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A Response to Dr. Russell
The Church Growth Movement's Indispensable Contribution

George G. Hunter III

This meeting of The American Society for Church Growth has found Walt Russell's critique of the Church Growth Movement to be perceptive, stimulating, and appropriately provoking. I noticed that the first responder to Dr. Russell's address had the advantage of receiving a copy of the manuscript ahead of time, and thereby had the opportunity to actually reflect on the paper and prepare his response before this meeting ever began. You have every right to know that I am suffering from no such handicap! I heard Walt's paper for the first time as you heard it. I took notes and wrote some suggestions to myself in the left hand margin. Now, as I stand before you, I can hardly wait to hear what I have to say!

I did think to cluster notes for my remarks in four general sections.

I. Let me begin by reminding us of the Church Growth Movement's indispensable contribution. Peter Drucker counsels organizations to ask themselves, periodically, "What is our main business?" I believe that Church Growth's people, and its critics, both need to be reminded of the movement's main business. From the time of Donald McGavran's research and conceptual innovations in the 1940's and 1950's, three features of the movement have controlled the movement in its most productive seasons.

The first feature is a consistent concern for what McGavran called "Effective Evangelism." McGavran believed that the goal of the ministry of evangelism is not to "get decisions" so much as

to “make disciples” – defined as people who follow Jesus as Lord through His Body, the Church. McGavran especially wanted to know, in contrast to many entrenched assumptions and outright myths, how the gospel actually spreads and how the true Church actually grows. McGavran’s concern for effective evangelism spanned both cross-cultural mission – how to reach a People and start a Christward movement in their midst, as well as intracultural evangelism in cultures where the Church is already present in outreach.

The second feature represents a consistent concern for “Strategy” in mission and evangelism. Before McGavran, relatively few leaders gave much thought to “mission strategy.” In one tradition or another, we did what we knew how to do and what “our mission” had always done. We built schools, filled teeth, dug wells, managed orphanages, taught people to read, and (more recently) taught English as a second language – usually within the walls and community of a “mission compound.” We called what we were doing “evangelism,” and we assumed that whatever we were doing was as successful as mission could be in the given situation, and we could report occasional stories of converts to the mission’s supporters back home. McGavran, however, challenged such assumptions, recognizing that some mission activities and some strategic directions are much more reproductive than others. He challenged mission leaders to formulate clear objectives, to develop strategies, and to marshal human and physical resources in pursuit of those objectives, and to “rather ruthlessly” evaluate a mission’s activities – to inform mid-course corrections.

The third feature is subsidiary to the first two. McGavran saw that the answers to his driving questions about effective evangelism and mission strategy would not surface easily; he and others would have to *dig* out the answers – through “field research.” Consequently, much of what we know today about effective faith-sharing and mission strategy we know from the field observations, interviews, and historical analyses of Church Growth researchers mining insight from hundreds of growing churches and movements in many different cultures.

Those themes – effective evangelism, mission strategy, and field research – comprise the “magnificent obsession” of the Church Growth Movement, and they constitute our main, and perennial, business. Those concerns are “enough” to keep a body

of scholars, graduate students, trainers, consultants, church executives, and others more than busy for a lifetime. As a student of communication theory, I know of no more complex process than communicating the meaning of Christianity's message to a single population; compound that with the challenge of communicating the gospel to people of many different cultures! As a student of leadership, I know of no more imposing challenge than developing a crosscultural mission strategy for a target society; compound that with a mission agency's challenge of developing a mission strategy for effectively serving and reaching many different societies!

Those concerns are so immense, and important, that we have often been reluctant in Church Growth to "divert" our research and teaching interests into other questions, however important. We have often escaped diversions because we knew we did not have to take on every important question. Church Growth is a specific field within the broader field of "Missiology," so we felt no compelling need to replicate what our colleagues were doing in, say, mission theology and produce a distinct "Church Growth theology." Church Growth is a specific field within the even broader field of ministry studies, so we felt no need to produce a Church Growth approach to homiletics, or church renewal, or even congregational studies. Furthermore, Church Growth is a specific field within the still broader field of theology, so we felt no need to do a Church Growth approach to, say, systematic theology. Frankly, I hope that no one reads Church Growth writers to get their soteriology, or their eschatology, or their hermeneutic or their homiletic. We do not pretend to do everything!

From time to time, we *have* taken on research and training challenges that were somewhat ancillary to evangelism and mission strategy. For instance, we saw that leadership and small groups contributed to church growth, so some of us offered seminars in leadership, or small groups. We saw that strategic planning is a crucial skill within strategy development, so some of us offered strategic planning seminars. We saw that there are spiritual factors in church growth, and some of us produced books and seminars in the role of prayer, spiritual formation, healing, and even signs and wonders and spiritual warfare.

In time however, some of those (originally) ancillary concerns hijacked the image of Church Growth. Consequently, forty years into the movement, more people are confused about what

we are up to than ever before! For this reason, and because no one is likely to pursue our original challenges if we do not, we should resist all three of Dr. Russell's critical challenges to Church Growth people. While any of us is free to 1) develop an adequate theology of persons, or 2) to develop a more adequate theology of leadership, or 3) to develop a more adequate theology of community, I reply by suggesting that those issues are important, but they are assigned to the whole theological community. There is no reason to believe that those concerns are within the special province of church growth research.

II. Dr. Russell's "View from the Ivory Tower" takes on the Church Growth Movement at a number of points that warrant response.

He suggests that some of us are more interested in building ecclesial institutions and advancing ecclesiastical careers than in the real salvation of people or growing the True Church. From my experience, there are facts to substantiate his charge. I have known, since the mid-1970's, that a fair number of pastors and other church leaders do attend Church Growth seminars and courses out of such dubious interests. I determined to begin where people are and use the seminar to move them toward where God wants them to be. If I have failed to do that, consistently, then Dr. Russell's charge rightly indicts me and, I presume, the rest of us.

Walt Russell suggests that, in training people for leadership, we have focused too much on skills and too little on the virtues that are required for church leaders. I do not know many church leaders who are "too skilled," but we do need to feature the biblical virtues much more.

Russell rightly charges that people may misuse Church Growth knowledge, strategies, and tools, citing the case of recent growth in the Unitarian Church. I quite agree; *all* knowledge, however,—from dogma to psychology to drug making to bomb making—is vulnerable to misappropriation and flagrant misuse. Is anyone suggesting that knowledge be suppressed, or its development be curtailed, because someone may misuse it?

Russell joins a chorus of folks in charging the Church Growth Movement with "pragmatism." While our critics can (and usually do) overstate our pragmatism, we do indeed employ the "pragmatic test" from time to time. Some pragmatism is, necessarily, built into any responsible strategic thinking. Any

mission whose cause is to feed hungry people needs to ask how many people are being fed in proportion to the resources entrusted to the mission. Any mission whose cause is literacy needs to inquire about how many people are learning to read, and whether we could teach more with the people and resources we have. Likewise, the mission whose cause is evangelization needs to inquire about how many people are becoming new disciples? Outcomes are so important that approaches demonstrated to feed, teach, or reach more people may indeed be preferable to those that feed, teach, or reach fewer. A mission which avoids the pragmatic test of its approach may be vulnerable to malpractice!

Dr. Russell, with others, also charges Church Growth people of indulging in "marketing." He does not tell us where the intensity of that charge comes from, nor what he means by "marketing." I suspect that the intensity comes from the anti-business bias of the theological academy. (Often, theologians brand as "sinful" anything that reminds them of business!) At the most elementary level, Marketing is simply an informed way of finding out who is out there, and what their needs and interests are, and how we might serve them. To put this question in perspective, I would wager that Dr. Russell's institution, Biola University, spends far more cash marketing each year than any growing church in the USA. (If they do not, Biola's Advancement department is vulnerable to charges of malpractice!)

I need to register some honest discomfort with one way in which Dr. Russell engages in guilt-by-association to critique the Church Growth Movement, though he is not an extreme indulger and he does flag one of our struggles. The problem centers around one question: Who is included in the Church Growth field? Who is a card carrying member of the club? Who represents, or speaks for, Church Growth? You are familiar with this approximate scenario. Some ding-a-ling, with no background in missiology and no knowledge of Church Growth lore in the McGavran tradition, takes an extended vacation in his minivan, visits some famous churches, writes up his impressions, and gets it published. The publisher markets it as a "Church Growth" book, and people (who don't know better) read it, generalize from it, and brand Church Growth a ding-a-ling discipline!

I know of no other field toward which critics function that same way, certainly no other field of ministry. Preachers serve

up thousands of lousy sermons every week, and publish a fair number, but no one assumes “that is homiletics” and no one blames the homileticians. Critics never blame Christian Education professors for the unfaithful or muddled Sunday School lessons in local churches. Critics never associate professors of Pastoral Counseling with the shallow, tacky manipulative “therapy” that cons and exploits people across this land. No one blames the New Testament professors for the fatuous exegesis you can hear on the radio or TV on any given day. Church Growth has, for a long time, been the butt of a selective guilt-by-association method of criticism. I only know one thing to do about this problem. Let’s name this obscenity by its right name, and let’s publicly call people’s hand on it *every time* they indulge in it.

III. Dr. Russell seems to assume that everyone, really, should be teaching and writing theology, and therefore we should judge any Christian movement by its specifically theological contribution. From this framework, he credits Church Growth with two positive theological contributions: 1. The movement has clarified that growth occurs through purposeful intentional activity, not simply through the “overflow” of faithful church life. 2. The movement has rightly emphasized the role of leadership in motivating and leading a congregation in growth.

I would propose two responses: 1. Church Growth should be judged primarily by its contribution to effective evangelism and mission strategy, and not primarily by its theological contribution. 2. Church Growth has, nevertheless, made more of a theological contribution than most “desk theologians” are aware of. If Russell’s twofold affirmation of Church Growth’s theological contribution represents “all there is,” then we have not contributed much theologically, even though that is not our primary assignment. So, for the record, I suggest that Church Growth’s theological contribution to date may go quite beyond what the theological academy perceives. For example:

1. With our colleagues in the wider field of Missiology, we believe that we have discovered (and demonstrated) that the gospel’s “point of contact” is not so much the sovereignty of the Word (Barth) nor the common humanity between the advocate and the receptor (Brunner) as in the interface between the receptor’s felt need(s) and the relevant facet(s) of the gospel.

2. Church Growth people discovered that the gospel becomes contagious as the communication forms it employs adapt to, and are indigenous to, the culture of the receptor population. Church Growth people also discovered that the faith spreads across the existing social networks between believers and prechristian people. Those two discoveries are filled with theological implications for our understanding of Revelation, the Church, and for the Incarnation and its extension through Christ's Body in the world.

3. We believe that Church Growth's lore of Receptivity theory has potent theological implications for a more adequate understanding of Grace (particularly Prevenient Grace), and The Holy Spirit. We believe that our informed confidence that (presumably) all people are receptive some of the time has penetrated, and helped to resolve, a very deep mystery heretofore separating the Calvinist and Wesleyan traditions.

4. Church Growth has advanced a high doctrine of the Church among evangelicals who, caught in Western Individualism, have emphasized eliciting "decisions for Christ, while regarding the Church as optional. In the distinctive Church Growth approach to evangelism, a person's incorporation into the Body is not left to mere "follow-up;" it is an intrinsic and necessary step in the evangelization of a person, and some of our research indicates that incorporation often precedes, and facilitates, the experience of justification and second birth.

5. While the entrenched paradigm in the Western Individualism of The Enlightenment, shared by most of the Western Church, sees the entire human race as a vast collection of individual "atoms," Church Growth's research of, and affirmation of, "People Movements" has almost single-handedly recovered the predominant non-western (and Biblical) understanding of humanity as a vast collection of "molecules"—tribes, clans, castes, and other "affinity groups" and "people groups." Theologians who have not yet appropriated the meaning of "ta ethne" in their theological anthropology represent a serious case of arrested theological development!

6. In contrast to the Protestant Christian culture's institutionally oriented interests in mere membership recruitment

as a means to preserve and maintain the institutional church, Church Growth's emphasis upon "Conversion Growth" as the only church growth that really counts, with the emphasis upon new church planting as "the best strategy under the sun" for reaching prechristian people, have helped restore the Christian movement's full Apostolic vision for humanity.

7. Church Growth's emphasis upon outreach and growth primarily through the ministries and witness of the *laity* represents one of the very few movements incarnating the Protestant principle of the "Priesthood of all Believers"—a towering doctrine to which most of the Church, including most professors in the theological academy, give mere lip service.

I could extend this list of Church Growth's theological contributions, but those examples serve sufficiently to illustrate my point.

IV. Church Growth's contribution, however, is much larger than its specific theological contributions. Its major contributions come out of its accumulated field research—with reflection upon that field research lore as well as upon the relevant biblical, theological, and behavioral science data, especially the data that focus on effective evangelism and mission strategy. Three affirmations should establish this point:

1. Church Growth research into questions like how the gospel spreads, how people become Christians, and how churches grow, has made it possible for churches today to know more about how effective evangelism is done than any other generation has been privileged to know in the entire history of the Christian Movement.

2. Church Growth's emphasis upon reaching the Peoples of the earth, amplified by the Lausanne movement's obsession to reach the Unreached Peoples of the earth, has resulted in more new people groups being reached than in any other generation in the entire history of the Christian Movement.

3. Church Growth restoration of mission strategy as something worth thinking about has prodded mission agencies to move beyond the entrenched "mission station" stage of mission in many places, which has led indeed to wider expansion of the Christian movement among many peoples.

It is impossible to imagine that Christianity's "desk theologians," left to their own interests and devices, would have led in those achievements. Church Growth has made, is making, and should continue to make an indispensable contribution to the World Christian movement. If we do not make it, no one else is likely to!

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