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Introduction

In the fall of 1972 a small group of church leaders, a retired missionary, and an upcoming missiologist gathered to study missionary principles with a twist—apply those principles to the American milieu. The results of this inauspicious class became the genesis of the Americanization of the Church Growth Movement, a movement that exerted a powerful influence on American religious institutions. According to the prominent church consultant, Lyle Schaller, the most momentous development on the American religious scene during "the 1970s was the emergence of the church growth movement."[1]

Genesis of the Church Growth Movement

Beginnings

Church growth was born on the mission field during the mid-1930s in response to the question: "How do people become Christians?" For years missionaries in India had experienced success reaching the untouchables through "mass movements," a phenomenon later called "people movements." At the 1928 session of the India National Christian Council (NCC), members hotly debated "mass movements." The opposition shouted: "These [are] giving Christianity the name of an Untouchable religion . . . All such untouchable movements ought to be immediately stopped!"[2] At the counsel of missionary leader John R.

Mott, the NCC commissioned extensive research on people movements. For three-and-a-half years the Methodist missionary J. Waskom Pickett used sophisticated research instruments to gather data on people movements. He published the findings of this effort results in his landmark book, *Christian Mass Movements in India*.[3]

Pickett's book profoundly influenced career missionary Donald Anderson McGavran. Early in his career McGavran was awakened by the sterility of Indian missions to an evangelical motivation and commitment to evangelism. Convinced that the purpose of Christian missions should be to make disciples rather than merely engage in humanitarian works, McGavran responded to Pickett's positive findings on people movements by proclaiming: "There has come a book sent by God, and its name is *Christian Mass Movements in India*."[4]

Church Growth Foundation Established

Pickett's findings also motivated the NCC to establish a Mass Movement Committee in 1935. McGavran chaired the committee, which was host to a conference led by Pickett on people movements. Following the conference, McGavran accompanied Pickett who was conducting additional field research in mid-India. Unable to complete the work, Pickett advised McGavran: "You have been accompanying me and seeing what I do. I have to go now. You carry on similar investigations in the three remaining areas."[5]

Pickett's basic insights and field research methods constructed the foundation upon which the Church Growth Movement was built.[6] Whereas, Pickett applied his principles and methodology only to India, McGavran's genius refined and universalized Pickett's foundational contributions. Years later, after he was recognized as the "Father of the Church Growth Movement," McGavran acknowledged Pickett's seminal contributions:

> I neither invented church growth nor am solely responsible for it. Indeed, I owe my interest to a great Methodist Bishop, Jarrell Waskom Pickett. In 1934, he kindled my concern that the church grow. I lit my candle at his fire.[7]

Thus McGavran began a quest to answer several questions:

"What are the causes of church growth where it is occurring?" "What are the barriers that prevent growth?" "What principles can be taught leaders who desire their churches to be more effective in evangelical outreach and display?"[8]

During the years from 1936 to 1954 McGavran continued to refine and universalize his church growth insights as "reproducible principles" of how the gospel spreads. After years as an educator, evangelist, church planter, and mission executive, McGavran retired to a jungle hut to commit his earliest insights about "how people become Christian" in the manifesto, *The Bridges of God*.[9] Convinced that *The Bridges of God* represented a revolution in missions, McGavran was not content to simply let it come into its own forty years later. "If it takes a quarter that long to become effective," he believed, "priceless opportunities will be permanently lost."[10]

McGavran's decision marked the beginning of a creative period for him as he traveled worldwide researching, verifying, and testing his church growth hypothesis. He taught ministerial students about missions and continued to write about church growth, making his first systematic attempt in 1959 to delineate church growth principles in *How Churches Grow*. By the late 1950s McGavran's ideas were creating a stir in the world of missions, but teaching ministerial candidates had proved unsatisfying for him. Convinced that the only way to reform the practice of missions was to teach career missionaries church growth, McGavran began exploring the establishment of an institute of church growth.

Institute of Church Growth

On 1 January 1961, the "Institute of Church Growth" (ICG) opened its doors on the Eugene, Oregon, campus of Northwest Christian College. Classes met on the third floor of the library around a large oak table and averaged eight students yearly. Most of the sixty-one students were career missionaries who represented diverse denominations and mission affiliations. The curriculum depended heavily on research conducted by ICG students and resulted in several church growth case studies being published.

During the early 1960s McGavran exchanged correspondence with World Council of Churches (WCC) leadership, seeking

to influence its direction toward a more evangelical version of missions. WCC leadership seriously looked at church growth, reading with interest McGavran's books, articles, and letters. Amazingly, until late 1964, the ICG seemed to have more potential of being identified with the Ecumenical Movement than with evangelicalism, yet it was evangelicals who most readily received McGavran and his church growth ideas.[11]

By late 1964 financial concerns and McGavran's mandatory 1965 retirement painted an ominous picture for the ICG. However, unanticipated future possibilities opened for the ICG when Fuller Theological Seminary appointed a committee to investigate the establishment of a school of mission. When a survey of Fuller graduates revealed that Donald McGavran was the mission leader most influencing them, the committee began focusing attention on McGavran and the Institute of Church Growth.[12] Thus, in the spring of 1965, Fuller Theological Seminary extended an invitation to Donald McGavran to move the ICG to Pasadena, California and become the founding dean of the School of World Mission and Institute of Church Growth.

Throughout the 1960s the Church Growth Movement grew in scope and influence, especially among evangelicals: Evangelicals provided most of the students, first to the ICG, then to Fuller's School of World Mission (SWM). In 1964, Overseas Crusades began publishing the *Church Growth Bulletin*, a sixteen-page bimonthly newsletter which was mailed out to over twelve hundred prominent missionary leaders. Further growth for the movement came in 1969 when SWM faculty member Ralph Winter founded the William Carey Library, which published many theretofore unpublished church growth books. Additional church growth book distribution came through the Church Growth Book Club which offered a 40 percent discount to club members in each issue of the *Church Growth Bulletin*. By 1970, when McGavran's magnum opus *Understanding Church Growth* was published, the Church Growth Movement and the School of World Mission and Institute for Church Growth were firmly established in the evangelical mainstream.

The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement

Before 1972 the focus for church growth was upon overseas missions exclusively, as McGavran sought to reform Christian

missions. Consequently, McGavran's missionary experience and the development of the movement within the School of World Mission almost precluded the application for church growth to North America. During the 1950s McGavran's ministerial students had often remarked, "Your principles also apply in America." "Yes, they do," he would reply, "but how they apply you will have to work out."[13] In 1963 he had explored establishing an American branch at the Institute of Church Growth but plans did not materialize when funding fell short. Finally, in 1972 when McGavran and Wagner taught American church leaders church growth principles for the first time, the focus for church growth was successfully expanded to include North America also.

The impetus for the Americanization of the Church Growth Movement occurred when Chuck Miller, a staff pastor at Pasadena's Lake Avenue Congregational Church, remarked to SWM faculty member Peter Wagner, "I would like to learn church growth thinking, so that I can be all that God wants me to be." Wagner replied, "You can't do that . . . Because you haven't been in the Third World for three years and Dr. McGavran does not want to do the American scene." However, when Wagner arranged a closed-door session with the SWM faculty to consider the proposal the members laughed, saying, "We have always laughed because we proud Americans call it [baseball] the World Series and now we call it the School of World Mission—but of course folks in the United States can't get in." Then they added, "The key will be how Dr. McGavran responds." Upon hearing Miller's proposal, McGavran readily agreed, saying, "I don't see why we can't do this."[14] Wagner then invited McGavran to team-teach a class with him on church growth to American church leaders.

During the fall of 1972 a group of eighteen area ministers and lay people met at the Lake Avenue Congregational Church from seven to nine Tuesday mornings for the class. The curriculum was comprised of McGavran's *Understanding Church Growth* and Wagner's *Frontiers of Mission Strategy*. Following a brief lecture by either McGavran or Wagner, class members discussed the chapters and made application to their churches. One class member, Phil Goble, recalled how McGavran went through *Understanding Church Growth* chapter by chapter, "like the Bible," underlining key passages and then discussing the implications of

each idea for the American Church. Definite plans for effective evangelism in the congregations represented comprised the last three class sessions.[15]

Excitement about American church growth ignited members of the class. Miller resigned his staff position to enroll in the School of World Mission and later led "Discipling Ministry Seminars," which integrated church growth principles.[16] Phil Goble, concerned that Christian churches might misunderstand the needs of Messianic Jews, developed a creative model called "synagogue growth" for Jewish evangelism that incorporated church growth insights. This application excited McGavran who viewed the Messianic Jew movement as a people movement.[17] Win Arn, another member of the class, became so enamored of church growth that he resigned his job to found the Institute of American Church Growth. Peter Wagner began researching and teaching American church growth at Fuller. Although Donald McGavran continued to emphasize world missions, he too became involved in the Americanization of the movement. He taught a class called "Principles and Procedures in Church Growth" with Wagner, authored several significant American church growth books with Arn, and mentored an increasing number of church leaders who came to Fuller to study his theories. Perhaps McGavran made his most significant American church growth contribution in 1980 by fully revising *Understanding Church Growth*, on the back cover of which he referred to as "Americanized." Revision of the book incorporated many new insight from the Fuller SWM faculty, and American church growth pioneers C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn, and George Hunter.[18]

Peter Wagner and Win Arn quickly emerged as the most prominent American church growth leaders. Both played decisive roles in introducing, developing, spreading, and applying church growth principles to the North American Church. Whereas both Wagner and McGavran were academicians, focusing on teaching academic classes, Arn operated as a field consultant, teaching church growth via film media and seminars. Along with a former Quaker pastor named John Wimber, Wagner emerged as an innovator, wedding church growth principles to Pentecostal and charismatic models of evangelism.

Peter Wagner

Peter Wagner's first reaction to *The Bridges of God* was negative because it was so different from anything he had learned about missions. When Fuller Seminary announced that McGavran was the SWM founding dean, Wagner was incredulous: "Why would they choose a person whom I considered so far off-center to start a School of World Mission?"[19] When he enrolled in the SWM to "check McGavran out," McGavran's passion for evangelism and "absolutely revolutionary ideas about missions and missiology" converted Wagner to church growth.[20] Conversely, McGavran noticed Wagner's enthusiasm for church growth, academic excellence, and "sound views on Christian mission." Thus, Wagner joined the SWM faculty in 1971 as associate professor of Church Growth and Latin American studies.[21]

Wagner's experimental American church growth class made it clear that American churches and denominations were receptive to church growth theory and methodology. The class also signaled a shift in Wagner's focus as he quickly assumed a pivotal leadership role in introducing church growth to the American Church. As McGavran's heir apparent, Wagner engineered significant changes in the Americanization of the Church Growth Movement. First, he was instrumental in adding a church growth component to the Doctor of Ministry program at Fuller. Second, he steered the Charles Fuller Evangelistic Association toward becoming a leading church growth organization. Third, he awakened the church to the possibilities of church growth by authoring more than twenty books dealing with church growth. Finally, along with John Wimber, Wagner became a primary factor in the "Pentecostalization" of the Church Growth Movement.

The Fuller Doctor of Ministry Program

In the 1970s several notable churches around the United States were experiencing dynamic growth. Aware of these rapidly growing churches, Wagner resolved to teach other accredited American church growth classes. A strategic opportunity came in 1974 when Fuller Seminary overhauled its Doctor of Ministry (D. Min.) program and added an in-ministry model to its curriculum. As a member of the D. Min. curriculum committee, Wagner pushed for the inclusion of two units on American church growth: "Principles and Procedures of Church Growth"

and a companion course, "Church Growth Research."[22] By 1978 two additional classes were added: "Anthropological and Historical Dimensions of Church Growth" and "Theological and Historical Dimensions of Church Growth." These classes trained ministers "in both the practical methodologies and the theoretical base of church growth applied to the North American church milieu."[23] Significantly, Wagner was the principal instructor in the Doctor of Ministry church growth classes, teaching 2,000 students by 1988.[24]

The Fuller Evangelistic Association

When Wagner joined the Fuller faculty his duties also included serving as Executive Director of the Fuller Evangelistic Association (FEA), an agency which disbursed funds to mission projects from the Charles Fuller trust.[25] When church leaders began to call for consultations, Wagner conceived the idea that the FEA could provide church growth consultation as well. Thus, he created the FEA Department of Church Growth. In a 1975 D. Min. class, John Wimber came to Wagner's attention and became the pioneering Director of the FEA Department of Church Growth. Wimber traveled extensively across America in this capacity, consulting with church leaders and lecturing on church growth. Additionally, Wimber and members of the Department of Church Growth conducted seminars and produced several teaching resources which included the well known spiritual gifts studies and questionnaires. When Wimber resigned his position as Director to lead the Vineyard Movement in 1978, he was replaced by Baptist minister Carl George and the agency was renamed the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth.

Peter Wagner the Author

The church growth publications of Wagner include more than twenty books and twenty-five articles targeting both academic and popular audiences. His earliest writings dealt with how people become Christian within a social scientific context. Following a paradigm shift marked by a new openness to the Pentecostal Movement, Wagner then started emphasizing the spiritual elements of church growth.

In 1976 Wagner made his initial attempt to interpret church

growth to the American public in a popular treatment entitled *Your Church Can Grow*. In this effort he introduced church growth and its origins and provided many examples of growing churches, along with a paradigm of seven vital signs of growing churches. In *Leading Your Church to Growth*, Wagner addressed the role of pastoral leadership, finding the pastor as leader to be a more positive factor than that of minister as care-giver of souls in a church's growth. Accordingly, he defined leadership narrowly as "leadership for membership growth."[26] Using a medical model of church sicknesses, Wagner systematically described eight church pathologies, and their obstacles to growth and offered concrete steps and remedies in *Your Church Can Be Healthy*.[27] In 1986 he collaborated with Win Arn and Sunday School specialist Elmer Towns editing *Church Growth: State of the Art*, an up-to-date review of developments in church growth research.

Wagner's ability to think strategically about world missions was one of the traits that attracted McGavran's attention. His earliest church growth writings addressed South American and world evangelization strategy issues. At the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland, church growth proponents influenced the Congress to adopt church growth concepts. As chairperson of the Lausanne Strategy Working Group, Wagner initiated the *Unreached Peoples* series, focusing attention on unreached people groups worldwide. In another homogeneous unit (HU) principle application, *Strategies for Church Growth* sought to help local churches identify and reach those receptive to their ministry within their social network.[28]

In 1975 Wagner participated in the Hartford Seminary Foundation study of mainline church membership trends over the preceding quarter-century. His contribution, "Church Growth Research: The Paradigm and its Applications," explained how church growth research identified those reproducible principles that produce church growth.[29] He later joined Bob Waymire in co-authoring *The Church Growth Survey Handbook*,[30] a step-by-step manual on how to a conduct church growth survey.

Wagner often played the role of church growth apologist. As church growth diffused through American Protestantism, great confusion and debate emerged over the merits of church

growth's HU principle. A committed advocate of the HU, Wagner made an able apologetic in his published doctoral dissertation, *Our Kind of People*.[31] This added fuel to the HU debate, as one reviewer criticized Wagner's theology as "Evangelism without the Gospel."[32] Striking a more mediating tone in *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*,[33] Wagner examined the relationship between the cultural mandate (ministry to the poor and downtrodden) and the evangelistic mandate (to make disciples), arguing for the primacy of the latter. Significantly for the Church Growth Movement, Wagner began to turn his attention toward more spiritual concerns.

The Pentecostalization of the Church Growth Movement

By the end of the 1970s Wagner felt the spiritual side of church growth was being neglected. Mission professor Herbert Kane noted the following in a critique: "The proponents of church growth, with few exceptions, have emphasized the human factors and all but overlooked the divine factor."[34] The fierce pragmatism of church growth was legendary. McGavran explained:

> We believe in pragmatically sound methods. We devise methods and policies in light of what God has blessed—and what He has obviously not blessed. Industry calls this "modifying operation in the light of feedback." . . . We teach men to be ruthless in regard to method. If it does not work to the glory of God, throw it away and get something which does.[35]

Wagner began softening this coldly scrutinizing approach as his focus shifted away from traditional church growth research and toward the supernatural's relationship with church growth. According to Wagner:

> It is easy to get caught up in techniques and methodology, especially when they have produced productive results in the past . . . The church growth movement, of which I am a part, began to succumb to this tendency toward the end of the '70s when the movement was around 25 years old. At that time, some of our critics began to complain that we had begun to rely on human

technology instead of spiritual power.[36]

Nothing in Wagner's early Christian background prepared him for Pentecostalism. Like most dispensationalists Wagner rejected the teachings of Pentecostalism. As an SWM student, Wagner learned that church growth research emphasized studying the most vigorously growing churches, an unsettling idea since the fastest growing Latin America churches were Pentecostal.[37] When he returned to South America, Wagner observed as a church growth researcher the explosive growth of Pentecostal groups, seeking to discover the factors that caused church growth among Latin American Pentecostals.[38] Over the years Pentecostal spirituality increasingly influenced Wagner. By the late 1970s, when McGavran was lecturing on divine healing as a means of church growth, Wagner considered his openness to Pentecostalism to be "like a papal 'imprimatur'."[39]

When John Wimber resigned from the Department of Church Growth to pastor the Anaheim Vineyard Christian Fellowship, he began developing a ministry based on healing, signs and wonders. His influence was substantial upon the development of Peter Wagner's later church growth thought. Wagner observed firsthand as both an interested spectator and a church growth researcher as Wimber developed his signs and wonders theology. Wimber's "power evangelism" allowed Wagner to witness personally the gifts of the Spirit dynamically working in North America and helping the church to grow.[40] A symbiotic relationship developed between the two men as they explored the relationship between church growth's spiritual and social scientific sides.

The final and most controversial factor in Wagner's paradigm shift was a new SWM class offered in the winter quarter of 1982: "MC510: Signs, Wonders and Church Growth." In 1981 Wimber had taught a class segment in Wagner's "Church Growth II" class on the relationship between signs, wonders and church growth. Based on the success of the class, Wagner received permission to teach an experimental class MC510, "Signs, Wonders, and Church Growth."[41]

Although Wagner was the professor of record, Wimber did most of the teaching.[42] What further distinguished the course was the ministry time following the class when students re-

mained and requested prayer for healing. Many testified that they were healed. "MC510" attracted national attention, creating a firestorm among Fuller supporters that "Fuller Seminary [was] going charismatic."[43] In response to the controversy Fuller withdrew the course, appointed a task force to study the issue, and replaced the infamous MC510 with MC550, "The Ministry of Healing and World Evangelization."[44]

Wagner insisted through all of the controversy that he was neither charismatic nor Pentecostal, instead he claimed the following:

> I see myself as neither a charismatic nor a Pentecostal. I belong to Lake Avenue Congregational Church. I'm a Congregationalist. My church is not a charismatic church, although some of our members are charismatic. However, our church is more and more open to the same way that the Holy Spirit does work among charismatics. For example, our pastor gives an invitation after every service for people who need physical healing and inner healing to come forward and go to the prayer room and be anointed with oil and prayed for, and we have teams of people who know how to pray for the sick. We like to think that we are doing it in a Congregational way; we're not doing it in a Charismatic way. But we are getting the same results.[45]

However, Wagner's new-found openness to the gifts of the Spirit marked a new chapter in the development of the Church Growth Movement. Increasingly during the 1980s, other leaders in the Church Growth Movement followed Wagner's lead, focusing more on the supernatural and departing from the movement's social science research foundation.

A review of Wagner's later writings confirms this trend: *Signs & Wonders Today* tells the story of MC510. His *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* article, "Church Growth,"[46] was written from a Pentecostal perspective. Based on his experiences with Wimber and the MC510 class, Wagner wrote his own signs and wonders healing volume: *How to Have a Healing Ministry Without Making Your Church Sick*.[47] Other signs and wonders books soon followed.[48] His three-volume commen-

tary on the Book of Acts integrated his accumulated church growth and signs and wonders insights.[49] Most revealing in Wagner's Pentecostalization of the Church Growth Movement was his editing of the third edition of McGavran's *Understanding Church Growth* to which he added a new chapter entitled "Divine Healing and Church Growth." His only non-Pentecostal book during this period was *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*,[50] a more traditional church growth topic.

Win Arn

The other innovative leader most responsible for the Americanization of the Church Growth Movement was Win Arn. Arn's pilgrimage to church growth began with a background of mass evangelism that emphasized "decisions." Dissatisfied with this approach, Arn began asking probing questions: "What [happens] to those who [make] 'decisions'? [Do] they become actively involved in a local church? What [are] the long-term results? What [are] the actual facts?" Further investigation revealed that few who made "decisions" found lasting relationships in local churches.

In 1970 Arn relocated to Southern California to assume duties with the Evangelical Covenant Church. While visiting Fuller's SWM to investigate local church evangelism resources, he enrolled in the first American church growth class. As he learned about church growth, Arn realized that he had found the effective approach to evangelism that he had been searching for. "In those hours," he recalled, "I experienced my third birth—'conversion' to church growth thinking."[51]

Studying church growth stimulated Arn's creativity. Graced with the ability to take the abstract concepts of church growth and transform them into visual principles, Arn presented a series of six visual aids illustrating church growth concepts. One drawing pictured a hot air balloon soaring above one of McGavran's favorite sayings, "See the Possibilities!"[52]

Seeing the possibilities of applying church growth to America, Arn took a "leap of faith" and resigned his job to found the Institute for American Church Growth.[53] When McGavran learned of Arn's decision, he cautioned, "You'll lose your shirt. There's no money in church growth." However, ignoring McGavran's counsel, Arn founded the Institute for American

Church Growth (IACG).[54]

The IACG's philosophy of ministry was expressed in the following four-point mission statement:

1. To motivate and encourage evangelism and church growth in America.
2. To enable individual churches to devise strategy and bold plans for growth.
3. To help pastors and lay people understand their growth problems and apply reproducible principles of growth.
4. To serve as a resource for the church at large in its growth efforts.

The IACG employed four strategies to awaken American congregations and denominations to church growth: First, seminars, workshops, and training sessions were conducted to teach church growth to churches, denominations, laity, and pastors. Second, the IACG researched and developed American church growth principles and applications. Third, the IACG used a variety of methods and media to communicate church growth ideas. Finally, the IACG provided diagnostic, research, and consultation services to American churches.[55]

IACG Seminars

IACG seminars offered church leaders—both clergy and laity—training in church growth ideas and methods and became Arn's primary vehicle for spreading church growth in America. Arn was not the first to hold a the church growth seminar; Pickett led the first seminar in 1935, a method later adopted and perfected by McGavran. However, Arn improved on their didactic styles by incorporating a variety of learning experiences, integrating many creative learning techniques that included a variety of media, small and large group interaction, quizzes, lectures, charts, and graphs.[56] Win's son, Chip Arn, a graduate student in educational technology and communications, formatted the Basic Church Growth Seminar, employing state-of-the-art instructional media.[57]

The seminars were offered at three levels: basic, intermediate, and advanced. The Basic Growth Seminar, first taught in 1973, grew out of Arn's conviction that the laity were the key to church growth. Before attending a Basic Growth Seminar each

participant received a copy of *How to Grow a Church*. Each pastor received two copies of the "Advanced Growth Organizer," an analytical tool used to compile important data concerning his/her church. Upon completing the form, the pastor kept one copy and mailed the other to the IACG for analysis.[58]

Church growth seminars were held around the United States, thus making church growth training widely available. Much of the highly technical terminology used in the academic church growth books was absent in these seminars. Instead, they were user-friendly and were designed to express church growth principles at levels most pastors and laity could easily understand. For congregations and church boards considering sponsoring a seminar, the IACG offered a promotional seven-minute color 16mm film entitled *Helping the Church Grow*.

By 1976 Arn headed a staff of twelve seminar leaders located around the United States. Generally, seminar leaders were pastors or denominational executives who wanted to extend their ministry by leading seminars. Although the IACG did not promote the work of associates, its Church Growth Associates program trained them. Both evangelical and ecumenical churches sponsored seminars, with some denominations conducting their own training by leasing Basic Growth Seminar materials provided by the IACG.

The Intermediate Seminar grew out of a series of seminars conducted by Arn in Australia and in response to the growing demand for additional training from Basic Seminar students. The term "intermediate" was a misnomer since the intermediate concepts were as easily learned as those in the Basic Seminar.[59]

Advanced Growth Seminars targeted judicatory executives, pastors, and key lay leaders. The Advanced Growth Seminars with the largest attendance were held in Pasadena and lasted for five days. The more abbreviated three-day regional seminars took place in Atlanta, Dallas, Indianapolis and Seattle. Advanced Growth Seminars featured leading theorists and practitioners who presented a variety of models and illustrations of church growth.[60] A Traveling Growth Seminar combined church growth lectures with world travel. Led by McGavran and Arn, participants toured the ancient world, Holy Land, Roman Empire, and European Reformation sites. At each stop McGavran lectured on church growth, applying lessons from the early church. The

North American diffusion of church growth during the 1970s can be credited in part to the rich variety of IACG seminars.

Research and Development of Church Growth Principles and Applications

The IACG conducted research aimed at developing church growth principles and applications. During the 1970s McGavran and Arn shared a close working relationship in this effort. McGavran served as IACG Board chairperson while Arn substitute taught for him at the SWM. Jointly, they developed and applied church growth principles to North America and co-authored several books.

Because Arn was not prepared to write a complete book on American church growth in 1973, he put McGavran's ideas on the subject into a book that could be widely read. A chapter in Malcolm Muggeridge's book, *Jesus Rediscovered*, featuring a dialogue between Muggeridge and Roy Trevivian gave Win an idea on how to make reading McGavran the missiologist more interesting to the public. While Win interviewed McGavran over four or five sessions, Chip Arn tape-recorded the conversation. Arn then edited transcripts of the conversations into a book entitled *How to Grow a Church* that featured easy-to-understand dialogue between Arn and McGavran about applying church growth to North America.[61]

In its sequel, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, McGavran and Arn explained comprehensively the Church Growth Movement and established squarely the American contributions in the worldwide context. They explained in ten steps church growth theory and offered practical principles, methods, and resources for local churches. McGavran and Arn joined Chip Arn in evaluating the Sunday School from a church growth perspective in *Growth: A New Vision for the Sunday School*.[62] Their last book, *Back to Basics in Church Growth*, explored the question, "What is the real meaning of church growth?" The answer did not reside in methods ("The best way to achieve growth is") or numbers ("We added a hundred members last year") but in two theological convictions: (1) "the assurance of salvation [comes] through Jesus Christ alone"; and (2) "the biblical imperative to spread the good news of the gospel and make disciples of men and women everywhere."[63]

Arn's other writings included *The Church Growth Ratio Book*,[64] which identified twenty-three ratios that pinpointed the measures of a growing church; *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples*,[65] based on the HU principle, explained that the natural way churches grow is through Christians' networks of friends and neighbors; *Who Cares About Love?*[66] attempted to define loving Christians and churches by seeking to quantify "Love/Care Quotients." Some of his other publications were compendiums and included *The Pastor's Church Growth Handbook*, Volumes I and II, that contained excerpts from *Church Growth: America*; *The Pastor's Manual for Effective Ministry* reprinted *Win Arn Growth Report* articles.[67] During the 1990s Win Arn shifted his focus toward senior citizens, applying his accumulated church growth insights to a particular homogeneous unit in *Age Wave* and *Catch the Age Wave*.[68]

Institute of American Church Growth Media

Win Arn, an able communicator and educator, was interested in the transmission of learning. In the early 1970s he founded Christian Communications, Inc., whose purpose was to produce evangelism films. Consequently, Arn's "church growth eyes" quickly perceived the potential of film media to communicate church growth to the American Church.

When Chip Arn attended McGavran's church growth classes in 1972, he videotaped several of the sessions. Arn found that McGavran presented himself well on film, which led to the production of his first church growth film in 1973. *How to Grow a Church*[69] featured McGavran, Arn, and pastors of growing churches sharing church growth concepts that could be applied to congregations in America. Film media gave Arn the ability to relate visually abstract concepts to pastors and laity. His films exposed many to church growth who otherwise would not have attended a church growth seminar. By 1981 an estimated 1.8 million people had viewed one or more of the films produced by Christian Communications.[70] During the 1970s and 1980s Arn either produced or co-produced a total of twenty-one church growth films.[71]

The IACG began publishing *Church Growth: America* (CGA)in 1975 as a mimeographed newsletter, expanding it to a magazine

format in 1976. CGA targeted ministry professionals and the laity, and its contributors were leaders in their fields. Each issue introduced readers to new growth concepts, new research data, and the availability of new resources. Excellence was Arn's goal, and production was first-rate. *Church Growth: America*'s production run ended in 1983 when publication costs exceeded income. In its place Arn began sending out *The Win Arn Growth Report*, a newsletter that discussed one aspect of church growth or reviewed some research.

IACG Resources

Under Chip Arn's guidance the IACG produced many diagnostic, research, and consultation services for churches, including books, manuals, film strips, videos, transparency masters, and participant workbooks. These resources were packaged in various combinations or kits that applied church growth to church life.[72] Notable training kits included: "A New Vision for the Sunday School" which taught Sunday School teachers and leaders how to apply key growth principles in their classes and departments; "Let the Church Grow" a twelve-week curriculum study of church growth principles; "Spiritual Gifts for Building the Body" trained laity how to identify and use their spiritual gifts; and "The Caring System" provided local churches with a systematic approach to monitor the needs of new members and prospects.

The IACG offered diagnostic, research, and consultative services. A church could use an IACG kit for self-diagnosis or employ a professional consultant. Beginning with Basic Growth Seminars, diagnostics were an integral part of the IACG church growth package. Pastors attending seminars received evaluated copies of the Advanced Growth Organizer which compiled important data and produced an accurate picture of its growth potential.

Church growth consultations were not the early focus of the IACG, although Arn served as a consultant to several major denominations, judicatories, and individual churches. According to one-time IACG church growth consultant Gary McIntosh, over the years the IACG became increasingly involved in church consulting while the number of seminars decreased. In contrast, the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth's number of consultations decreased as its number of seminars

increased.[73]

Innovation and Diffusion of American Church Growth

By the mid-1970s the necessary elements had converged for the Americanization of the Church Growth Movement. McGavran, Arn, and Wagner were its recognized leaders. Their books, *Understanding Church Growth*, *How to Grow a Church*, and *Your Church Can Grow*, constituted the movement's foundational texts. Fuller Seminary had emerged as the church growth Mecca for Doctor of Ministry and graduate students. The IACG was producing the influential *Church Growth: America* magazine, church growth seminars, films, and other related materials. The FEA's Department of Church Growth assumed leadership in church growth consultations while developing other materials promoting church growth in the local church. Significantly, many other American church growth books began to be published. Some targeted the American Church while others applied church growth to particular denominational cultures.

American church growth books quickly appeared: Christian pastor LeRoy Lawson and Milligan College professor Tetsunao Yamamori collaborated on *Church Growth: Everybody's Business*;[74] McGavran and Methodist George Hunter wrote *Church Growth: Strategies That Work*; Wagner added *Your Church Can Be Healthy*; and Lincoln Christian Seminary professor Paul Benjamin contributed *The Growing Congregation*.[75]

Denominationally oriented adaptations began appearing in 1977 interpreting church growth for particular denominational cultures. Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor Waldo Werning wrote *Vision and Strategy for Church Growth*;[76] Southern Baptist church growth experts Charles Chaney and Ron Lewis teamed up to write *Design for Church Growth*;[77] Presbyterian Foster Shannon explained *The Growth Crisis in the American Church*;[78] Episcopalian Wayne Williamson added *Growth and Decline in the Episcopal Church*;[79] Church of Christ minister Dewayne Davenport published *The Bible Says Grow*;[80] Nazarene Paul Orjala wrote *Get Ready to Grow*;[81] Methodist George Hunter described *The Contagious Congregation*;[82] and Seventh Day Adventist Roland Griswold wrote *By Hook & Crook*.[83]

In response to the American church growth trend, The Church Growth Book Club began offering two sections: "Global Books" and "American Books." Beginning with the March 1976 issue of the *Church Growth Bulletin*, readers could enroll in either book-of-the-month section, receiving books deemed valuable by Wagner for American church growth or by McGavran for global church growth.[84]

Response to the Church Growth Movement

Response was not always enthusiastic to the church growth ideas that surged through the American Church. Signaling future mainline response, former missionary J. B. A. Kessler, Jr., described the typical church growth writer as "a hard-driving North American businessman, armed with a sheaf of statistics, eager for new takeovers and determined to keep his concern within a category outlined by 'growth companies'."[85] Evangelicals such as *Eternity* magazine's Robert Coote expressed apprehension, urging readers:

> . . . not to be carried away by the enthusiasm of pragmatics at the expense of real dependence upon God. To become too absorbed in methods based on psychological and sociological insights is to invite superficial or even counterfeit spiritual results.[86]

Perhaps a more accurate picture of mainline and evangelical response to church growth can be gained by examining two influential publications: *The Christian Century* and *Christianity Today*. Over-the-years both journals have enjoyed wide-ranging popularity reaching across denominational lines. *The Christian Century* has reflected the social and theological agenda of mainline American Protestantism while *Christianity Today* has reflected and reported the twentieth-century evangelical resurgence.

Christian Century Reaction

The Christian Century's first mention of church growth appeared in its 4 September 1963 issue when it reported the proceedings of the Consultation on Church Growth held at Iberville, Canada. Its early reaction, although guarded, was positive:

> When enunciated as a quantitative touchstone, the principle of church growth may be assailed as theologically

> and psychologically unsound. But when interpreted as premise with theological, biblical and qualitative connotations. . . the principle of church growth is both a norm and a stimulus which should be taken seriously by the entire church.[87]

Typically, *The Christian Century* was more supportive of social causes than evangelism efforts. In 1973 over 130 denominations and religious organizations put aside doctrinal divisions to present the gospel to as many people as possible in a program called Key 73. Although *Christian Century* editors embraced Key 73, criticizing "liberals, ruder ecumenists and social activists" who rejected it, their comments also revealed mixed feelings toward evangelism:

> One can no longer accuse Key 73 of being antiecumenical; it has become ecumenical, on terms that differ hardly at all from classical Protestant ecumenical grounds once opposed by the older evangelicals . . . And we can find no reasons for a Christian elitism which welcomes an ever-smaller church, a thinner diaspora, a more straggly band of Pilgrims. Movements need bodies, and Key 73 hopes to pick up a few after a decade of setbacks.[88]

By the early 1970s mainline membership loses were becoming alarming with debates over the causes and remedies being played out in *The Christian Century*. In 1972 National Council of Churches executive Dean Kelly posed reasons for mainline decline in *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*.[89] He argued that successful churches made strict demands of both faith and practice on their members, thereby increasing loyalty. Mainline denominations, he maintained, were experiencing membership decline because of a weakening of that religious commitment which appeared to be a function of organizational growth and strength. Thus, according to Kelly, "social strength and leniency do not seem to go together."[90]

Kelly's thesis, "the function of religion is to provide ultimate meaning for people's lives," attracted both evangelical and mainline attention.[91] Church growth advocates invoked his thesis in their arguments and Kelly discussed his thesis in the first church growth film, *How Churches Grow*. In contrast, Sociologist Thomas

McFaul challenged Kelly's thesis, saying, "fluctuations in denominational membership [were] related to events in the larger American society and to the church's response to them."[92] He asserted that earlier membership gains had resulted from their leniency and not their strictness. When prophetic voices spoke in the 1960s, members left. In reply, Kelly charged McFaul with ignoring his thesis and offering "an easy solution, without ever confronting the main problem . . . that the mainline churches are not very effective religious organizations."[93]

Churches having highly visible growth tended to make mainliners ill at ease. One such church featured prominently in early church growth literature was televangelist Robert H. Schuller's Garden Grove Community Church. In 1975 Schuller hosted the First American Convocation on Church Growth which was attended by Wilfred Bockelman, American Lutheran Church communication research director. A colleague's comment had prodded Bockelman to attend: "We can't stand Schuller's theology; but he's growing and we're losing. We'd better take a look at him and find out why."[94] Impressed by Schuller, Bockelman wondered: "What kind of vacuum has developed in the mainline denominations that their members must go outside to find something they feel is lacking in their own church?" Still holding theological reservations about church growth, he asked, "How does the church address the social issues of the day?" He found the church staffer's reply disturbing: "We are a nonprophetic church. Our people witness on the job by telling others about Christ and the church and by helping heal the hurts of society and by tithing."[95] This raised a serious question for Bockelman: "Can one accept a definition of 'church' which assumes the local pastor places it foremost in his life, while for even the most dedicated deacon, elder, or trustee it has—with rare exceptions—third priority at best?"[96]

Several years later Congregational pastor Browne Barr also reluctantly attended an Institute for Successful Church Leadership held at Schuller's church. Reflecting on the proceedings, Barr realized that "Schuller's gift to today's church is to be found largely in his genius for winning a hearing from the unchurched. Regardless of our theology or our politics or our location, we can learn from him."[97] Such a positive assessment troubled *Christian*

Century associate editor Martin Marty. Should Schuller win praise simply because he was "successful at filling a void left by the mainline churches, to whom [his] success is telling something about human needs to be measured and met." He concluded:

> Up and down the streets of today . . . we meet need-meeters who out do churches that are inefficient, sometimes lazy, but most of all free. We don't need to be lethargic and let them off of the hook. But what about those who know about and carry the crosses that freedom brings? Should they change in order to 'pack them in?' I wonder.[98]

Despite mainline theological reservations, the Church Growth Movement offered hope to mainline churches concerned about membership losses. In 1979 Alfred C. Krass, co-editor of the periodical *The Other Side*, reviewed how mainline evangelism efforts had been influenced by the Church Growth Movement. Many mainline denominations had responded to grassroots' demands to reverse the membership decline by adding a new executive staffer who most often was inclined to use a church growth approach. Citing the trend of sending denominational staffers to IACG church growth seminars, Krass noted that church growth catchwords and theories subsequently appeared in the denominational literature "so poorly integrated into the total approach or so changed from what . . . Win Arn and Donald McGavran write about that one wonders why the terminology was even used."[99]

In 1977 associate editor Jean Caffey Lyles asked *Christian Century* readers, "should Methodists buy the 'church growth' package?" Church growth advocate George Hunter had recommended a church growth strategy to the United Methodist Council of Bishops as a means to reverse the membership decline. Reactions to the presentation by the bishops ranged from a desire to see their churches grow to misgivings about the "appropriateness" of church growth for a pluralistic mainline denomination. Some bishops were distressed that Hunter "seemed to equate evangelism with membership enlistment," and that he advocated "centering Methodist evangelistic efforts in the process of church growth as promoted by nondenominational Fuller Seminary."[100]

In the most critical *Christian Century* stance up to that time, Lyles concluded: "The UMC and other mainline Protestant bodies may find that trying to compete with burgeoning evangelical churches is not the best use of their energies in this era." Rather they should acknowledge that "small is beautiful" and concentrate their energies on nurturing their congregations toward a deeper commitment to serve "a hurting world."[101]

Christian Century contributor Peter Monkres, seizing the "small is beautiful" motif, noted how often "we assume that growth is good, and bigger is better."[102] He then concluded that since individuals are more important than institutions, "small is beautiful" and pastors should "build Christian community as if people mattered."[103]

This "smaller is better" mentality alarmed *Christian Century* editor at large William H. Willimon who countered: "that mainline churches stopped growing . . . *because we decided to stop growing* (emphasis his)." He continued, "we decided to get out of the business of making new disciples . . . our members [did not leave] in a huff because of our courageous social-action policies . . . we simply stopped making new members."[104]

By the end of the 1970s *Christian Century* writers were expressing stronger criticisms toward the Church Growth Movement. United Methodist pastor John Robert McFarland viewed church growth churches as threats because the statistical count was most important. He insisted that these "churches" used "the meat-grinder approach to evangelism," creating "members" by squeezing people through certain holes to make them fit. Those who did not fit into the grinder's holes were discarded. According to McFarland: "No one in the growth . . . church seems to care about the discards. So long as the church is growing it is successful, regardless of how many persons get ground into religious dog food in the process."[105]

Chicago pastor Ralph H. Elliot warned of the "dangers of the church growth movement," wondering if it were possible for mainliners to maintain their identity as the church and be a "successful" institution at the same time. Thus, he believed the Church Growth Movement "to be one of the worst distortions of the church that American ingenuity, born of an outworn capitalist mentality ('if it succeeds, it is right'), could possibly de-

vise."[106]

If caution, bitter opposition, and controversy described *The Christian Century*'s response to the Church Growth Movement, then support, dialogue, and receptivity described *Christianity Today*'s response. *Christianity Today* provided the Church Growth Movement with a major platform to address evangelicals by featuring many articles about the movement.

Early Christianity Today Support

Donald McGavran's views on missions were well received by *Christianity Today* readers. Although his earliest articles dealt exclusively with world missions, they helped prepare evangelicals for later acceptance of church growth American style.

The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement received a tremendous boost when SWM faculty responded to *Christianity Today* editor Harold Lindsell's request to write a series of articles enunciating church growth principles that would be used in conjunction with Key 73.[107] These articles were the first exposure many readers to American church growth. McGavran introduced readers to the newly Americanized version of church growth, pointing out that "the acid test of evangelism is never numbers of decisions but growth of churches."[108] Charles Kraft argued that styles of evangelism must vary because America was not a "cultural monolith" and offered that Key 73's goal might be: "*that every group may hear and respond to the gospel message in a culturally appropriate way* (emphasis his)."[109] Alan Tippett rejected the notion of "the resistant secular city" and advised that America was a very religious nation, even if many people participated in religious practices other that Christianity. He noted that "the problem of Key 73 is to discover why these people rejected the Church when religiously hungry."[110] Finding inadequate Key 73's assumption that existing congregations are ends and not means, Ralph Winter argued that new congregations were needed since most church growth came "through new congregations, not enlarged ones."[111] Arthur F. Glasser called for action, noting that "nothing reforms a church more quickly than for its members to break with their introversion, confess their sins, pray . . . for mercy and grace, and then reach out with the Gospel to their unsaved neighbors."[112] Wag-

ner faulted the *Key 73 Congregational Resource Book* for lacking the "one ingredient that . . . strategists in evangelism and mission [were] recognizing as essential to effective evangelism . . . diagnostic research."[113]

Many other *Christianity Today* articles featuring church-growth's point of view followed throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. In 1976 Wagner asked "How 'Christian' Is America?", asserting that America was now a "mission field" and that the task of evangelization was yet unfinished. He predicted that "New and growing forces for evangelism plus unprecedented openness to the message bid fair to make this last quarter of the century a very exciting time to be an evangelical and an evangelistic Christian."[114]

In "Aiming at Church Growth in the Eighties," Wagner foresaw a bright future for the Church Growth Movement with American churches having "unprecedented opportunities for growth."[115] He predicted that during the 1980s church growth would see: (1) mainline denominations reassess their priorities and establish evangelism and church planting as priorities, (2) evangelical denominations continue to grow following the lead of Pentecostals, (3) many local churches turn their decline around and start growing because they were willing to pay the price, and (4) see a new and exciting spirit of evangelism in churches.[116]

However, not all *Christianity Today* readers shared Wagner's optimism. Many evangelicals struggled over church growth's theology and methodology. Peninsula Bible Church pastor Ray Stedman expressed concern about the "validity of making numerical growth a kind of supreme measure of whether a church is succeeding or not." He affirmed that the church should demonstrate the quality of reconciliation"—one that mixes all castes, clans, creeds and races."[117]

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School world mission professor Arthur Johnson, a friendly Church Growth Movement critic, charged that "church growth principles [stressed] quantity over quality" and encouraged "reliance on human effort rather than the work of the Holy Spirit." He also expressed concern that church growth principles "implicitly [neglected] missionary work among people who are harder to reach" and encouraged "theological dilution by urging adaptations of the Gospel to ap-

peal to 'natural' cultural differences."[118]

While most *Christianity Today* reviews of church growth books were favorable, one reviewer, James Patterson, warned that Wagner's *Look Out! The Pentecostals Are Coming* read "like a propaganda piece."[119] Presbyterian pastor Richard Allen Bodey found *Your Church Can Grow* "a disturbing book—disturbing for its truth, no less disturbing for its fallacies." Bodey remonstrated:

> One can scarcely dispute Wagner's thesis that God wants churches to grow. And many of us in static or dying congregations are guilty, as he charges, of taking refuge in 'remnant theology.' But his idealization of the super-church lacks both scriptural sanction and empirical validity. A five-thousand-member congregation may feed a pastor's ego and project an image of success, but comparative studies . . . suggest that ten congregations of five hundred members each are apt to generate greater spiritual growth among the members.[120]

In the same review Bodey critiqued Schuller's book, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities*, deploring Sculler's formula for success as "adventuresome faith" combined "with professional salesmanship" and "more than a pinch of showmanship . . . in ministering to clearly identified human needs and hurts."[121] Schuller's pragmatism, that churches must "grow or perish," disturbed Bodey who explained: "For Schuller, the ultimate test of methods and programs seems to be their popular appeal."[122]

In an era of high profile and aggressive churches not all, even evangelical, were growing. The new-found interest in church growth prompted Nazarene pastor Grant Swank to write the article "No-Growth Guilt—What to Do When Your Cathedral Isn't Crystal." He reminded readers that "not every situation is going to produce a swelling congregation . . . There are many reasons why—some legitimate, some not." Swank offered three suggestions that might help these pastors: (1) an opportunity to be heard, (2) practical help instead of a quick fix, and (3) appreciation for the work of small-church pastors in difficult situations.[123]

Evangelical opposition to church growth differed in kind from that found in *The Christian Century*. While never as intense

and bitter, *Christianity Today* contributors struggled over "what" church growth did to the nature of the church. Although there were evangelical critics of church growth, *Christianity Today* generally affirmed the American Church Growth Movement. When Christianity Today, Inc. launched *Leadership* in 1980 as "a practical journal for church leaders," it maintained a close relationship with the Church Growth Movement. Notably, its editorial advisory board included several leaders closely tied to the Church Growth Movement including Win C. Arn, Robert H. Schuller, and C. Peter Wagner.[124] Not surprisingly, one early issue explored the relationship between "success and church growth."[125] This offers compelling evidence of broad acceptance of church growth by evangelicals.

Acceptance of the Church Growth Movement

Widespread acceptance of the Church Growth Movement came almost two decades after McGavran and Wagner introduced church growth to a group of American pastors in 1972. According to *Christianity Today*, following a "wave of church growth bashing in the seventies, many of the movement's ideas had become virtual givens in the then-current discussions of church vitality."[126] Church growth tools like demographic charts and membership projection graphs were prevalent in most evangelical churches and outright critics were hard to find by the 1990s. According to author Ken Sidey: "The change in attitudes [reflected] both the recognition by church leaders of the movement's real contributions, and the refinement of church growth ideas by its own practitioners."[127]

Mainline acceptance of the American Church Growth Movement was substantial by the early 1990s. Prompted by huge membership losses, the mainline denominations were forced to take a second look at church growth and were using church growth concepts although they often shunned the movement's terminology. In his consulting work with mainline churches, Herb Miller, executive director of the National Evangelistic Association, found that "almost 25 percent of the pastors were positive about church growth ideas, about 50 percent were interested, and the remaining 25 percent 'anti church growth'." Earlier surveys had revealed that only 5 percent were favorable and 20 percent interested.[128] Miller cited three factors motivating main-

line acceptance of church growth ideas: (1) the pervasiveness of church growth literature; (2) the endorsement of the movement by mainline churchmen, especially Methodist church expert Lyle Schaller; and (3) the decline of the denominations. Accordingly, the continual decline created a financial desperation that had a "sobering and painful effect" at the top of the denomination.[129]

Summary

The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement began when Donald McGavran and Peter Wagner taught such a class to eighteen students. Over the next decade, under McGavran's guidance, Wagner, Win Arn, and church growth theoreticians and practitioners adopted, adapted, and applied church growth ideas to the North American milieu. The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement redefined the American religious landscape, especially how the Church practiced evangelism. Conversely, the American religious environment affected the Church Growth Movement. Perhaps the best example of this dynamic was the movement's Pentecostalization. Consequently, church growth introduced many congregations to spiritual gifts and the dynamics of signs and wonders. By the early 1980s the spiritual dynamics of church growth were eclipsing the earlier dominance of the social science orientation of church growth.

Donald McGavran died in 1990 as the recognized patriarch of the Church Growth Movement. In 1984, Peter Wagner was installed as the first holder of the Donald A. McGavran Chair of Church Growth in the Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission and Institute for Church Growth. He now lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado, having moved on to establish the Wagner Leadership Institute. While his church growth writings remain influential, Wagner's interests have turned more and more to Pentecostal themes. Win Arn continued to apply church growth principles in a ministry to senior citizens until his retirement in the late 1990s.

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