

MY PILGRIMAGE IN CHURCH GROWTH

Bill Easum

I had never heard of church growth until I was almost finished with my pastoral ministry, but I have lived its principles every moment, at one time as a pastor and now as a consultant. However, I have gotten ahead of myself.

YEARS PRIOR TO CONVERSION

I did not grow up in the church. My parents would take me to church on Easter, but that is all. Religious or faith conversations were nonexistent in our home. In fact, sharing any emotion was not encouraged. I had good parents, but for some reason, they did not give me much guidance growing up. So much of what I learned about life came from my peers, and that is seldom good. I will leave the years prior to my conversion to your imagination.

When I was sixteen and a half, I noticed a girl I decided I was going to date. The problem was, the only way she would date me was if I went to church with her, so I did. It was a strange experience for me. It was a Baptist church, and they were so different from the stayed Methodist Church to which my parents took me on Easter. The only saving grace was that the pastor, Andy Odem, played golf and invited me to play with him. Now the backdrop for this is that I was preparing to drop out of school in a year or two and try my hand at professional golf. Andy and I played golf once a week.

THE DAY OF CONVERSION

Unlike many conversions today, mine was a Damascus Road experience. One day while walking off the tee of the third hole at Hancock Golf Course, Andy asked me if I was a Christian. I remember telling him, “Of course; isn’t everyone in America?” By the time we got to the green, not only had Andy debunked my response, he had also convicted me to the point that when we got to the green, we kneeled and prayed, and bingo, my life was changed forever. Andy, wherever you are, I am so grateful God sent you my way.

MY EARLY MINISTRY

The next few years were like a whirlwind. By the time I was seventeen, I was preaching wherever I could—at missions, on sidewalks, and occasionally at the tiny Onion Creek Baptist Church on the outskirts of Austin, Texas, where I grew up. These were formidable years in learning how to hone my evangelistic skills.

From there, I went to Baylor and got a major in history, religion, and Greek. Those were also formidable years for a new Christian. I was surrounded by Christian friends—something I had never really experienced. Their passion for the Great Commission was infectious, but still no mention of church growth.

Next, I went to Southwest Baptist Seminary, where at the age of twenty, I was called to be the pastor of Cranfills Gap Baptist Church. For the next three years, I drove the eighty-five miles to seminary and back, visiting and preaching on Saturday and Sunday. It was not much of a church, but we led the association in baptisms three years in a row. At this tiny West Texas church, I honed my preaching.

MY DESERT WANDERINGS

It was also at this tiny church that I began to experience the politics and bigotry that plague most denominations. Without going into the specifics, I left the church altogether and entered the University of Texas Law School. I did not know or appreciate at the time the strings my dad had to pull in order to get me into law school.

At law school, I realized just how debased people could be. The language of the professors was shocking. However, what upset me the most was that the students were actually hiding books in the library so others could not finish their bibliographies. I was like a fish out of water. Little did I know that I was being prepared for ministry in an unchurched culture.

Now keep in mind, I had graduated from seminary and had passed three languages required for my entrance exams into the doctoral program at Southwestern when I quit. For the next year, I attended classes at law school and hated every minute.

ANOTHER SHOT AT SEMINARY

While attending law school, I attended a Methodist Church because I had heard the pastor was a maverick, which he was. He was asking all the questions that Methodists did not want asked at the time. However, he took a liking to me and spent time with me explaining Methodism. He introduced me to the writings of John Wesley with whom I fell in love. God continued to fill me with passion for the Great Commission, which I would soon learn was the heartbeat of the Church Growth Movement.

One day while getting a haircut at my grandfather's barbershop, this pastor called and asked if I still wanted to be a preacher. Of course, I said yes. "Then get yourself up to SMU and see the dean of Perkins School of Theology. You will need to do a semester of church polity if you want to be a Methodist."

Off I went to Dallas. What I discovered was that the dean did not like ex-Baptists. He turned me down and sent me home. This was a low point in my life. I had to reexamine if God was telling me to return to law school or perhaps even pursue professional golf.

I did not know at the time that the pastor who sent me to see the dean was the brother of the president of SMU. It was not long before he applied enough pressure to the dean that I received a phone call telling me I was now welcome to attend Perkins School of Theology. I returned to Perkins and to the office of the dean where I learned that I would be admitted only to audit classes but not admitted as a full student. I would have to earn admission by meeting with the dean every week to discuss infant baptism—no quasi Baptists allowed!

I decided that if I had to do a semester getting one course to be a Methodist, I might as well spend another semester and get another degree. I spent the next nine months doing a three-year Masters degree. At this point, I still had never heard of the Church Growth Movement or of Donald McGavran.

After attending classes for nine months, finishing the entire Masters program, writing my dissertation, and passing my oral exams, the oral committee asked me if I would accept a teaching position on the faculty. They were shocked to learn that I was just auditing the courses and still had not been admitted. When my supervisor heard this, he went to the dean and demanded that I be admitted as a full student. Four days before graduation, I was admitted and allowed to graduate. After four years of college and five years of seminary, still no mention of church growth. I was simply committed to helping fulfill the Great Commission.

The year I graduated from Perkins School of Theology, the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church merged to become the United Methodist Church. For some odd reason, they wanted me to attend the merger conference and participate in the ordination service. I was clear from the start that I would not be baptized again. After several rounds of arguments, they agreed to allow me to participate in the ordination service

without being baptized again. Go figure. There I was with two hundred others being ordained, all kneeling except me. I was standing. When the bishops went around the circle laying hands on those being ordained and came to me, one bishop did not understand the arrangement and tried to push me to the floor. Finally, another bishop stopped him, and they continued laying hands on the others. Needless to say, it was a night to be remembered.

MY PASTORAL YEARS

In 1967, I was assigned to a couple of UM churches. They did well, but they were the armpits of the world. Still these churches flourished, and still I had not heard of church growth.

Then in 1969, I was assigned to restart a failing, nine-year-old church that was on life support. After getting rid of half of the remaining thirty-seven people, the church exploded in growth. Twenty-four years later, the church was one of the largest UMC churches in South Texas.

In 1982, Lyle Schaller came to our church to help me decide if I should retire at the church. It was unusual for a United Methodist pastor to stay for more than a few years, and I was entering my thirteenth year as their pastor. His conclusion was I could stay as long as I kept under the bishop's radar. While with us, he asked my people many questions that I would later know came straight out of church growth without ever mentioning the movement.

In 1986, I had the same experience when Kennon Callahan came to our church to help me sell the purchase of a million dollars' worth of contiguous property for parking. He, too, used church growth principles without mentioning the movement. Could it be that God was up to something?

During these twenty-four years, we became a teaching church. Groups would come from all over to see how we were growing in a denomination that was declining. Before long, they began asking me to come to their church and help them. Both of these men taught me about church growth without ever mentioning it by name.

MY EXPERIENCE WITH CHURCH GROWTH

In the mid 1980s, I was introduced to Leadership Network that was assembling what was then called mega churches (over 1000 in worship). At this conference, I was finally introduced to church growth. I met Carl George, and I began to understand that the essence of my ministry had been based on fulfilling the Great Commission, thus church growth in action. God had prepared my heart for this moment.

This conference was an electric time for me, as it was the first time I had been around anyone whose heart beat as mine did. These men lived and breathed the Great Commission. All the principles stemmed from it. Now I had a name for my understanding of ministry. It had all been about church

growth. It was so good to no longer think I was weird, as all my United Methodist friends kept telling me. I knew something was wrong. Their churches were declining while mine was growing. Surely, I was not totally off base. Now I felt I could move full steam ahead without worrying about their criticisms or outreach dislike.

Sometime after that, I was invited to become part of The American Society for Church Growth, where I was introduced to Donald McGavran and the details of the Church Growth Movement. It was clear to me at the time that both were interpreting the heart of the New Testament Great Commission. Later, this organization would change its name to “Network for Great Commission Research.”

Soon I was introduced to the likes of Gary McIntosh, Chuck Hunter, Bob Whitesel, Elmer Towns, and many other giants in the faith. These folks were kindred spirits and validated all that I had done and was doing in ministry. One of the great disappointments of my life is that I did not meet these giants in the faith earlier. I had no real guidance and had made so many mistakes. I am just glad our paths finally crossed. These men greatly influenced my life for which I will always be grateful. Several years ago, the society blessed me with the prestigious Donald McGavran award for outstanding leadership in church growth.

What I now realize is that God continually plowed my fertile ground with biblical church growth principles without me knowing it. I know that church growth principles are simply biblical principles given a contemporary name and system-like approach to ministry. Church growth is about applying biblical principles to carrying out the Great Commission. It does not matter what it is called—truth is truth, and the Great Commission is the heartbeat of God. Why else would Jesus’ last will and testament be, “Go make disciples of all people groups?”

Because of this, it is hard to understand why church growth is looked upon as passé. Church growth has received a bad rap over the last few years. Those who say it is all about numbers just do not understand or do not want to understand. How can that be?

I have a theory about why people are discounting church growth. In order to apply the principles, the results must be measured. Most pastors do not want to measure results, because most pastors are not having good results and do not want to look bad. It is impossible to bluff one’s way through church growth.

CONSULTING MINISTRY

By 1993, I was traveling two hundred days a year while pastoring a thriving church. Before long, my wife said, “You need to choose—the church or consulting.” There really was no choice. I could achieve more for the Great Commission consulting with churches than I could by pastoring one church.

So with little in the bank, my wife and I set out on a new journey and started 21st Century Strategies, which would later become Easum, Bandy, & Associates, and now The Effective Church Group.

Over the next twenty-four years, I consulted with over seven hundred churches, coached hundreds of pastors, and trained thousands of people. This incredible journey took me to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. I saw amazing types of thriving congregations both small and large, but all of those that were growing were applying church growth principles whether or not they knew it.

Before long, I was traveling 250 to 300 days a year, consulting with churches and denominations and speaking at conferences.

THE YEARS OF COACHING

The last few years, I have turned my attention to coaching, and I have had a blast. During this season, I have been taught that pastors do not like to be held accountable for executing their mission. They do not like to measure the results of their work. As a result, my latest book is called *Execute Your Vision*, to be released in the fall of 2016.

MY BEST ADVICE TO A YOUNG PASTOR

When conducting an interview, I try to remember to always end by asking this question, “If you had one thing to say to a young pastor, what would it be?” I have always wanted someone to ask me this question, but they never have. Let me conclude by telling you what I would tell them if they asked. I would tell them, “Follow your dream and never, ever allow anyone, or any group, or anything, or any church to stifle it. If you do, you will be miserable all the rest of your life.”

About the Author

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