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CHURCH GROWTH COMING OF AGE

ELMER L. TOWNS

Presidential Address to the
North American Society for Church Growth Annual Meeting
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Dr. Elmer L. Towns, born in Savannah, Georgia, graduated from Northwestern College in Minneapolis, Minnesota (1954). He received an M.A. in education from Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas (1958), and a D.Min. from Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California (1982). He currently serves as the dean of Liberty Baptist Seminary, Lynchburg, Virginia.

Church Growth is one of the most dynamic words in today's church vocabulary. Notice the second word in that phrase, **growth**. The word **growth** embodies those positive aspects of hope, optimism, future, and the energy of God that produces fruit and life. Now notice the first word in that phrase, **church**. The word **church** reminds us of the group of people for whom Jesus died, so it is near to the heart of God. Therefore, we in the Church Growth movement have a high priority in God's love; we are involved in a dynamic ministry. We do things that are important and imperative.

The Church Growth movement is relatively young in recognition and development. Even though there have been growing churches since Pentecost, Church Growth is a relatively young area of study. As a discipline, it has come a long way since its birth, and must move through adolescence to adulthood. I, for one, am excited with the expanding horizons and the bright future of our movement.

I think we in the North American Society of Church Growth have a better understanding of the nature and purpose of Church Growth than anyone outside our discipline. Some outside our movement, or perhaps many, do not know who we are or what we do. There is still ignorance about Church Growth. There are various views of Church Growth, some of these views are only partial, others are flawed.

First, there are some who still hold the popular view of us as compilers of lists and gatherers of statistics to determine the "largest" or the "fastest growing" church. Whereas these lists may have pointed toward the heart of Church Growth and in some occasions given identity to our

movement, this is not Church Growth and the compiling of lists is not our objective. As a matter of record, those who view Church Growth as a fad or trend probably hold this flawed view. However, because we gather data and use figures to measure growth, it is an understandable though limited view.

Second, some think of us as the new denominational name for the old department of Foreign Missions, Evangelism, or Home Missions. Although it is true that Church Growth includes evangelism, church planting, cross cultural missions, and some other areas of ministry, and it is also true that many denominations have begun using the title "Church Growth," we are much more than the same old workhorse with a new name. We are more like new wine in old bottles: we tend to smash old forms with new life.

The third view of Church Growth is the foundation of our movement, i.e., Church Growth is a science. The third definition has been articulated by C. Peter Wagner: "All that is involved in bringing men and women who do not have a personal relationship to Jesus Christ into fellowship with Him and into responsible church membership."¹

This third definition of Church Growth is as follows:

Church growth is that science that investigates the planting, multiplication, growth, function, health, and death of churches. It strives to apply the biblical and social principles in its gathering, analysis, displaying and defending of the facts involved in implementing the Great Commission.

As we view the 1990's and the next century, let's ask the question "Where is Church Growth going?" If we know where we are going, who we are, and how to get there, there is a greater likelihood we will stay on course.

Our objective is still the Great Commission, "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe' all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age," Matthew 28:19-20 NASV.

¹C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1976) 12.

Church Growth is not limited to any one area of the church. Church Growth people span denominations, types of ministry, theology, ethnic groups, cultural and class barriers. Church Growth is as broad as the Great Commission, yet as narrow as Christianity. The glue that holds us together is the simple but fundamental truths that flow from the Great Commission given by our Savior whose death, burial, and resurrection are the basis for our belief and action.

However, even though the Great Commission is the "glue" that holds us together, there are trends that we must recognize within our movement. Because we are a young dynamic growing movement, we must be careful because all trends are not healthy and we must not let any new force pull us away from our intended goal. Like an airline pilot flying across the country, there will be occasions when we need "in flight corrections." But these "in flight corrections" are not based on pilot needs or desires. These must be made in keeping with the radio beam from the receiving airport. The radio signal gives direction to the pilot and plane. Our beam is the Great Commission, it is the objective that will keep us on course.

The first trend I want to consider is *the growing emphasis on the supernatural*. Whereas Church Growth has been a science with a strong empirical basis on gathering research data to determine principles, there is a growing thirst for the supernatural in growing local churches. This could be either a strength or a weakness. It is a strength if it involves a quest for spiritual principles, but it is a weakness if it leads us to rely on mysticism or intuitive feelings. This trend toward the supernatural includes deeper exploration of the role of Church Growth and the practice of prayer, power evangelism, the Third Wave, and the Deeper Life. This emphasis on the supernatural is broad based and has many different facets to it, not necessarily associated with one area of theology or denomination.

Why this concern? Church Growth has viewed the church as both an organism and organization, a balanced view between outward and inward principles, and between spiritual and natural principles. We who know God want to know Him better and serve Him more effectively. The human tendency of the Christian servant is to emphasize the "spiritual," which is to be led of the Holy Spirit. But this does not mean we can violate rules or ignore the natural laws by which God runs the universe.

I think this trend toward the supernatural is healthy, and I would confess with many that I want more power in my ministry. I am not suggesting we are unbalanced in our movement. I think we are arriving at a balance. In times past we have been accused of *being just another*

behavioral science movement within the queen of all science, i.e., theology. We may have given too much attention to science and ignored the supernatural, but in this growing trend of seeking the supernatural we face two dangers: (1) the trend of over reacting and ignoring the organizational nature of the church, or (2) losing the scientific nature of our movement. Remember, James tells us "works and faith" are both necessary. The bird must have two wings to fly, and the battery must have two poles for power. Church Growth must be built on a proper balance of organization and organism.

The second trend I notice is that *Church Growth is moving into the third generation*. Obviously, the time span from the 1950's to the 1990's represents three generations, but this period of time in the development of Church Growth represents more than a sequence of time. The first generation was the pioneers who asked questions, made observations, suggested hypotheses, and verified principles. They rocked the ecclesiastical world by questioning "myths" and "unsupported methods" which generally had no Scriptural or cultural base. These pioneers articulated Church Growth philosophy and principles. Their strength was their communication skills, their role as statesmen, and their courage to "risk" doing it differently and doing it better.

The second generation was made up of denominational leaders, mission executives, and pastors who got "turned on" to Church Growth. They caught the vision of growing churches. They discovered workable "tools and techniques." They read the books and magazines, listened to the tapes, and began implementing Church Growth principles. They established departments of Church Growth or renamed Home Missions or some other related area with the name "Church Growth."

However, during this second generation some publishers claimed the movement was "sputtering" because the previous "hot" sales of Church Growth books slowed in the early 80's. Maybe some of the books by second generation leaders did not say anything new, but were simply a rehash of what the founders had said. Maybe it was not said in an exciting way. Maybe people did not understand the movement or did not understand how to apply the principles to church life and ministry. But it might have been that the movement was making a "mid-course correction," and the publishers did not follow suit.

In the third generation I see an explosion of Church Growth among laymen. They are not as concerned about theoretical philosophy, instead, they are pragmatic. They get "turned on" to Church Growth because in it they see potential for their church. They see how it relates to their church

and their personal ministry. Church Growth has introduced them to the potential of spiritual gifts, and they want to find their gift and use it. They seem to like Church Growth language. Because Church Growth tends to coin phrases that express newly discovered principles, the educated lay public which tends to be technologically oriented, has embraced our terms. They attend our seminars, employ our consultants, and apply our principles. Before new churches are built, boards want information from a Church Growth survey. Churches or denominations in stagnant situations seek Church Growth consultants. Because I believe in the church, I am excited about the future of Church Growth in the hands of lay people, led by Church Growth leaders.

The third trend is that *Church Growth is becoming more sophisticated*. This is a trend that is another outgrowth of the third generation. The third generation represents more than the emergence of the educated lay public to Church Growth. It also marks the emergence of a generation of Church Growth leaders more sophisticated in exact research. Whereas the pioneers saw the broad principles of Church Growth and validated them, the new breed of Church Growth authorities want to both verify past hypothesis and expand the limits of knowledge. They are closely identified with statistical research, gathering data from better defined audiences, and qualifying their results to defined groups. Without destroying the foundation, they are building upon the past.

This technical research seems to be more evident in denominational offices. This may be because they must balance budgets and must be accountable for decisions. If their research on church planting is faulty, they have to "eat their losses." On the other hand, if an author who writes from a theoretical base about the philosophy or principles of Church Growth gives wrong opinions or is out-of-date, he loses royalties or reputation.

I have some words for the new technician in Church Growth. You must be right, but you must also be balanced. Don't lose the big picture in detailed research. You must be exact, but you must also remember that many in the church are "fuzzy" or blind to workable principles. Let us bring the church along with us; we need an educated church to win the world. But let us also be spiritually committed. All of our research is powerless without the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

The fourth tendency involves *cross-cultural reality*. Whereas foreign missions is thought of as a cross-cultural ministry, we must realize home missions is also a cross-cultural ministry. We have historically thought of American Church Growth as "in-culture" and foreign Church

Growth as "cross-cultural," but America is changing. Before long, to be "white" will make you a minority, and to be "Anglo-Saxon" will also place one in a minority status.

The theory of cross-cultural ministry is becoming reality in our churches, not only in New York and Los Angeles, but in Lynchburg, Va, rural Maine, and the small towns of North Dakota. Minorities are everywhere. They represent a new challenge and a new need. Therefore, needs are everywhere. We cannot hide in our churches. Every church *must* be a cross-cultural ministry to the minorities of its Jerusalem.

Our task is not only to research new principles, but to communicate our findings to the church. As church leaders become aware of changing America, they can evangelize and minister with new tools and technology to meet the challenge of the next century.

The fifth trend I see is *the emerging forms and methods of new ministry*. There are a vast array of new forms of ministry, i.e., cells, praise services, Saturday night churches, Sunday evening Sunday school, church planting with the tool, *The Phone's for You* video and book produced by Norm Wahn. Many of these new forms were initiated by Church Growth. We can take credit for them. Others were the product of an environment created by Church Growth where these new forms could happen. We must be careful not to take credit for that which we did not create, but we must look carefully at the multitude of new forms, methods, and principles. We can measure, evaluate, and give directions concerning their use.

Not all new forms will be effective and biblical, just as Church Growth challenged the credibility of some old forms that were not effective or biblical. Since a method is simply the adaptation of an eternal principle to a culture, there will always be the need for new methods as culture changes. There will also always be the necessity of eliminating out-of-date methods. We do church workers a disservice by telling them to simply work harder or to continue to be faithful when their tools are out-of-date or worn out. We in Church Growth must help the church by knowing eternal biblical principles and applying them to the new forms of ministry. We must tell them it is all right to drop some of their methods and it is all right to add some of the new forms. In order to make this awesome judgement, we must be sure our foundation is rooted in biblical and empirical research.

We are making some solid progress in our ongoing attempt to lay a firm foundation for our discipline known technically as Church Growth. The vision of Church Growth has been clear in the eyes of the founders as well as in the eyes of the second and third generations. We have known

what Church Growth is, what Church Growth can accomplish, and basically how it works. The foundation is laid, but the past leaders and the new disciples must work hard to improve upon the superstructure. The words ascribed to Augustine remind us of this: "The next generation must stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before, and reach higher for God."

Our future as a discipline and as a professional organization looks bright. We have a "shared mission" to make Church Growth more effective. We have "enlarged borders to stretch our faith, to do more effective research, and to reach out to a needy world. We have new tools and new techniques to plow new grounds.

God forbid we should ever do nothing more than rehearse the "past victories" of Church Growth or be satisfied with past fields.

God forbid we should ever be selfish with our discipline of Church Growth like a child with a new Christmas toy. We need a constant renewal of our commitment to our unique ministry. We need constant revival and leadership of the Holy Spirit. We need an openness to others who fellowship with us in like minded pursuit. We have a shared task with the whole Church.