VOL. 9 • NO. 1 • SUMMER 2017 • 6–19

# LEARN WHY SOME CHURCHES ARE GROWING

*George G. Hunter III*

***Abstract***

Donald McGavran's pioneering contribution to understanding the growth of churches and Christian movements drew from field research in growing churches and Christian movements, in addition to scripture and history. While field research included analysis from observation and the church or movement's history and statistics, interview research produced the lion's share of new insights. This article reports some of what has been learned about field interviewing—who to interview, the kinds of questions to plan to ask, the importance of follow up questions, and how to ask questions, manage the interview process, record insights, and reflect on the insights to inform future growth.

Church growth people believe that planning for a church's mission must necessarily be informed by data and by insights we derive from data. Knowing the Bible, church history, and tradition are necessary (but less than fully sufficient) prerequisites for faithful, strategic thinking. Furthermore, your plans are unlikely to be any better than the data on which you based them; as computer people say, "Garbage in, garbage out!"

It is possible, of course, to overstate the revelatory power of data and ways you can use it. I was once reminded of this while flying from Atlanta to London. I asked the fellow sitting next to me what he did for a living; he replied that he was a professor. I asked him where he taught; he taught at the University of California, Santa Cruz. I asked, "What do you teach?" He replied, "I teach politics." I asked, "Do you mean political science?" I will never forget his reply or its intensity: "It is NOT a science!"

The professor explained that his field was "inappropriately named" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—when the influence of science in academic institutions was huge; so, the people who studied political life felt compelled to justify the field by calling it a "science." I then recalled that in that same period, many emerging academic fields—such as most of the behavioral sciences and the social sciences—experienced the same pressure.

Much later, some church growth people felt constrained to claim that church growth was a "discipline" and a "science." It is probably not a discipline but rather a field within the eclectic discipline of "missiology." It is certainly NOT a science, though its people discover insight by reflecting upon data, in addition to traditional, theological reflection.

To be specific, informed mission requires knowledge of what Donald McGavran used to call the available "field data." The reason we need data, McGavran taught, is that the facts are usually obscured by "an informational fog" that rises from such factors as denominational chauvinism, semantic vagueness, and especially rationalization for what the church is already doing. Such fog keeps most church leaders in the dark; they do not really know what is happening, or why, or what could happen.[1]

Therefore, if you want to plant a new church in an under-reached section of your city, you need to gather and study the available demographic data. If you want to turn around a church that once grew but has more recently declined, you need to study the earlier growth period (to discover why they were growing) and the more recent period of decline (to discover why they declined). Again, if your church is called to reach addicts, you need to gather intelligence about the causes and experiences of addiction, and you need to learn from churches already serving that target population. You need data, facts, information, and organized intelligence to plan your church's future; meanwhile, we bathe our research in prayer, knowing that we had better discern God's answers to our prayers when we are informed.

Much of the data that church leaders need to plant churches, plan for growth, or reach a target population already exists, but it does not await us on a silver platter. You must dig for the intelligence you need through practical research, and it usually requires industry and persistence. From the global field research by Donald McGavran and others, the Church Growth movement has already gathered more intelligence than we have ever known before about how the gospel spreads and how the true church grows. In the USA, the forty years of quiet research by Lyle Schaller and others has taught us much more than we knew before about the health, growth, and development of Western congregations. The research that really matters, however, is local. It stands on the shoulders of the body of global and national insight,

---

[1] See Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd ed. (Eerdmans, 1990), chapter 5.

but local research is needed to help "Old East Side Church" to clarify its mission strategy in its historical, demographic, and cultural context.

In local church growth field research, we do not usually have to begin from scratch. In your area, some churches are already growing, and some churches may already be reaching the target populations that your church is called to reach. The purpose of this chapter is to get local church leaders started in discovering why some churches are growing and reaching target populations and in making sense of the opportunity that God has entrusted to them.

One field research method that we have often featured is historical analysis of growing churches and Christian movements—like J. T. Seamands employed in his study of the Methodist church in India, and McGavran, Alan Tippett, and others employed in many field studies. Another method is observation—something like a cultural anthropologist would do. You carefully observe the growing (or declining) church, record your observations, and later review your data to discern some patterns in all you have observed.

The method we rely upon the most in church growth field research is the interview. An interview can be defined as interactive communication between two parties that involves the asking and answering of questions. From the perspective of the classic

**Source Message Receiver**

model of the communication process, interviewing is a unique genre of communication, in which the receiver initiates and shapes the communication.

Interviewing is the most common form of planned communication. An interview has been initiated every time a nurse asks a patient, "How are you feeling?" or every time a dad asks a son, "Where have you been?" or every time a manager asks a worker, "How is it going?" or every time a waitress asks a customer, "What'll you have?" or every time a prosecuting attorney says to a witness, "Please state your name," or every time a pastor asks a parishioner, "How is your life?"

More specifically, in church growth field research, we interview pastors, core lay leaders, rank and file members, new members, and, especially, new converts to discover how people have been reached. In time, we discover reproducible, or adaptable, strategic principles with which our churches can cooperate.

Interview research is best done in concert with the other methods. For instance, when you observe people emotionally responding to a song, you ask your "informants" why it engaged them so powerfully. Again, when you have done the "graph of growth" in interviews with people who were around at the time, you point to the period when the graph moves from growth to decline and ask, "What was happening in this period that could have caused that?" Of the several methods, however, the interview is usually the most productive. Over the years, I have learned more about how effective evangelism actually takes place from interviewing new converts than from

most of the books (combined) that prescribe how evangelism ought to take place!

As a method for gathering intelligence, the interview method has limitations, as all research methods do. The subjectivity of both the interviewee and the interviewer are the most obvious traps in the interview method. However, you can reduce the effects of each interviewee's subjectivity by asking enough people the same questions. Further, you can reduce the effects of your own subjectivity by trying to disprove your own hypotheses. In comparison to other methods, however, including questionnaires and various statistical approaches, the interview method has strengths and advantages. Decades ago, when I first started doing field research related to evangelism, I was impressed by Pauline Young's case for interviewing's advantages:

> The interview is a highly flexible tool in the hands of skilled interviewers. It allows a more permissive atmosphere than is the case when using other techniques of investigation. Questions not readily grasped by interviewees can be rephrased, or repeated with proper emphasis and explanations when necessary. Also, the interviewer has greater opportunity to appraise the accuracy and validity of replies. Contradictory statements can be followed up and possible reasons for contradiction learned. The interviewer might also be able to differentiate on the spot between fact and fiction supplied by informants, their hearsay and impressions, convictions and opinions. In the presence of competent interviewers, interviewees often feel freer to express their fears, complexes, emotionally laden situations, than when filling out a questionnaire. Only in the study of human beings is it possible for a scientist to talk to his subjects and investigate directly their feelings and thinking processes. The social scientist can secure about the object of his study a degree of intimate and personal knowledge that is denied to the natural scientists. The latter cannot communicate with the subjects despite all the instruments of precision.[2]

Decades later, we are now aware that effective interviewing is a more powerful, catalytic tool than our forbearers knew. As Young's generation stressed, skilled interviewing obviously taps into what people consciously know and can talk about and makes that knowledge available to the researcher. At least as important, skilled interviewing sometimes engages people's tacit knowledge. That term characterized the philosophy of Michael Polanyi, who is famous for his observation, "We can know more than we can tell, and we can tell nothing without relying on our awareness of things we may not be able to tell." That is, experienced people know some things they have never

---

[2] Pauline V. Young, *Scientific Social Surveys and Research*, 4th ed. (Prentice-Hall, 1966), 222–223.

expressed in words; skilled interviewing brings some of that tacit knowledge to consciousness and helps them express some of that in words for the first time.[3] Their first draft may not be perfect, but follow-up questions and occasional probing can help them clarify and express their contribution. Therefore, interviewing can be epistemic; it can create conscious knowledge—not *ex nihilo*, but from people's background tacit understanding.[4]

## PREPARING FOR CHURCH GROWTH INTERVIEW RESEARCH:

There is no advantage to doing interviews "cold." One should prepare for field research as much as time and available data permit. Through many sources (print and internet), you can familiarize yourself with a community's history, demographics, and distinctive features before visiting it. You will usually find that denominations have published much of the data that you need to acquire and graph. The "General Minutes of the United Methodist Church," for example, has published useful local church and judicatory data annually for decades. Most denominations publish such data, available at judicatory offices. A few do not publish such data, but they have it on file at headquarters.

The denominational data may not serve all of a researcher's interests. For instance, they probably report the membership and/or the average worship attendance and/or the funds received for each year, but they may not record the number of small groups or the number of people involved in lay ministries. Nevertheless, you are much better prepared if you gather the data that is available for at least the last ten years. You are even more prepared when you graph the data, which permits you to detect and discuss in interviews the trends that are reflected over time in the year-by-year data.

Wherever possible, it is always useful to schedule interviews ahead of time; it is even more useful if a local leader can invite the people and schedule the interviewees for you. Who, or what types of people, do you want to interview? That depends entirely on who has the data that you want to access—who already knows what you want to know. In the years when I was studying growing churches the most, spending a Friday evening and all day Saturday at each church, I often asked for the following kind of interview schedule:

1. The pastor—90 minutes
2. Group meeting with six to eight leaders—90 minutes
3. Five to eight new members (preferably converts)—45 minutes each

[3] The skilled psychotherapist, of course, can more deeply engage and surface a person's tacit awareness.

[4] This chapter is only an introduction to interviewing perspectives and methods. Many good texts can take the reader much farther than what is written here. The most widely used text (with this writing) is in its eleventh edition. See Charles J. Stewart and William B. Cash, *Interviewing: Principles and Practices*, 11th ed. (McGraw-Hill, 2005).

4. Group meeting with several longtime active members—60 minutes
5. Group meeting with several inactive members or dropouts—60 minutes
6. Church staff—individually twenty minutes each or with a group—60 minutes
7. City manager or city editor (whoever best knows the community)—60 minutes
8. Final group visit with pastor and the six to eight leaders—to check perceptions and to probe deeper where necessary—90 minutes.

Before the interviews begin, you will want to prepare some questions to ask each person or group. My students always ask at this point, "What are some good questions to ask?" I respond by saying, "Well, here is a great question: 'Will you marry me?'" I suggest that it is such a significant question that most of us would not even be here if someone had not asked that question once!

For research purposes, however, the "good question" is the question that elicits the information you want. To identify that kind of question, you first become clear about what hypotheses you want to test and, if valid, can generate relevant insights. You then formulate the questions that can best check the hypotheses and help you learn. If one hypothesis, for instance, is that people become more receptive to Christianity during periods of transition or stress in their lives, then you might ask new converts, "What (if anything) was happening in your life, shortly before or during the time you became a Christian, that made you more receptive to the Christian possibility for your life?" You might use several different questions to test a single hypothesis.

Your list of questions, for each person or group, constitutes your "interview guide." There are especially six points to remember about your interview guide and the overall interview process:

1. Begin each interview with an appropriate greeting. Explain the purpose of the interview and what you will do with the data. (I usually explain that when I report and interpret the data, my sources are confidential.)
2. Plan to ask general questions early, like, "Tell me the story of how you became a Christian in this church." If their answer to that general question also answers a more particular question that you had planned to ask later, it is even more valuable; you know you did not influence their answer.
3. The interview guide is your servant, not your master. Like a game plan for a football game, you do not adhere to it rigidly; you are not required to ask every planned question.
4. Plan to ask some of your questions to multiple persons or groups.
5. Not all interviewees are created equal! Feel free to extend a productive interview; feel free to graciously abbreviate an interview with a "stone."

6. Many times, their answer to your planned question will stimulate a question you had not considered; those "follow-up" questions will often turn up more gold than your planned questions! Indeed, an interviewee's answer to a follow-up question may stimulate a new church growth hypothesis.

What specific questions might you ask people or groups? My interview guide has often included questions like these:

**Questions for the pastor of a growing church:**

1. How did you get to this church? Tell me the story.
2. What strengths did the church have, and what opportunities did it face when you came?
3. What has happened since you became pastor here?
4. What is the church's main business?
5. What is your philosophy of ministry?
6. What do you do best?
7. (Referring to the graph of growth) What explains the rises, plateaus, and dips in this graph?
8. In the last five years, how many new classes have been started? New groups? New ministries? New outreach ministries? New congregations? What new groups, ministries, etc. are projected for the next five years?
9. What does the congregation do best?
10. Why do you think the church has grown (or plateaued or declined)?
11. How have you planned and organized for growth?
12. Does the church have a strategic, long-range plan in place that the people are conversant with, that is being implemented?
13. Knowing what you know now, what would you do differently if you had it to do all over again?
14. What would have to happen for more pastors to lead growing churches?

**Questions for the leader group:**

1. (Introductory) What do you do for a living? How long have you been a Christian? How long have you been a member here? How long have you been a leader here?
2. What is your church's main business?
3. Describe how your church reaches people. How did your outreach get started? What is the story? What does the church do, specifically, to help reach people?
4. What is your church's image in the community?
5. Why is your church growing? What do you believe are the causes?
6. In what ways does your church respond to and connect with first-time visitors?
7. What does your pastor do best?
8. What does this congregation do best?

9. Does the church have a strategic, long-range plan in place that the people are conversant with, that is being implemented?
10. What kind of people are you reaching? What kind of people do you plan to reach?
11. How do you initiate and assimilate new members?
12. What are your expectations of members, especially new members?
13. (Referring to the graph of growth) What explains the rises, plateaus, and dips in this graph?
14. What are the most meaningful moments, events, and experiences in this church?
15. In the last five years, how many new classes have been started? New groups? New ministries? New outreach ministries? New congregations? What new groups, ministries, etc. are projected for the next five years?
16. What goes on here that gives people an opportunity to talk about what God is doing (or what they want God to do) in their life?
17. As the church's leaders, what are you trying to do that you can only succeed at if God is with you?
18. Do you ever invite people to this church or to faith in Christ? If yes, how do you go about that? If no, what would have to happen here before you would feel free to do that?
19. If you could change one thing in this church, what would it be?

**Questions for new converts and new members:**

1. What do you do for a living?
2. How long have you been a serious Christian? How long have you been a member here?
3. Tell me the story of how you became a Christ follower.
4. Before you were ever interested in becoming a Christian, what was the image of Christianity and the church in your mind and in the minds of your peers? What helped to change that image?
5. What was happening in your life that made you more receptive to Christianity than you might have been before?
6. Why did you first become interested? How was the possibility opened up to you? What got you started?
7. What or who attracted you here for the first time?
8. What brought you back the next time and the next?
9. Describe your first visit to this church, including your feelings. What might have caused those feelings within you?
10. What kinds of needs were you experiencing in your life? What helped meet those needs?
11. Why did you choose this church, rather than some other church?
12. What almost kept you from joining?
13. What keeps you coming and getting involved?

14. What happens here that is very important, even significant, for your life?
15. Now that you are a Christian here, what does the church expect of you?
16. Do you ever invite people to this church or to faith in Christ? If yes, how do you go about that? If no, what would have to happen here before you would feel free to do that?
17. How do your non-Christian friends and relatives view Christianity? What could this church do to appeal to them or to communicate with them?

Sometimes you want to reach a distinctive population (such as deaf people, Filipino-American immigrants, or gambling addicts) you do not understand, but some people are "experts." What questions might you ask the experts?

1. What is very important to understand about their history or specific life condition?
2. What appears to be their goals in life? What drives them?
3. What are their distinctive behaviors, habits, and pastimes? What beliefs, attitudes, or values might these reflect?
4. Who, or what types, are their heroes and role models? What does this tell us about them?
5. What are their conscious problems, struggles, and felt needs?
6. What are their strongest driving beliefs and values?
7. What are the themes of their music, movies, legends, and stories?
8. How do they perceive the world? How do they perceive the future?
9. What are their taboos and hang-ups? What turns them off?
10. What is their image of God? Jesus Christ? The church and Christianity?
11. What do they assume is Christianity about? What does Christianity offer? Who do they assume that Christianity is for?
12. What can we learn from those who have become Christians about approaches to effectively reach others like them?

In reaching a distinctive population, you do not usually have to begin from scratch! Some churches have already discovered, for example, underreached blind people or single mothers, and some of those churches are already serving them effectively. From an onsite visit in which you interview the leaders, you can stand on their shoulders in developing an outreach ministry.

1. What is the ministry or program that you use to reach these people?
2. Tell us the story of how this ministry got started.
3. Describe, systematically, how you got it started.
4. What keeps it going? When it is most effective? What makes it effective?
5. What kinds of human resources are necessary for this ministry's effectiveness?

6. What kind of financial resources are necessary for this ministry's effectiveness?
7. Please tell us the stories of persons who have been significantly helped by this ministry.
8. What churches did you learn from when you began this ministry? What similar ministries do you network with now?
9. What sources (like experts, articles, or books) have been most useful in understanding this population and being in ministry with them?
10. Knowing what you know now, what would you do differently if you were starting the ministry today?

Most churches, in most cultures, reach and involve more women than men. A three to two ratio is typical, and we sometimes find two females for every male in attendance. However, we reach some males, and church growth people would suggest that our occasional male converts could show us how to reach others, IF we asked them!

1. How long have you been a Christian? Tell me the story.
2. Before you got involved, what was your image of Christianity and the church?
3. What was happening in your life that made you more receptive to Christianity than you might have been before?
4. Who, or what, got you involved?
5. What kinds of needs were you experiencing in your life? What helped meet those needs?
6. What almost kept you from joining?
7. How is your life different now?
8. What happens here that is very important, even significant, for your life?
9. Do you ever invite people to this church or to faith in Christ? If yes, how do you go about that? If no, what would have to happen here before you would feel free to do that?
10. What would this church have to do to reach a lot more men?

We have not, of course, exhausted the range of people who could be usefully interviewed, nor the questions one could plan to ask. These sets of questions for interviewees should, however, be sufficiently illustrative. Good interviewers, with a few models and some experience, become very competent in identifying points in church growth literature to check out, in clarifying their own hypotheses, and in generating their own questions.

Two other questions should doubtless be asked of all interviewees. 1) Often, interviewees will come to the interview with something in mind they already know they want to contribute, and until they do, they may not really hear your questions. It is useful to ask early, "What did you come here thinking you might want to share with me?" 2) The interview will often stimulate insight in the interviewee's internal conversation that no question from you has particularly invited. While some interviewees will be confident

enough to intrude unsolicited information, most will not. The interviewer should undoubtedly close almost every interview by asking, "What other question should I have asked you? What else would you like to tell me?"

Incidentally, as you have thanked the interviewee for his contribution, and you are both standing up to end the conversation, he may "by the way" verbalize his most important contribution. Do not neglect the material that "slips out" at the last minute!

## ESSENTIAL PERSPECTIVES FOR EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWING

Interviews consist of both verbal and nonverbal interactions. The words within a language system are the currency of verbal communication; they are the culturally-agreed-upon symbols that we use for people, animals, things, ideas, beliefs, feelings, and so on. A word is usually an arbitrary symbol chosen by a culture for the symbol's "referent." The symbol's meaning is within the people, not within the symbol, per se. So, in American English, we agree upon the genus of critters we refer to with the symbol "dog." However, most of the earth's other languages refer to the same group of critters with different symbols. Even within a language community, individuals may attach contrasting meanings from their experience; so "dog" may mean Corgi to one person, while another person thinks of a Dalmatian. From our life experiences or socialization, many words have emotional connotations for us; one person may respond to "dog" with affection, another with amusement, and another with fear.

Distinct cultures sharing more or less the same language may have different referents for the same symbol. For instance, "football" does not refer to the same sport in England as it does in the USA. Furthermore, distinct cultures, or even subcultures, that share more or less the same language may have different symbols for the same referent. My "automobile" burns "gasoline" as I drive it down a "highway," and it has a "windshield," a "hood," and a "trunk." My British friend burns "petrol" as he drives his "motorcar"—with a "windscreen," a "bonnet," and a "boot"—on a British "motorway!" All of this means that the interviewer must NOT assume that, by any key word, the conversation's two parties mean the same thing. The semantically aware interviewer will often ask the person to define what he means or to say it in other words. This is especially necessary when the person's first response to a question is expressed in Christian jargon—for which some Christians may have no referent at all!

Interview conversation also takes place nonverbally, as people communicate meaning through facial expressions, vocal inflections, speaking rate and volume, and through their eyes, posture, gestures, and other body language expressions. Interviewers need to be aware of the nonverbal cues that the interviewee may, more or less, unconsciously emit. All competent communicators look for consistency between the interviewee's verbal and nonverbal messages. If we perceive inconsistency, we take the nonverbal messages very seriously, and we know to probe for more access to the person's meanings.

Listening to the interviewee is an essential part of the process. The most competent interviewers spend over 80 percent of the conversation time listening. Unbelievably, we are only learning when we are not talking! Effective interviewers listen at two levels. 1) They listen for comprehension—to make sure they understand what their conversation partner means. Therefore, typically, they listen for main ideas. They often work to restate what the person has said to their partner's satisfaction. They may ask for examples, or they may probe for the same ideas through different questions. 2) They also listen with empathy for the person's situation, experience, or feelings. Good interviewers will often express in words how they sense that their interviewees feel—which helps them identify more closely with each other.

## THE INDISPENSABLE SKILL: ASKING QUESTIONS

Effective interview processes have a typical structure. In the *opening*, one is welcoming the other person into the project, setting the tone, establishing rapport, and sharing the project's purpose and the way the data will be used. The interviewer will often state the interviewee's status in a way that indicates why his help is needed, for instance, "I really need to understand the experience of the church's newest Christians, like you." In the *body*, one follows the planned questions in the interview guide, plus the follow-up questions that his initial answers prompt. The *closing* is usually quite brief, but important—lest one lose the rapport that has been built, and lest one miss his last "by the way" comment. A "clearing house question" often facilitates the closing, such as, "Can you think of anything I may have missed, or a question I should have asked you?" Often the interviewer simply declares that their time is up, or their task is complete, and expresses appreciation for their contribution. I sometimes ask for a telephone number at which I could call them one time, should follow-up questions occur to me later.

When it comes to types of questions, there is a range of tools in the researcher's toolkit. We have already distinguished between the planned questions for each person or group in the interview guide and the follow-up questions that will occur to us as we listen. There are also closed questions, which can almost be answered with a yes, a no, or a single sentence, and open questions, which encourage a considered answer. Within a few minutes into the interview, closed questions are seldom productive—except for clarification. The more productive open questions often begin with "who," "what," "where," "when," or "how." A question somewhere between the closed and open genres can be productive, such as, "Why did you choose this church, rather than some other?" Skilled interviewers avoid leading questions, such as, "How do you feel about the boring, old-fashioned music in this church?"

Two techniques are especially useful in helping the interviewee to respond and to keep talking. One is the judicious use of silence. When an interviewee pauses in the answer, too many interviewers impulsively break

the silence by talking. It is usually far better to wait for the interviewee to finish his internal conversation and then to break the silence and continue talking. Even if he has completed his answer, he will often respond to some silence by expanding upon his answer. The other technique is acceptance cues, which can be defined as "affirming sub-vocalizations." When we nod indicating that we understand, or quietly interject an "uh huh," or "I see," or "Well said," people keep contributing.

George Truell, a teacher for the American Management Association, used to reflect that skilled interviewers are something like major league baseball pitchers. As an effective pitcher does not keep throwing the same pitch, but mixes the fast ball, curve, slider, and change up, so the effective interviewer mixes the questions—planned, follow-up, open, closed, and so on. There is one difference. The pitcher mixes pitches to increase the possibility that the batter will miss; the interviewer mixes the questions to increase the possibility that the respondent will hit! Somehow, not knowing the form that the next question will take energizes the interviewee, and better information emerges.

## RECORDING INTERVIEW DATA AND ORGANIZING INTELLIGENCE

No interviewer, after two days of interviews, has total, or even sufficient, recall of what anyone said. Therefore, recording the data we need to retain becomes essential. To maximize the possibility of an effective interview and record, some logistical issues need to be resolved.

One logistical issue is the location for your interviews. People need to be able to find it. It needs to be comfortable, free of distractions, and free of the possibility of being overheard. It is desirable to have an adjacent place where the next interviewee can wait. A church sanctuary, for several reasons, is usually the least desirable setting for interviews.

Another logistical issue involves the technology you will use in recording interview data. The modest range of options includes relying on memory alone, taking notes immediately after the conversation, taking notes during the conversation, audio recording the interview, and video recording.

No one should rely on memory alone! I often make notes immediately after an unplanned conversation, as when I find myself visiting with a new Christian sitting next to me on a plane, though even then I sometimes ask if I can write some notes while we talk. In planned interviews, I virtually always plan to take notes during the interview. While it takes more time to write key words and some verbatim comments than it has taken someone to say it, that is not usually lost time; while you write, they are thinking about what to say next.

It is not usually appropriate to electronically record an interview. The presence of a tape recorder will often intimidate the interviewee, and his responses will be guarded. In any case, a stack of tapes is a terrible retriev-

able system. It takes an extremely long time to listen to and take notes from tapes; since you will take notes anyway, do so during each interview. At the end of each day of interviewing, review your notes, and add what you can recall. This takes time and energy, so schedule it for a time when you will still have some energy!

There is one notable kind of exception to the "do not electronically record" rule of thumb. When you are interviewing senior professionals who are used to being recorded, and with whom you can contract only a limited amount of time, obtain clearance from them, and record the interview. When I have done telephone interviews with people like Robert Schuller, Bill Hybels, or Rick Warren, for instance, I have attached a recorder to the telephone. (Once I have taken notes from the recording, however, I do not archive the tapes for anyone's future use.)

During the interviews, then, you labor to record everything that may later be significant in your study. After the interviews, and following a day or two to get some distance from, and objectivity toward, the experience, you review your notes—several times. (Warning: If you wait much longer, however, some of the data will be "cold," and some of your notes will no longer make sense to you!) Gradually, some patterns will emerge, and some key insights will become obvious. (The more church growth lore you know, of course, the more equipped you are to perceive the patterns and the insights AND to perceive possible new insights as possibly new!)

In time, you are weeding out many of your notes. You are focusing on the 20 percent of the data that accounts for 80 percent of the significance. You are distilling some organized intelligence from the mountain of data.

Your penultimate goal is to write a case study of approximately six to twelve pages (single spaced), from the research in each church. The typical case study should present the story of the church and its achievements. It should include your major insights about the causes, principles, methods, ministries, policies, attitudes, and so on that other churches might learn from, complete with descriptions of key programs or ministries, with inspiring stories and quotations from leaders or converts who expressed a salient point more memorably than you can.

Since it is often academic folly, or hubris, to reach conclusions from a single case study, defensible theory emerges from reflection upon many cases, though plausible hypotheses may emerge from each case study.

## About the Author

George Hunter taught at SMU's school of theology, served as evangelism executive of his denomination, and taught at Asbury Seminary's school of mission and evangelism, where he also served as dean for 18 years. Hunter has published over 20 books on mission, outreach ministry, evangelism, church growth, and leadership. His best known books are *How to Reach Secular People* (Abingdon, 1992) and *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Abingdon, 2000, revised in 2010). His most recent book is *GO: The Church's Main Purpose* (Abingdon, 2017). He is now an Asbury Distinguished Professor, Emeritus and living in Kentucky.