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## Wave Makers

Bill M. Sullivan  
*Church of the Nazarene*

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## WAVE MAKERS

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**Bill M. Sullivan**

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Presidential Address to the  
North American Society for Church Growth Annual Meeting  
Thursday, November 15th, 1990

*Bill Sullivan is Church Growth Division Director for International Headquarters of The Church of the Nazarene, 6401 The Paseo, Kansas City, Missouri 64131. (816) 333-7000.*

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### INTRODUCTION

I have in my library two invaluable resources. The first is the class notes of Dr. C. Peter Wagner's lectures on Church Growth. By all rights I should long ago have copied those lecture notes on to India paper and had them bound with a genuine leather cover! Silk sewn, gold edging and all.

The second major resource is my personally marked copy of Dr. Donald McGavran's monumental work, *Understanding Church Growth*. Again and again I return to that book, so important in the annals of Church Growth. Perhaps this is an appropriate time to return to that book again.

There is a loneliness here tonight because of Dr. McGavran's absence. We know that if he had lived and had been able to be here tonight he would have declared, "This is the most important meeting in America, for here are gathered professors, denominational executives and pastors who can affect the growth of churches and the planting of churches in the entire cultural mosaic of this land."

I can also hear him quoting from Romans 16:26 " . . . by the command of the eternal God . . . that *Panta ta ethne* might believe." For Dr. McGavran



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"*Panta ta ethne*" was not an evangelistic novelty. It was an evangelistic necessity. How else could the lost be found?

I was always greatly moved by Dr. McGavran's emphatic insistence that "God wants the lost found!" He declared that "The Finding God . . . is not pleased when many findable sheep remain straggling on the mountain, shivering in the bitter wind. The more found, the better pleased is God."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. McGavran deplored the universal fog that clouded the ways by which the lost were most effectively found. He challenged persons like us to discover the means by which the church grows.

He reminded us that it was sometimes necessary to sit in the promotional chair and at other times to sit in the diagnostic chair. Times we should fire people's imaginations with what we confidently expect to happen. At other times we should give an accurate accounting of what has been accomplished and a realistic assessment of what we hope to achieve.

I suppose the question is, "In which chair should we sit tonight?" There is so much to celebrate. Dr. McGavran's legacy is so richly decorated.

A compliment is surely in order for Kent Hunter, the editor of *Global Church Growth*, for the outstanding current issue featuring the life and legacy of Dr. McGavran. A beautiful issue, Kent.

As we work through the loss of our founder, now is surely an appropriate time to think about the future. It may be eminently important that tonight we sit in the chair of the diagnostician.

### WAVE RUNNERS

This past spring I rented a condo on the shore of The Lake of the Ozarks in southern Missouri. I had to have some extended privacy to complete a writing project. Well, it was a good excuse to go to the lake.

The Lake of the Ozarks was formed by flooding a winding river valley so now there are hundreds of miles of shoreline. Boats of all description passed the condo where I was writing. It was consoling to my jaded urban nerves to hear the gentle purring of the engines as the boats passed and the subsequent waves that washed on the shore 30 to 45 seconds later.

Now we're not talking about ocean going vessels here, but there were some pretty large boats passing by. They would create large waves-- or wakes, I guess I should call them.



I noticed an interesting situation a few hundred yards across the lake from me. A fellow over there had a little wave runner. It was like a ski mobile on water.

I noticed that every time a large boat passed by he would jump on his wave runner and buzz out behind the passing boat. For a minute or two he would maneuver back and forth across the wake created by the boat. The wave runner jumped and splashed over the waves a few times and then would head back for the shore.

I didn't think much about it at first. Later I began to wonder about this water toy that was so dependent on passing boats. It was like this fellow just sat over there on the shore all day long waiting for boats to pass so he could play for a few seconds in their wake. That didn't seem like enough "bang for the buck" to me.

I did observe that once when he was out there in the middle of the lake, he made a few sharp turns with his wave runner, as though he was trying to play independently of the passing boats.

That's when I discovered why he was playing on the waves created by the large boats. The wave runner created no waves of its own. I mean it was like those lanky water flies I used to see on the farm pond back in Arkansas. I never did figure out how they skimmed the top of the water so lightly that they didn't make any ripples.

That's the way that wave runner was. It didn't make any waves of its own. It was totally dependent on larger craft to create the environment in which it could function.

I began to wonder if that scenario was not being played out in a variety of settings. Could it be that I was riding a wave runner-- jumping and splashing in the waves created by Donald McGavran, C. Peter Wagner and others?

Was that phenomenon widespread? Were there many church growth advocates who weren't really making any waves-- just jumping on the waves of others?

I began to realize that without the wave makers the wave runners would be out of business.

## LEADERSHIP

The Church Growth discipline is not mastered at a two-day seminar. Reading a few books scarcely makes one knowledgeable, much less competent.

I say it carefully and with great respect for those who have accomplished it, but even building a great church does not in and of itself make one an authority on Church Growth. People who live to be a hundred years old can't

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usually give you much of an idea about how they did it--or about how you could do it!

Of course, the academic pursuit of the discipline doesn't necessarily make one an authority either. Gifts and skills must be blended with academic competence in a unique combination.

What I am talking about here is the need to enlarge the corps of Church Growth authorities. The passing of Dr. McGavran should alert us to the reality that we don't have enough scholars seeking to give leadership to the movement, especially on a national basis. We need a much larger cadre of leaders who will pay the price to give authentic leadership to this movement.

The Church Growth Movement has profited greatly from the support of Fuller Theological Seminary. I doubt if anyone would question that leadership in the first fifteen years was provided principally by Donald McGavran, Peter Wagner, and Win Arn.

The leadership of these persons and the role of Fuller Seminary represent a benchmark. The issue we will face in the decade of the nineties is not the replacement of primary leadership but the development of competent and committed secondary leaders. The movement must develop secondary leaders at a more rapid rate than has occurred in the past few years.

As we sit in the diagnostic chair tonight let us acknowledge that the most crucial issue facing the Church Growth Movement in the decade of the nineties is leadership -- competent and committed Church Growth leadership dispersed throughout America.

#### TRAINING

A second critical issue is training.

What we face today is a softening of the fascination with Church Growth. American Church Growth as a movement is approximately 15 years old. During that decade and a half, many denominations offered at least one round of Church Growth promotion. Specialty organizations have extensively provided both training and materials. Now, the old malaise, expressed in the oft repeated saying, "that won't work either," is beginning to reappear.

It is important that the clergy receive training in the true nature of Church Growth. They may never become Church Growth scholars but they need to develop an appreciation for the movement's scientific approach and critical methodology. They can then experience the failure of a particular program without losing confidence in the principles.

The question is "How?" and "When?" will the clergy receive this training? One answer is that they should be taught it before they are biased against it. Old prejudices against the movement and the homogeneous unit principle continue to spawn aspersions against the Church Growth Movement.



Careful thought needs to be given to correcting the errors and prejudices that have developed against the Church Growth Movement. Until people's minds are cleared of the rubbish, it will be difficult to gain acceptance of new Church Growth insights.

One of the biggest tasks of the stewards of the Church Growth Movement is building bridges to those persons responsible for clergy preparation. The assignment is not to displace them but to become partners with them in producing a kind of clergy person who is competent to lead a growing church today.

Dr. McGavran not only spoke about this, he even wrote a book about it. In *Effective Evangelism* he called for the inclusion of six Church Growth courses in seminary curriculum. He created quite a wave with that idea. We need someone to continue his emphasis on revising the curriculum for ministerial preparation.

Pastors also need to receive practical Church Growth training in the first year or two of their ministry. This requires the involvement of supervisors and specialty Church Growth organizations.

The size of this task is overwhelming. It is easier to ignore it and hope it will just go away. Unless we provide for the training of persons who will be ultimately responsible for the implementation of Church Growth, it is highly unlikely that we will ever reach our goal.

Also, training the laity must be given higher priority. While it was correct to emphasize the essential role of the leader, it mitigated the findings of significant Church Growth research--that the laity play a vital role in the growth of the church.

Most attempts to train the laity in Church Growth principles have been token efforts in comparison to the energy expended in the training of the clergy. Greater attention to training the laity will be required.

In the nineties, we need someone to plow a "McGavran-size wave" of Church Growth training for both clergy and laity. The institutions exist. The facilities are adequate. Advanced technology is in place. Dr. McGavran has provided the idea. A "wave runner" can't get the job done. This task requires a really big ship maybe a whole fleet!

## CREDIBILITY

Another critical issue facing the Church Growth Movement in this decade is credibility. Have we been able to make good on our claims? What are the reasons people should look to us for growth leadership in the nineties?

I asked a church leader a few weeks ago about his thoughts concerning the Church Growth Movement. You know what he said? "Has it really made any difference?" he asked. "Is that mere pragmatism or what?"



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Well, that wasn't the time to slouch down in the diagnostic chair. That was a clear signal to get up, move over and sit proudly in the promotional chair.

The Church Growth Movement has made significant contributions to American Christianity. It has brought to light the crucial importance of church planting. The pervasiveness and extensiveness of web evangelism has been documented. The complexity of super church growth has been objectively studied. A new and powerful awareness of the Great Commission has been instilled in the hearts and minds of many people. And a new focus on the validity of church growth has been achieved.

I believe it would be correct to say that the Church Growth Movement has altered the way pastors think about congregational development and the expansion of Christianity. Strangely, the movement has not been credited with this accomplishment. We have not yet "won our wings" with the rank and file.

There are two factors in credibility to which we must give greater attention in the future: accuracy and emphasis.

Dr. McGavran's "wave" was powerful because his theory grew out of solid research. He was a strategist who forced himself to submit his theories to rigorous testing. He used research methods, apparently learned from Wascom Pickett, at whose fire McGavran said he lit his candle. He understood that untested theory is of limited value and actually tends to contribute to the "fog" that hinders Church Growth.

Sociologist Ken Crow, to whom, I often turn for guidance, keeps cautioning me about "truncated" research discovering "When?," "Where?" and "How many?," without discovering "Why?"

He also warns me against imprecision in interpretation-- generalizing from case studies and assuming causation from correlations.

I recognize that some of our group are concerned that this movement not become overly involved in statistical comparisons and evaluations. The point is well taken. Statistical surveys and analyses should never be allowed to dictate what decisions must be made or what concepts articulated.

The purpose of research is to provide accurate information for theorists and strategists like Donald McGavran. The problem with most statistical analyses is not that they are overdone but they are incomplete. It is easy to jump to an exciting conclusion based on flimsy data. It happens all the time.

I believe the Church Growth Movement must be committed to a more precise methodology than anecdotal data provides. We need persons who will pay the price of toil in uncovering the real causes of church growth in



It is not just more research that we need in the nineties it is better research. We must have some truly monumental research projects in the next few years.

"Wave running" across the waves of Dr. McGavran's research is not enough. We should follow his lead in using solid research to achieve balance between the promotional and the diagnostic elements of our task. If we fail to discipline ourselves here, we may contribute to the fog instead of dispelling it.

We should take advantage of the full range of social science research methods. Both Anthropology and Sociology provide methods with particular strengths and limitations. Rigorously applying the established methods will extend accuracy, precision and therefore, credibility.

A second aspect of credibility is emphasis. We need to be talking about the issues with which pastors are concerned.

We have said much about church planting and ethnic evangelism. These are topics that are important to denominational Home Missions executives. They are not the top priorities for pastors. Pastors are concerned about insights that affect the evangelistic effectiveness of the local church.

Most pastors and lay leaders need help in the congregations where they serve. They need to know that Church Growth has important insights for small as well as large churches; for inner city, suburban and rural settings; for new churches and for 50-year-old congregations; in growing, declining and stable populations.

The challenge we face is to find effective ways of getting resources to where the rubber really meets the road for the typical pastor or church.

We cannot abandon the emphasis on church planting as the most effective method of evangelism, especially on a regional basis. To improve our credibility with pastors, we need to increase our emphasis on the value of Church Growth insights for their local church.

Another facet of this same problem has been an inferred over-emphasis on the super church. I say "inferred" because it has been the pastor's inference, not the movement's intention, or even their implication. Nevertheless pastors by the hundreds, possibly even thousands, have become disenchanted with the Church Growth Movement because they perceived it to be preoccupied with the growth of super churches.

As the movement continues its impact on this decade it will do well to help pastors understand that Church Growth is comprehensive and can help all sizes and kinds of churches to discover the most effective ways to implement growth.



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## IDENTITY

Finally, I want to say something about the identity of the Church Growth Movement.

Is it appropriate to ask if Church Growth has a clear identity? Do those of us who view ourselves as its strong supporters perceive the movement in a unified way? Increasingly these days I find myself insisting, to people who should already know, that Church Growth is a perception-- not a product.

While many pastors know some Church Growth principles and methods, they fail to understand the ongoing self-critical, self-perfecting nature of the Church Growth Movement. "The Universal Fog" that Dr. McGavran wrote about, just doesn't seem to go away.

Before dawn, one morning last month, I started driving from Denver, Colorado to Cheyenne, Wyoming. There was a dense fog. At times visibility was down to less than 100 feet. I kept anticipating the sunrise because I knew it would burn off the fog. Isn't it fascinating how quickly a fog can disappear when the sun rises?

This fog was persistent. It just wouldn't go away. Sometimes when I went over a hill I would get above it momentarily; only to descend back into the fog as I went down the hill.

I began hoping the wind would blow it away. Alas, no such fortune. I continued to drive in the fog. I knew that eventually the sun would dispel it, as indeed it did. For when I returned, later in the day, the fog was gone and you could see "forever."

Donald McGavran believed that the light of empirical reality would dispel the fog that obscures the vision of the church as to how God's kingdom grows. That is fundamental to the Church Growth Movement. We don't put much stock in wind. It may move the fog around, but it doesn't dispel it. Only the light of truth dissolves the fog.

This is the identity the Church Growth Movement must communicate as we move through this last decade of the twentieth century.

We are about truth--even if it shows us that we have been wrong in the past. We are so committed to the truth that we are glad when the empirical data leads us back to spiritual causation. And we are committed to the truth even when we stand bewildered in the mystery of divine sovereignty.

We gaze in awe at those ways of God beyond our comprehension. We search with diligence to know those realities within our power to understand. We have no easy answers--no simplistic solutions.

We have a critical methodology--sanctified by a commitment to the person of Jesus Christ and obedience to the Great Commission.

Let others blow the fog around. Our task is to help the light of truth dissolve the fog.



national responsibility. It calls for the highest commitment of those who, like Donald A. McGavran, believe with all their heart, that "God wants the lost found!"

## Charles L. Chaney

*Charles L. Chaney is Vice President of the Church Extension Division of the same Mission Board (Southern Baptist Convention), 1450 Spring Garden, NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30327, 404-4858-7000.*

Southern Baptists stand at the doorway of an unprecedented opportunity, the first time in the history of American Protestantism, one denomination at the numerical, ethnically, ethnic, social, and racial diversity, and geographical dispersion to address America with the gospel of Jesus Christ to people those who say yes to Christ and His kingdom into New Testament churches.

It is not at all clear that Southern Baptists will walk through this doorway with vigor, purpose, and determination. Whether we will respond with glad response to the Great Commission in our generation and fully evangelize this land is not yet clear. Whether we will see this nation as one of the world's great mission fields and boldly plant New Testament churches in each diverse ethnic group and every geographical corner is still unknown. But we have the opportunity!

A revolution has occurred in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in the last century. The geographical boundaries of the South no longer contain

the "true" Christian faith. . . . we must understand that we are often years in with our neighbors. I encourage those that believe and practice the essential tenets of the gospel, and who doubt the role of the New Testament, that trust in the Bible as their foundation for faith and that regard a regenerated life under the lordship of Christ as a central blessing. These churches, planted within a given culture and led by leaders who reflect that culture, are essential to the part of a larger leadership of believers around the world and the understanding that believers may and people whose cultures recognize their own, but also with whose cultures may be very different from their own. To go into their souls, they must work with other churches with their own doctrines and goals.