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Thom S. Ranier
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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**Church Growth at the End of the Twentieth Century:
Recovering Our Purpose**

Thom S. Rainer

On February 1, 1994, I closed the chapter on a meaningful era in my life. After many years of pastoring, I was on my way to the hallowed halls of academia to become the founding dean of Southern Baptist's only graduate school of missions, evangelism, and church growth.

The four churches I pastored ranged in size from 200 to 2,000. One was located in rural Indiana. Another was on the Gulf coast of Florida. A third was in a rural area transitioning to a suburban bedroom community. And the fourth church was in one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the South. In each of these churches I applied the principles of church growth I had learned in seminary and my own reading. And God blessed these churches, all of which had been declining, with new growth and excitement.

Now that I am a seminary dean, I am able to reflect on those four churches and the application of church growth principles. In my times of reflection, I realized that the manner in which I utilized church growth principles was somewhat different than that of some of my pastoral peers. I was a church growth practitioner in the line of Donald McGavran and C. Peter Wagner. And I found that how I did church growth was different from some of my peers because we were, for the most part, following two different sets of "instruction books." It is that difference, a difference between the first and third generations of the movement, that must be understood. And I will say with some fear of overstatement that the future of the Church Growth Movement may

rest on our decision to return or not return to the Church Growth Movement that is truly in the spirit of its founder, Donald A. McGavran.

The thesis of this paper is that a critical element is missing in much of church growth literature and practice today. Furthermore the viability of the movement and the health of churches across our land may very well depend upon our recovery of that missing element.

The mysterious missing element is, simply stated, evangelism. But many may exclaim that church growth has always been about the Great Commission. And if the Great Commission is not evangelism, then what is it? Please bear with me as I attempt to explain further this thesis.

We will soon take an excursion into yesteryear before we approach the topic of the twenty-first century. And as we take this sentimental and meaningful journey, we will see if indeed evangelism has the same priority today as it did when Donald McGavran founded a movement. But before we take this journey, let us examine the concept of a movement, and relate that to the evangelistic thrust of church growth.

Some Reflections On A Movement

In his excellent address to this group in Houston last year, Gary McIntosh reflected upon the definition of a movement. He stated the definition of a movement to be "a self-perpetuating company of people who are united by a common cause and committed to having a significant impact on their social environment".¹ He noted three necessary dimensions for a movement to exist. It must have people, particularly a leader, a common cause, and a commitment to impact the social environment.

In my discussion of the Church Growth Movement, I will use McIntosh's definition with slight modifications. First, a movement must have a leader or leaders. When one thinks of the Civil Rights Movement, the name of Martin Luther King comes to mind immediately. For many, the name of John R. Mott is inextricably tied to the Student Volunteer Movement.

The second characteristic of the movement is its clear commitment to a distinct and defining cause. As a child of the sixties growing up in the shadow of Martin Luther King's church in Montgomery, Alabama, I have vivid memories of his life's purpose when I hear those words, "I have a dream." Could anyone

ever doubt his passionate cause for the Civil Rights Movement? And perhaps on another part of the political spectrum today we have the Political Right Movement. Its leaders have been several, Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, and Newt Gingrich to name a few. But its common cause has remained clear conservative moral values and less government.

A third characteristic of a movement is that it has a significant number of followers. Though "significant" is a nebulous term, there can be little doubt that some movements of today have numerous followers. The Great Prayer Movement and the Men's Movement, each with a plurality of leadership, can today count millions among their fellowship.

How does the Church Growth Movement fare in these characteristics? Clearly church growth had a founding leader. Donald A McGavran is the father of the movement. Among the second generation, C Peter Wagner has to be named at the forefront of leadership. His books, classes at Fuller, and seminars impact thousands of churches and their leaders. Though many others could be mentioned, some at this annual meeting today, the clarity of leadership ends with these two men.

The second characteristic of a movement is its clear commitment to a distinct and defining cause. It is at this point that church growth may have its most significant challenge. For a quarter of a century, 1955 to 1980, most followers of the Church Growth Movement could state its cause unhesitatingly. As McIntosh noted in his address last year,² church growth today may be identified with church planting, marketing, seeker sensitive methodologies, cell groups, metachurches, prayer, spiritual warfare, generational studies, church renewal, church leadership, conflict management, change agency, or megachurches. While we church growth leaders understand that the movement is an expression to fulfill the Great Commission, we often fail to acknowledge or emphasize that the key element of the Great Commission is evangelism. More on this later.

A movement also has followers. But the second characteristic, a known and passionate cause, must precede the third characteristic, followers of that cause. Again fellowship may be waning because only a few know that which they are following.

Today we have more critics than ever, even more than the turbulent years of the sixties and seventies. We listen to the agitations of Guinness, Seel, Webster, MacArthur, and others. We

build defense barriers that say these critics can not be right because they do not understand who we are! But whose fault is that scenario? If we were a clearly-defined movement today, I doubt the critics would confuse us with others. We have met the enemy and it is neither Guinness, Seel Webster, or MacArthur – it is ourselves because we are not clear about our purpose.

The fate of a movement, in simplest terms, is threefold. It can have a lasting impact, felt centuries beyond its inception. When Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door at Wittenberg in 1517, I doubt he realized that a movement had begun. But nearly 500 years later, we who are here today are the products of a movement called the Protestant Reformation.

A second fate of a movement is that it becomes cyclical in nature. Such is the nature of a movement we often called spiritual awakenings or revivals. These movements typically ebb and flow to return the people of God to their first love.

A third fate of a movement is that it makes a temporary impact then dies. The busing movement in churches had a terrific impact for about a decade, but less than ten percent of churches today utilize this methodology.³

What then is to be the fate of that movement we call church growth? Few would deny its impact, at least its influence for a season. Shall it continue? Will it wane in influence? Or will it have an impact far beyond the lives of even those here today? We must be willing to allow the movement to die if it has truly run its course in the kingdom. To do otherwise would be a violation of God's prohibition of idolatry. But, with all the objectivity I can possibly muster, I will say that I do not believe that the time has come for a funeral. To the contrary, the best days of the Church Growth Movement may very well be in the twenty-first century. The critical issue, however, is the clarity of the purpose of the movement. And evangelism must be explicitly stated in the purpose of the movement.

Having stated the thesis, it is now time to examine the Church Growth Movement historically to test the validity of the issue. Was evangelism once the heart of the movement? If so, is it now? If not, then why not?

An Historical Excursion

In my book, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology and Principles*,⁴ I look at the Church Growth Movement in four histor-

ical eras. For the most part I still hold to that same division today, with a few minor modifications. Remember, as we look at these pivotal moments in the movement's history, we are looking for clues to the emphasis or lack of emphasis on evangelism.

The McGavran Era (1955-1970)

The Donald A McGavran era of church growth is in the truest sense, unending. The influence of the "father of the Church Growth Movement" will be present as long as the movement exists. But the initial impact of McGavran's influence was strongest in the years 1955 to 1970. The birth of the movement was certified with the publication of *The Bridges of God*. These years of strongest influence continued until the publication of *Understanding Church Growth* in 1970.

Perhaps the best way to understand McGavran's heart during this period is to allow him to speak for himself. If you have never read *Effective Evangelism*, one of McGavran's last written works, please put it on your required reading list. Chapters six through nine are particularly fascinating because they are McGavran's reflections on, and anecdotes about, the Church Growth Movement.

Please note also the title of the book, *Effective Evangelism*. McGavran is clear that this term is synonymous with church growth (see page 89). When he was a missionary in India in the 1930s to the 1950s, McGavran was wary of using the word "evangelism" since almost every good deed and ministry was being done in the name of evangelism.⁵ Church growth, a results-oriented term, came to replace evangelism, a process-oriented term. Is it likely then, that by 1988, he returned to the nomenclature of evangelism, because he saw much in church growth that was not truly evangelistic? Had perceptions of church growth broadened to the point that the term was no longer understood to be "effective evangelism," but everything else under the sun?

Reflecting upon the early years of the movement, McGavran reveals that his passion was first evangelism, but an evangelism that results in the growth of the church. He says,

...the essential task of all world evangelization was to carry out the commands concerning finding and folding the lost. These commands must be obeyed, especially in

the rapidly growing and many-faceted cities of the world and the responsive populations. The essential work was the spread of the Christian faith. The absolute center of evangelization was *matheteusate panta ta ethne*, incorporating all segments of society into Christ's body.⁶

When McGavran founded a movement, his wisdom was demonstrated by his insisting that the first priority of evangelism must always be connected with the growth of the church. That is the heart and genius of the Church Growth Movement. Great Commission evangelism results in disciples in the church, not just in converts "out there somewhere."

McGavran thus insisted that the soteriological aspects of the Great Commission must be understood ecclesiological as well. Evangelism and church growth can not be separated. My concern is that, in our understanding of the purpose of the Church Growth Movement of today, we have remembered McGavran's heart for the church, but we have forgotten his passion for evangelism. We speak of the growth of the church, but often we speak in terms of total numerical growth rather than true conversion growth. Simply stated, evangelism is missing in much of church growth today.

Identity Crisis Era Part I (1970-1981)

After the publication of *Understanding Church Growth* in 1970, McGavran watched the Church Growth Movement become "Americanized." McGavran himself chose to focus his efforts in non-American contexts, and leave the North Americanization of church growth to others. He writes:

As long as four-fifths or more of the world's population remains non-Christian, and Asia and North Africa remain overwhelmingly non-Christian, all schools of mission will, beyond doubt, spend most of their time on discipling the non-Christian *ethne* of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Beginning in 1972, however, effective evangelism [note the absence of "church growth"] in the United States and other "Christian" lands began to be taken seriously by the Church Growth Movement.⁷

With North American church growth proponents advocating their mission sans McGavran, the critics become vicious. Many

of the writings of this period were apologetic responses to the critics. The American movement was attempting to define itself and its purpose with little input from its founder. Interestingly, most of the criticisms were concerned with the movement's over-emphasis of evangelism. One critic commented that the movement misdefined evangelism "in the narrow sense of saving souls."⁸ Kenneth L. Smith characterized church growth as "a mixture of theological absolutism (i.e., the necessity for a born again experience) and sociological utilitarianism."⁹ Kilian lamented that church growth is deficient because it is exceedingly concerned with "the actual number of souls gained."¹⁰ As we listen to these critics assault the movement because of its preoccupation with evangelism, please listen to the criticisms of today. I would be exceedingly joyful if but one critic accused us today of too much evangelism.

The Wagner Era (1981-1988)

Though C. Peter Wagner was clearly identified with church growth prior to 1981, he became the leading spokesperson for the movement with the publication of *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate*¹¹ in that year. What marks this book as a watershed in the Church Growth Movement is its defense of critical issues in church growth. Wagner responded to the critics who had hounded him for years. He even acknowledged a debt of gratitude to many of them. Then he set forth his apologia.

In articulating his defense of the movement, Wagner refused to dilute the evangelistic priority that McGavran had already established. Both implicitly and explicitly throughout the book, evangelism is at the heart of church growth. He says that "in the total sweep of Christian mission and the kingdom of God, the evangelistic mandate is primary."¹² Again he emphasizes, "the biblical indication is that the evangelistic mandate must take priority. Nothing is or can be as important as saving souls from eternal damnation."¹³ Six years later, in *Strategies for Church Growth*, Wagner would write, "In planning church growth strategies, plan for both the cultural mandate and the evangelistic mandate. But don't forget that the best way to maximize both is to conceptualize evangelism as the magnet and keep it on top."¹⁴

The critics of church growth had numerous complaints, but

among the most-frequently mentioned were those that were concerned with an overemphasis of evangelism. What brought Wagner to the forefront of the movement was his willingness to concede peripheral issues with an irenic spirit, but his unwillingness to yield in the priority of evangelism in church growth. McGavran had viewed the mission field decades earlier and had concluded that true effective evangelism will result in church growth. His concern was only for that growth that comes from winning the lost and bringing them into the fold. No other type of growth can be found in McGavran's primary works. C. Peter Wagner became the founder's heir to the leadership of the movement because he kept that same priority. Though Wagner's contributions are many through his books, classes, seminars, workshops, articles, and speaking engagements, the mantle fell on him because of his heart for evangelism.

Identity Crisis Era. Part 2 (1988 to present)

C. Peter Wagner does not like to hear that he has "strayed" from the Church Growth Movement. Wagner recently wrote:

Over the past three or four years I have heard the statement from time to time that "Peter Wagner is no longer into church growth, but into prayer and spiritual warfare." Although people who know me well would not think this, it is fairly easy to understand how others might get such an idea . . . I see myself as a professor of church growth in the Fuller seminary School of World Mission. This means that I earn my living as a professional missiologist with a specialization in the field of church growth. My vocational task, therefore, is to research, teach, and write on how the multiplication and growth of Christian churches can best accelerate the process of world evangelization.¹⁵

Indeed Wagner is still very much the most recognized name in the movement. He has not strayed from church growth, but ventured into areas such as the third wave and the Prayer Movement with an ultimate concern about their impact upon the growth of the church. But I would suggest that, since 1988, when Wagner wrote *How to Have a Healing Ministry without Making Your Church Sick*, there has been no clear spokesperson about the founding purpose of church growth. Church growth is simply

evangelism that results in the growth of the church.

I recently asked my Introduction to Church Growth class on the first day of classes to give me a word or phrase that first comes to mind when I say "church growth." Among the forty students the responses were "megachurches," "leadership," "numbers," "Thom Rainer" (that student will do anything for a good grade), "contemporary worship," and "church planting." All of those responses have some validity, but no one mentioned "evangelism!" The perception today seems to be that church growth is concerned about the absolute size and growth of the church regardless of the type of growth. We who identify ourselves with church growth should recognize that the movement is in its second identity crisis because of lack of clarity in our purpose. When I spoke to our kindred organization, the Academy of Evangelism in Theological Education, a year ago, most of their questions related to the relationship of church growth to their discipline of evangelism. Does church growth today really focus on evangelism?

Hurdles To Overcome

If evangelism is the heart of church growth, why can we not just say so, and get on with our business? Unfortunately, perception is reality, and several perceptual issues must be addressed for the movement to clarify its purpose.

Fuller Theological Seminary Issue

When the Church Growth Movement found its first permanent home, the world began to view Fuller Seminary and church growth as almost interchangeable terms. Such is the perception of many outsiders. But, from the day McGavran founded the School of World Mission, the department of evangelism remained in Fuller's School of Theology. Whether warranted or not, a perception began to grow that evangelism and church growth are two very different disciplines. That must be, they thought, since they are in two different graduate schools.

The Definition Issue

Please forgive what may seem to be an act of arrogance on the part of a newcomer when I suggest that the ASCG's definition of church growth may have created some perceptual problems as well. The definition¹⁶ includes many good phrases such

as “Great Commission,” “planting,” health,” “multiplication,” “disciples,” “God’s Word,” “social sciences,” and “behavioral sciences.” But the plethora of phrases may engender confusion more than clarity. When one of my students read the definition in my textbook, she came to me and asked, “Dr. Rainer, what does church growth *really* mean?” When I responded that church growth was evangelism that resulted in fruit-bearing church members, she looked at me with wide eyes and said, “Oh, that makes sense.”

The Academic Issue

Church growth has certainly grown as a legitimate academic discipline. But, in many institutions, it has grown apart from the discipline of evangelism. We may be training a generation of students who will go into the churches and mission fields thinking that they can grow churches without evangelism.

The Organizational Issue

A fourth perceptual hurdle is the fact that two distinct academic societies function almost without awareness of each other. The American Society for Church Growth and the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education have only a few mutual members. Partnerships between the two entities, to my knowledge, have never taken place. If the world of academia communicates through its organizations that church growth and evangelism are only distantly related, then the churches in America will eventually receive that same message.

Recovering Our Purpose: A Modest Proposal

Our critics are not at fault when they misunderstand us, mislabel us, and misapply our principles. So much takes place under the guise of church growth that we must not express dismay when others know us not. Let us learn from our critics. If they do not understand us, let us have greater and more specific clarity in our purpose. And let us begin our purpose statement with the role of evangelism. Since we are a pragmatic group, the burning question is probably “How?” How can we best recover our purpose and communicate that purpose to eager listeners? As a starting point, may I make seven suggestions?

1. *Rethink the Centrality of the Great Commission to Our Pur-*

pose. The Great Commission is first about evangelism. Let us communicate that message without hesitation. Disciples must first be Christians. And New Testament disciples were known by their fruit in the context of a local body of believers.

2. *Write Church Growth Theologies That Build upon Theologies of Evangelism.* Many of us have been pleading for years for more foundational theological works in church growth. But in reality most of the work has already been done. Numerous theologies of evangelism have been written by able scholars. But most of these theologies of evangelism are incomplete in that they fail to include an ecclesiological component. We should write theologies of church growth that begin with a theology of evangelism and conclude with ecclesiology. In other words, we will advocate that the work of effective evangelism (McGavran's term) is not complete until a person becomes a fruit-bearing disciple in a local church.

3. *Consider New Wording for a Definition of Church Growth.* I am already presumptuous in making this suggestion, so I will not attempt to re-write the Society's definition of church growth. But, for clarity of purpose, I would suggest that we need a definition that is shorter, simpler, and communicates that church growth is effective evangelism which results in fruit-bearing church members.

4. *Eliminate Biological and Transfer Growth from the Meaning of Church Growth.* McGavran's church growth was conversion growth. Other types of numerical growth confuse our purpose and open us to legitimate criticisms.

5. *"Reward" Effective Conversion Growth Churches in Our Conferences and Writings.* Many of our church growth books and conferences applaud rapidly-growing churches with little regard to their growth through evangelism. I recently read a church growth book that hailed the success of a fast-growing church in the South. Upon examination I found that the church had only one convert per year for every thirty church members. Such is not the evangelistic growth advocated by McGavran and Wagner, but a glorified circulation of the saints. In my next book in 1996 I am focusing on the most effective evangelistic growth churches in America relative to church size.¹⁷ You may be surprised at the churches on the list and those not on the list.

6. *Consider Organizational Partnerships.* The American Society for Church Growth and the Academy for Evangelism in Theolog-

ical Education can mutually benefit each other. Let us become creative in discovering ways that we can work together. Our organizations are truly siblings not distant relatives.

7. *Bring the Disciplines Closer Together in Academia.* Let us train the next generation of church growth leaders with the knowledge that evangelism and church growth have a symbiotic relationship. Evangelism that has no church growth is convert-making, not disciple-making. Church growth that has no evangelism is sheep shuffling. Such is the reason why I am a professor of evangelism *and* church growth, working in a department of evangelism *and* church growth, in a school of missions, evangelism, and church growth. And such is the reason we now offer the Ph.D. in evangelism *and* church growth, the only such degree in the world, to my knowledge.

Conclusion: A Clear Purpose Answers The Critics

The critical verbiage that has been hurled at the Church Growth Movement in the past few years has been good for us. The critics have caused us to go through a time of healthy introspection. And in my own time of listening to the critics, I have found that our primary problem is an unclear purpose related to evangelism. Church growth can mean several good things, from leadership to megachurches to church planting. But all of those good things are not part of our purpose, but rather part of our methodology or product. The heart of the Church Growth Movement is evangelism which results in fruit-bearing church members. I think that is what Jesus had in mind when he commanded us to make disciples. We should present the gospel clearly, persuade the people to accept the Savior, and present them to a local church for growth and maturity. That seems to me what the Great Commission is all about. And so it seems that such is what the Church Growth Movement should be about as well.

Writer

Rainer, Thom S.: *Address:* Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2825 Lexington Rd., Louisville, Kentucky 40280. *Title:* Dean, Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth. Dr. Rainer earned the B.S. degree from the University of Alabama, majoring in finance and economics, the M.Div. and Ph.D. degrees from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in

Louisville, Kentucky, majoring in evangelism. Thom has pastored four churches and has authored or co-authored six books. He also serves as President and CEO of Church Growth Visions, a church consultation firm established in 1988.

NOTES

1. Gary L McIntosh, "Thoughts on a Movement." Address to the American Society for Church Growth, November, 1994.
2. Ibid.
3. This percentage was revealed in a recent study of 583 evangelistic churches in America. The study was conducted by the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. The results of the entire project is published in Thom S. Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches: Surprising Insights from Churches That Reach the Lost* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996).
4. Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993).
5. See Donald A McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988), 66.
6. Ibid, 67.
7. Ibid, 92.
8. Kenneth L Smith, review of *Our Kind of People: The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth* by C. Peter Wagner, *Review of Religious Research*, 22 (September, 1980), 100.
9. Ibid.
10. Sabbas J. Kilian, review of *Understanding Church Growth* by Donald A. McGavran, *Theological Studies*, 33 (1972), 182.
11. C. Peter Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).
12. Ibid, 101.
13. Ibid.
14. C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1987), 111.
15. C. Peter Wagner, "Prayer and Church Growth: Whatever Happened to Peter Wagner?" in *Strategies for Today's Leaders*, 22 (July, August, September, 1995), 39.
16. The complete definition is: "Church growth is that discipline which investigates the nature, expansion, planting, multiplication, function, and health of churches as they relate to the effective implementation of God's commission to 'make disciples of all peoples' (Matt. 28: 18-20). Students of church growth strive to integrate the eternal theological principles of God's Word concerning the expansion of the church with

the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences, employing as the initial framework of reference the foundational work done by Donald A. McGavran.”

17. See note 3.