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My Journey in Church Growth

Bob Orr

At the request of my good friend Gary McIntosh, I am going to recount my more than 40-year journey in the field of Church Growth.

The Beginning Years

In 1970, as a young seminary graduate, I was called to my first pastorate: a German-speaking Baptist Church trying to become an English-speaking church in a community experiencing a vast influx of Portuguese immigrants. I knew nothing more than the mandate to make disciples was real and that no excuses were allowed.

In seeking to figure how to be faithful to our mandate to disciple *panta ta enthne*, I tried a few things, some that were successful, and others that lie on the scrapheap of history.

Two things worked well. The first was learning how to attract and pastor the unchurched. Within a couple of years, I had a parish of over 150 people who were unchurched and unreached in our community. As the relationships developed, many of them came to faith in Christ. The strategy was simple: I went door to door asking people if they attended church. If they said yes, I asked if I could pray a prayer of blessing on them. If they said no, I asked if they could ever imagine a time when they might need a pastor they could call upon and count on. If they could envision that, I asked them, with no obligation, if I could be their pastor. We would exchange numbers and I would call them once a month to see how they were doing and pray with them about anything going on in their lives. I remembered the words of Jesus about sheep in search of a shepherd.

The second thing that worked well was recognizing that everybody knows somebody. Using the existing relationships we have is an important way to take seriously our mandate. The church truly does grow through whom the members know. We had a significant number of nurses and doctors in our

church who were German and worked at the largest general hospital in the city that was less than 100 yards away. Before long, we started to see a stream of nursing students, and medical personnel who came, not because the church was English speaking or had a German heritage, but because their friends invited them. The same pattern happened with schoolteachers and independent contractors.

I eventually wrote about both of these concepts for articles in the early issues of the magazine *Church Growth: America*. I believe one of them ended up in the first edition of *The Pastor's Church Growth Handbook*, edited by Win Arn in 1979.

I give this short background to tell you about a critical experience in 1973 when my denomination, the North American Baptist Conference in Western Canada, was holding its annual pastors' conference at the Banff Springs Hotel. The guest presenters at that time were Dr. Donald McGavran and his protégé Win Arn who had recently launched the Institute for American Church Growth. Not only was I fascinated listening to them, but I also gained a theoretical framework to understand some of the things I had been doing.

At that conference, I had been asked to lead a workshop. To my surprise, both Dr. McGavran and Dr. Arn were in the audience. After I finished my presentation, McGavran and Arn came up to talk to me. McGavran asked me about visiting my church and told Arn that he needed to come too.

The following year, Arn conducted this Basic Church Growth Seminar, which was relatively new, at our church and several other locations around our province. As Arn's host, the extended one-on-one time together created a life-long friendship that resulted in our working together for most of my ministry.

A year later, Arn hosted his First Advanced Church Growth Seminar for pastors in Pasadena, California. He invited me to come and present. I had no idea what I was getting into. At that conference, the speakers included not only Win Arn, but also Lyle Schaller, Bob Schuller, Dr. Paul David Cho, Ted Engstrom, Art Glasser, Peter Wagner, and the father of the movement Dr. McGavran himself. Each of these men became a friend. What they have done for Christ and His kingdom is nothing short of amazing.

When the conference was over, Arn invited me to meet with Dr. McGavran and himself. He asked me if I would be willing to be a consultant and seminar leader for the Institute for American Church Growth. As far as I know, I was the first of these leaders. I not only went home to Canada and began helping scores of Churches, but I also started getting regular calls from Pasadena from Arn asking me if I could go somewhere on such and such a date and conduct a seminar on behalf of the Institute. I found myself doing 25-30 of these conferences each year.

The Second Phase

Eventually, pastoring a church, teaching at the local Bible College, and doing

the seminars made it so that I had too much on my plate. I had to ask myself, "What does my future look like? Where does God want me to serve?" After prayer, discussion with my family, and the counsel of my spiritual advisors, I resigned from my church and formed the Institute for Canadian Church Growth. I was now devoted full time to this fledgling discipline. My schedule quickly filled up and I found myself traveling to every province in Canada serving as a consultant for over a dozen denominations and conducting seminars on Church Growth for congregations in Canada. I was grateful for the help and resources given to me by McGavran and Arn. I was still traveling for Arn to many places in the United States; my time was spent equally between the two countries.

1982-1983

In December of 1982, Arn asked me to join him for a conference in Chicago. When it was over, he asked me if I would consider combining our two organizations in Pasadena to take Church Growth principles across not only the States and Canada but to wherever God would open up the doors. After going through the requisite immigration hoops, our family moved to Pasadena in a U-Haul. We arrived in mid-August and by the beginning of September, I found myself someplace (and sometimes in more than one place) every week, helping churches put into practice Church Growth principles.

The Institute Years 1983 -1994

These years were filled with travel to 48 countries, work with 56 denominations, and seminars or consultations in over 3000 churches. I was on the road about 200 days a year and have the dubious distinction of being the first person in history to have traveled 1,000,000 miles on Northwest Airline domestic routes.

The creative whirlwind at the Institute during those years saw Church Growth as a discipline come of age. Here are a few highlights.

Church growth became a holistic discipline with seminars on topics such as Sunday School, Assimilation, Lay Ministry, Oikos Evangelism, and Worship that Attracts and Holds the Unchurched. I had a large part to play in writing the curriculum for some of the seminars, including Assimilation, Lay Ministry, Faith Planning, 25 Ways to Reach The Unchurched, Worship, and a specialty conference for small churches. The manuals for some of these seminars were used by the Cumberland Presbyterians as well as other denominations.

During this time, we designed specialized training for Pastors Conferences. Often, we would receive a call from a group of pastors or denominational executives and customize the material for the group. I remember a lecture that outlined the DNA of a growing church that was so well received and relevant that some younger consultants such as Chad Thibodaux used it as the basis of a method to determine a church's health. It can be found

on my blog (<http://drboborr.blogspot.com/>) under the title “The Ethos of a Growing Church.”

These seminars led to the development of a 2-year plan for a regional judicatory or a local church. We would visit the churches every 4-6 months, providing training and consulting to help them become more growth-oriented. It was during this period that my friend Dr. Gary McIntosh joined the organization to help pastors and churches collect the information needed to apply for this 2-year plan.

Perhaps the best conference or training we offered was our Diagnose and Renew Your Church conference. We developed an 85-page diagnostic tool that covered every aspect of church life. I wrote the first draft of the diagnostic tool and then Charles Arn and I worked together to refine it. After a church completed as much of the diagnostic tool as it could, we would spend 3 days going through the data and discussing what it meant. Many parts of this diagnostic tool are still being used. I was the lead presenter and often had Win Arn, Charles Arn, Gary McIntosh, Steve Wagner, or Bob Bast with me as co-presenters. Occasionally, I led all 3 days myself. I do not have the fondest memories of such seminars because presenting morning, afternoon, and evening sessions took an unbelievable amount of energy to keep the participants engaged. As I look back on this conference, however, it allowed churches to get 80% of the benefits of a two-person conference without paying for a second consultant. This probably helped thousands of small- and medium-sized churches.

During this time, we also focused on training consultants whom we called Church Growth Associates. Hundreds of pastors and denominational executives came to the Institute for training and resources so that they could take Church Growth principles to their areas of ministry.

We also trained chaplains for the United States Navy. I remember two officers from the Navy coming to Pasadena to meet with us. We appropriately adapted the seminar and had the privilege of going to 25 bases around the world to train chaplains in outreach. We also developed a second conference on worship in the Navy. I am still friends with many of these chaplains.

As the Church Growth seminars became better known, I found myself in Japan, China, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, Australia, and numerous other countries teaching Church Growth principles to pastors and lay leaders.

The Following Years

Although Dr. Arn had a stroke, he was still a vibrant and brilliant Church Growth expert. He changed his research focus toward reaching people neglected by most churches. I found myself wondering how my life would change as activity at the Institute was winding down.

Church Growth had changed and our seminars in many respects had been replaced by the megachurch conferences led by practitioners of the discipline.

Pastors such as Rick Warren and Bill Hybels were drawing thousands of pastors to “See how to do it” seminars held on their campuses, The number of National Church Growth Conferences dropped accordingly.

I formed a new company called Growth Associates and began a time of seeking to understand how I could most effectively use what I had learned. I entered back into the pastorate, the real laboratory for what we had been teaching. Not to my surprise, I found these principles really did work. McGavran’s mantra rang in my head: There was more indifference to the gospel in a church than in the surrounding community. I truly did find in the community a vast mosaic of people who could be reached with the gospel.

My “expertise” still gave me opportunities to keep my heart and hands in the discipline. I conducted a study, at the invitation of Carlise Driggers and Bill Mackey of the Baptist Convention of South Carolina, that received an award for Religious research on the subject of values and their influence on church growth. The South Carolina Baptist Convention was a cutting-edge group that included such people as Bobby Jackson, George Bullard, and Reggie McNeil. To this day, the time and effort I invested in that region are still discussed. The Lilly Foundation printed the summary report entitled “Values for Growing Churches” and sent it to 40,000 churches. (The report can be found at <http://drboborr.blogspot.com/2012/02/values-for-growing-churches.html>)

I had the privilege of working with my denomination, the North American Baptist Conference in Western Canada, on numerous programs including Church Revitalization, Breaking the 200 Barrier, Helping the Small Church Grow, and other activities for which the leaders felt my expertise was relevant.

My work continued to take me overseas regularly with 4 trips to India, 3 to Korea, 14 to New Zealand, 6 to Australia, 3 to Brazil, and 2 to Africa. These trips involved primarily pastoral conferences or Bible college classes. During these trips, I had the privilege of meeting many Church Growth leaders including Yonggi Cho, George Mabeleo, Ken Henson, Jeff and Becky Hrubrik, and Ray Muller. The list could go on but suffice it to say I have been greatly enriched by whom I have met; the contribution I made seems so small in comparison.

One of my great privileges during the last years of their lives was my regular times with my friends Donald McGavran and Win Arn. As Arn’s health began to fail, our twice a month visits typically focused on recounting stories about pastors and churches we had visited. Our times were especially meaningful when we remembered the stories of lives that had been changed. Arn had a phenomenal impact on my life and ministry; I still love to discuss with all who ask about him his passion for the local church. I especially remember watching Win shed tears of joy when he heard of someone coming to faith in Christ as a result of the effort he had put into training and investing in people’s lives.

I also regularly visited McGavran during the final years of his life. I had the privilege of presenting the final set of lectures he gave before his passing

(by reading them aloud for him) in North Carolina. I have been digitizing the original manuscripts and putting them on my blog. I have also published them in a book called *The Final Lectures*. There is a tribute to McGavran on my blog and you can read about it there. The last words he spoke to me were the same as his first words at the first conference I attended back in 1973, "It's God's will that his church grow and that his lost children be found."

Currently, I am the president of California State Christian University. It is a new kind of seminary that adopted two of McGavran's ideas and has made them part of the school's DNA. First, all of our faculty are successful practitioners who are not only academically qualified but also have practical ministry experience and know-how to apply biblical truth in context. As someone remarked, "Your professors play with real bullets." Second, we require a course in evangelism, church growth, and missiology every quarter. We also require every student, regardless of major, to participate in an overseas mission trip to understand where and how God is at work. We believe every Christian leader needs to have the passion and expertise necessary for leading churches in fulfilling our Lord's commands.

I still speak at a limited number of Church Growth Conferences around the world as well as doing local church consultations. As I reflect on my life, I have been changed. But the main thing is still the main thing: We serve a God who loves to see lost people found and the mandate to make disciples is still binding on each and every one of us till he returns.

I would say to those who follow after me that the principles of Church Growth are true and that they will work in any church that wants to grow. Find new methods to apply these principles and then watch and see what the Lord will do.