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Core Values: Backbone Of A Movement

Kent R. Hunter

In the spring 1995 issue of the magazine *Strategies for Today's Leader*, we reprinted an article from *The Church Growth Digest*. This magazine, published by the British Church Growth Association, carried the article, "Prayer and Church Growth: Whatever Happened to Peter Wagner?" This article, written by Peter Wagner, was his answer to the question raised by many people in the subtitle.

It is my presupposition that the Church Growth Movement is alive and well, even though it has proliferated and expanded multi-culturally, multi-denominationally, and internationally. The article begs the question of a communication gap, a weakness suffered by the Movement. It also carries a powerful message: not so much in what Peter says, but the fact that he makes a public confession. The medium is the message. The leaders of movements need to continually communicate with constituents, followers, and other interested people, to let them know they still have the passion they experienced years ago.

In this article, Wagner proclaims his focus is still the same: world evangelization. Then he lists the various research agendas he has pursued under that passion. He lists theological education by extension, pastoral leadership, spiritual gifts, the homogeneous unit principle, the people group approach to world evangelization, modality-sodality theory, evangelization and social responsibility, and church planting. He then explains that his most recent research agenda has been in the spiritual dimensions of church growth through signs and wonders and the focus on prayer. Wagner sees all of these agendas as a means towards the

end of world evangelization.

Proliferation

In the last 10 to 20 years, the Church Growth Movement has proliferated in at least three dimensions. First, the Movement has proliferated by topics. In the last decade or so, we have seen church growth leaders concentrate on mega-churches, meta-churches, philosophy of ministry, understanding secular people, mission statements, the age wave, builders, boomers, busters, lifestyle evangelism, vision, change, small groups, Sunday schools, breaking barriers, etc.

In a second dimension, there has been proliferation in other ways. Not only was there the founding of the American Society for Church Growth, but there is now also a British Church Growth Association, and India Church Growth Center, Australian Church Growth Center, German Church Growth Association, Church Growth International (David Yonggi Cho—Seoul, Korea) and centers and associations in many other places including Japan, the Philippines, Sweden, South Africa, etc. The phenomenon in the United States, originally centered in Pasadena, California, also has centers throughout the Southwest, Midwest, and the East Coast of the United States.

In a third dimension, there has been proliferation of the Church Growth Movement by influence. The Movement has had its impact and stamp upon many other movements. Through the efforts of Ralph Winter and Donald McGavran, the Lausanne Movement was highly impacted in its early days by church growth thinking. Many of those in the A.D. 2000 and Beyond Movement are highly saturated with church growth thinking. The DAWN (Discipling of A Whole Nation) Movement has been impacted and influenced, as well as motivated by church growth thinking. Ralph Winter started the U.S. Center for World Missions, coming out of the School for World Missions at Fuller Seminary with a high concentration of church growth influence. Today, the worldwide prayer movement is highly saturated with an emphasis on world evangelization.

Change And Consistency

A movement must be constantly changing and, at the same time, stay constantly the same. There have been many changes since we formed the American Society for Church Growth. In

fact, it began as the North American Society for Church Growth, registered in the state of California. Today its corporate legal ties are to the state of Indiana and it has been renamed the American Society for Church Growth. In the beginning, the North American Society was a piggyback event of the Fuller Institute. The Fuller Institute, for the time being, is now closed.

Win Arn, one of the early American giants in the Church Growth Movement has rerouted his focus on the age wave. The Fuller Seminary School for World Missions, which was previously *the* source for church growth training, now shares that role of professional training with many other schools, some of them in California, but others located throughout the country. Gone is the popular magazine *Church Growth: America*. *The Church Growth Bulletin* was changed to *Church Growth*, and then changed to *Global Church Growth* magazine and is now *Strategies for Today's Leader*. Donald McGavran has gone to be with the Lord.

What would McGavran say if he were here today? Of course, he would quote Romans 16:20: "By the command of the eternal God, this Gospel must be made known to *panta ta ethne*." In reflection, it seems quite amazing that Dr. McGavran never got tired of saying that. What's more, those who saw the fire in his eyes, heard the passion in his words, and were moved by the motivation of his spirit, never got tired of hearing it! Herein lies one of the keys to powerful movements.

Great people do very few things...very well.

Great movements are movements that do very few things...very well. Just like a laser beam, focused light has enormous power. This is one of the keys to a powerful movement—focus.

Focus And Flexibility

In I Corinthians 9:22, the Apostle Paul said, "I have become all things to all people that by any means some might be saved." The Apostle was flexible concerning the non-essentials. When he was with the Jews, he would act like a Jew, and when he was with the Gentiles, he would adapt to that culture. However, he was significantly focused on the essentials. In his highly acclaimed practice of church growth, the Apostle Paul literally could not be dissuaded from his mission to share the Gospel

with *panta ta ethne* by anything. Nothing could derail his passion: not shipwrecks, enemies, governments, betrayal, dangers in the wilds, or the denomination's initial persistence that Christianity remain a Jewish sect (Acts 15). Without a doubt, the Apostle was focused on core values.

After we printed that article, "...What Ever Happened to Peter Wagner?", I received a phone call from a pastor in a Church of God congregation in Indianapolis, Indiana. He had received his Doctor of Ministry degree at Fuller in Church Growth in the 1980's. His reaction was instructive. He said, "I really needed to hear that." He went on to explain that he had become somewhat lax in church growth, even lazy as he described it. He said that he was subtly discouraged by the fact that he did not hear much from Peter Wagner, or from many of the other practicing church growth people and that they were still committed to the core values of the Church Growth Movement.

This is an interesting contrast to the fact that anyone who ever met Donald McGavran would hear something about how God wants the lost to be found and be brought into the church. How easy it is, perhaps, to assume the obvious and lose touch with the center.

My own pastor is a case in point. He took church growth from Peter Wagner in the 1980's at Fuller. He has a heart for church growth—there is no doubt about that. But, I see him as a person who needs encouragement. He is surrounded by the mundane, everyday challenges of congregational life. He is involved in activities. There is always someone dying who needs to be buried and someone in love who needs to be married. There are classes to teach and messages to prepare. The move from mission to maintenance is so subtle and so easy. It is such a dangerous trap. Reflecting upon the excellent messages of our pastor, one of the members commented to me, "It seems like we hardly ever hear about outreach in the message anymore." I am sure that it is not because my pastor has changed his mind about the primary purpose of the church.

He still has church growth eyes. But he needs to be refocused. He needs to articulate. He probably needs encouragement. He needs a movement that will encourage him.

A movement is only one generation away from extinction. In fact, it may not take a whole generation, since there are dozens of influences that would diffuse, divide, and redirect that focus.

The Church Growth Movement is strong in its flexibility of changing agendas, targeting needs, and exploring new areas. However, like the Apostle Paul, the flexibility must be balanced by focus.

Core Values

In order to function properly, any movement, like any body, must have a backbone. The backbone of a movement is a set of core values. There are, of course, many core values that are part of the Church Growth Movement. Some of them might be considered to be church growth principles; others might be identified as basic assumptions. Here are a few.

#1: Stay focused. Just because you and I can recite the basics of church growth in our sleep does not mean that those around us are aware of these basic building blocks of church growth. People come and go in our lives and those who are coming need to know the paradigm shift we have experienced. We need to help them experience it also.

My wife discovered this in a painful way when a conflict arose at the staff meeting led by the principal of the school where she teaches. The school has an annual fund-raiser in which it sells apple fritters at the local apple festival. While it is a wonderful event that raises money for the school, gives some I-P exposure to the church, and provides great fellowship and camaraderie for parents who work the project, there are plenty of opportunities toward the discipleship goal that are overlooked. My wife, who is a hopeless fanatic for church growth, suggested that they provide some sort of message to people who buy a fritter. She thought it would be a good idea to print a basic Gospel message on the napkins, and also include the basic information about our church, with an invitation to attend. One of the other teachers, who was heavily involved with the work of the project, felt threatened. She felt my wife was implying the project was a waste of time unless we “beat people over the head with the Bible.” What these teachers rediscovered is that not everybody who is on a particular staff shares the same paradigm. Our pastor would say that our church in its varied ministries, including the school, are church growth-oriented. The tension came on a very basic issue between presence evangelism and the desire for persuasion evangelism, making disciples.

It just shows that church growth leaders can never overlook or assume the very basics. One of the challenges of a movement is the “been there, done that” syndrome, in which because at one time, in one era, basics were taught, that is old and out of date. For example, who today is reading *Your Church Can Grow: The Seven Vital Signs of a Healthy Church*? There is always a next generation, new people, emerging pastors and leaders, who must be introduced to the basics of church growth. In this present era, it is good to see those back-to-the-basics books like Thom Rainer’s *The Book of Church Growth*, my revision and update of *Foundations for Church Growth: Biblical Basics for the Local Church*, and Elmer Towns’ *Evangelism and Church Growth Encyclopedia*.

#2: *Remain flexible*. It is important to recognize that the vehicles of a movement change. Institutes, formats of magazines, topics, needs, authors, leaders, agencies, and teachers all change. Wagner shares this in his article by indicting all the different research agendas he has had throughout his past several decades in the Church Growth Movement. At the time of his death, Dr. McGavran was beginning to call church growth itself by different names, including “effective evangelism.” Movement leaders can become terribly stuck in a rut if they focus on those issues that are supposed to be flexible. For example, those of us who are authors might write for a certain publishing company for a while, but then discover that that company has lost interest in the church growth agenda, or is suffering from the “been there, done that” syndrome. Today, as in many areas in business throughout the United States, God is raising up new entities that are cutting edge, contemporary-oriented organizations. The major publishing companies of the future may be different than those of the past, just like the major church bodies of the future may not be the mainline denominations we have known in history. The point is that if we focus on the vehicles, we get stuck in a rut, become stale, and lose the vitality of the movement. So, while we must remain focused on the essentials, it is equally important for us to be flexible, “all things to all people,” as we treat these means to an end as only temporary.

#3: *We believe in the concept of discipling*. One of the basic principles of Church Growth is multiplication, with discipleship as the goal. We understand transformational leadership that raises up others and empowers them to do the work of ministry. So, as leaders in the Church Growth Movement, what movement

people have you identified? What movement people are you mentoring, nurturing?

In the early days of Evangelism Explosion, Dr. D. James Kennedy taught this basic principle: "It is more important to train a soul-winner than to win a soul." Based on the key concept of discipling, Kennedy recognized the importance of always evangelizing other people with someone else at your side. So, what movement person do you have by your side? What person are you discipling, not for activity in ministry, not for training in one of the vehicles of the movement, but what movement person are you empowering for work in the movement?

Years ago, Lyle Schaller approached me and said he felt I had some potential for a consulting ministry. He was aware that through the ministry of the Church Growth Center, a division called Creative Consultation Services had been developed. He asked me if I would like to come along with him and learn from him. I was delighted to receive such an invitation from one of my career-long heroes. Schaller not only modeled his consultation work, but literally gave away everything that he used in consultation. This concept of empowerment is a key value, not only to be taught, but also to be practiced. Leighton Ford in his article, "Jesus as a Model for Leaders," written for the Lausanne magazine, *World Evangelization* (No. 70, March/April 1995) reflects upon the importance of this aspect of Jesus' style for ministry. If we believe in discipling, we should be doing that, even for the Movement.

#4: *Let the heroes speak.* Peter Wagner spoke strong words to that Church of God pastor in Indianapolis. They were words that reassured that pastor and reignited his fire. They encouraged him because he realized that Peter Wagner still believed what he had previously taught. The pastor needed to hear it. We can not just assume that people know where we stand or what we do. Our teaching, our books, and our public record must not only include the emphasis on whatever important topic is our present research agenda, but also must reflect and articulate the core values upon which we stand. We can not, we must not, assume that people somehow already know those values—even if we have told them ourselves. Without articulating those values, people get the subtle message from our silence that these are not our driving passions any more, but we have gone on to something else. The medium becomes the message. We need to let our

heroes speak. This commitment to articulation is one of the core values of the Movement.

#5: *The issue of communication.* A movement needs strong, repeated, continual communication. One of the values of the American Society for Church Growth meeting is the opportunity for networking. It is a chance to talk with one another, to share, and to communicate what we are doing in our lives. Perhaps this networking is just as important as the excellent presentations by experts on exciting topics. But, in what way can we continue to network between society meetings?

Another aspect of communication is our efforts to declare the Movement. As we write, and as we are involved in public interviews, it is important that you reflect your dependence upon the Movement. Long ago, we were taught that when we begin reading a book, we start by reading about the author on the back cover. We do this so we can understand the perspective from which the writer is coming. This is also true of our audiences. They need to know that we are a part of a Movement and that this Movement is impacting people worldwide. To do so does not make the Movement an end in itself, but helps to sustain the viability of the vehicle by which we can obtain the lofty objectives of church growth.

Another aspect of communication is edification. People involved in a movement, facing many challenges everyday, need to build up and encourage one another. There are many challenges that face movement people. The value of ministry to one another cannot be underestimated. I remember when my ministry went through some very difficult times in the mid-1980's. Our colleague, George Hunter from Asbury Seminary, was a tremendous encouragement to me by simply asking how things were going and indicating prayer support and concern.

That prayer support is another way communication is important. Movement people should pray for one another. What if each of us in the American Society for Church Growth added to our prayer list four other society members that we committed to pray for everyday? That means that four people would be lifting each of us up in prayer on a daily basis.

#6: *The challenge to reexamine our motives.* This is not a reexamination of our motives in general. We would not be a part of the American Society for Church Growth if we were not motivated to be a part of what God is doing to build His Kingdom

through world evangelization. But, on a day-to-day basis, we need to reexamine our motives. While we are constantly trapped in the mundane issues of paying the bills, getting through the course, preparing the speech, developing the seminar, finishing the book or article on time, expanding the ministry, or even as we taste the elements of success, our everyday motives can easily lose sight of the loftier purpose for which we exist and to which we have dedicated our lives. Jesus said, "Whoever among you wants to be great, must be a servant (Mark 10:44)." For those of us who knew Donald McGavran, we experienced greatness personified in humility and servanthood.

In our day-to-day work, it is important to look beyond our own efforts in our own ministries, and continually reflect upon the big picture. This is one of the values of the American Society for Church Growth.

#7: Identify the competition. The enemy is Satan. The battles we face on a personal level are not just in a human dimension, but are principalities and powers. On the movement level we also face spiritual warfare.

The Church Growth Movement will continue to spin off agencies, other movements, leaders, and teachers. They are not competitors. When we look at the A.D. 2000 Movement, DAWN, the Prayer and Fasting Conference, these are not the competition. A movement is, by its very design, a catalytic force. As catalysts, it is our intention to birth new vehicles, cultivate new leaders, pioneer new paradigms, ignite new fires, and explore new horizons. In this sense, movement people are the edge of the cutting edge.

True leadership is influence. As movement people, we must be content with influencing and find our joy and excitement with empowering and raising up others.

#8: Persevere. The word for leader in the New Testament comes from the root word "to persevere." It appears that God, in His wisdom, knows the importance of leaders to be encouraged to persevere. As God spoke to Joshua and the Israelites prior to entering the Promised Land, he encouraged them to be strong and courageous. He is basically encouraging them to persevere. He said they would persevere and they would receive the Promised Land, even though they had to fight for it and there were some giants in the way. He said their strength and courage was based on two factors: He had promised the land and it was as

good as accomplished, and, He promised He would always be with them. In the same way, Jesus, when He gave the Great Commission command, said He would be with His people...to the end of the age. We also have the assurance that it is a completed task. There will come a time when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. There is a time when the Lamb will sit upon the throne and people from every tribe, language, nation, and race will sing a new song unto the Lamb. It is an accomplished fact and the Lord is with us. To lead is to persevere. Winston Churchill, in one of the shortest speeches ever recorded, profoundly said, "Never, never, never, never, never, give up."

#9: *Embrace the Independents*. There are those who are church growth-oriented who need to be a part of the Movement. They include people like Bill Hybels, George Barna, Rick Warren, John Maxwell, and others. This is not just to say the American Society for Church Growth or the Church Growth Movement needs these people but it is to say these people need the American Society for Church Growth, as well. They need it because, as key leaders, they need the movement perspective. Being a part of a movement outside of your own ministry provides balance. Each of us knows people in our sphere of influence that could be greatly blessed by that movement perspective. How valuable it would be if we would take time and list those people and give their names and addresses to the American Society for Church Growth to invite them. Why? Not because we are trying to grow the American Society for Church Growth. That is not our business. But because they, like we, need to be movement people.

#10: *Never lose sight of the core of the core*. The essence of the existence of the Church Growth Movement is not programmatic. It is not a fad. It is not tied to an individual. It is an eternal axiom. It is God's plan for world evangelization. It is God's passion. It is what drove Jesus Christ to the cross. It is what Jesus meant when He told His disciples on Easter evening, "As the Father has sent me, also I send you" (John 20:21). It is the driving force behind the early church in the book of Acts.

God wants the lost to be found and brought into the church. The purpose of the church is to grow: internally and externally. The goal of evangelism is disciples. People without Christ are truly lost. "Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one goes to the Father except by Him" (John 14:6). "For God so

loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

God works His Kingdom work through people. In I Corinthians, Paul says, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plant, but God gives the increase" (I Corinthians 3:6). But Paul confessed, "It is not me, but Christ in me" (Galatians 2:20). "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). "He must increase, I must decrease" (John 3:30).

God wants much fruit of eternal dimensions. Jesus said, "I am the Vine, you are the branches...the Father prunes back the branches so they can produce more fruit...go and produce much fruit, the kind that endures" (John 15:1-2, 5, 16).

"Go, make disciples, *panta ta ethne*" (Matthew 28:19).

And, as McGavran would sign his letters, he reflected a core value of our relationship to one another: "Your comrade in the bonds of the Great Commission."

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