

I also pray that evangelical congregations and denominations will by the church growth movement be wakened to today's tremendous opportunities. If they will make the effort, put in the hours, spend the dollars, wrestle in prayer, and offer the sacrifices, they will be the means under God of bringing multitudes at home and abroad to salvation. The years of the greatest growth of the church may lie just ahead.

The last 50 years have seen Africa south of the Sahara become substantially Christian. Sixty-two out of every 100 in Zaire, and 82 out of every 100 in Namibia are now Christian. The next 50 years can see great sections of mainland Asia turn to Christ in sweeping people movements. I pray that evangelicals will believe these things and thank God for giving them the privilege of sharing in this new birth of men and nations. ■

Dr. McGavran's book Conciliar Evangelical Debate: The Crucial Documents 1964-1976 is available from William Carey Library; 1705 N. Sierra Bonita; Pasadena, CA 91104.