

MY PILGRIMAGE IN THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT: EMPOWERMENT TO LEAD PEOPLE TO JESUS

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Abstract

As a child, Kent Hunter was a nominal Christian with faithful parents. During surgery for a football injury, God changed Kent from mediocrity to missionary. Kent's journey through college and seminary provided theology, but little strategy. In search of mission training, he earned a Ph.D. in Theology. It would become the biblical foundation for his future. Kent's first ministry was to pastor a dying, inner-city, Anglo church surrounded by unchurched African Americans. Humbled and discouraged by failure to effectively reach out, he enrolled in Fuller Seminary. God used that experience to transform his life, his church, and many others on six continents.

My pilgrimage in church growth began in my senior year of high school, long before I knew about the Church Growth Movement. My journey was launched on a football field in Plymouth, Michigan—my high school's rival. I was clipped from behind on a kickoff. My opponent landed a fifteen-yard penalty, and I received torn cartilage and ligaments in my knee. In November, I was in the hospital for extensive knee surgery.

Awakening from the surgery, I discovered a cast from my hip to my ankle. My hospital room was shared with three other young men, each with different ailments. My pastor Vic Halboth visited me. I felt embarrassed—he actually prayed in front of those guys. My dad brought me my Bible, which,

honestly, had not been read much. Then an event occurred that changed my life forever.

It was 3:00 a.m., and I was sound asleep, exhausted from major surgery. I was awakened by the gasps of the young man in the bed only ten feet away. He had some unusual lung ailment, and his lungs had suddenly collapsed. He began to suffocate from within, so I pressed my call button. The next three minutes seemed like hours. The nurses finally arrived and brought him back to life within seconds of his death. As I watched all of this unfold, I experienced a spiritual awakening—even at my age, people die. I knew I was not ready. In that moment, God moved me from a “church attender” into a personal relationship with the living Jesus Christ. Simultaneously, God gave me the mission to reach the lost.

Throughout my high school years, I had noticed the passion my dad had for sharing the Gospel. I did not quite get it because I had not quite “gotten it.” My dad had asthma and was sick almost all the time. He worked very hard at his job at National Cash Register, where he fixed machines and began to work in the very early days of the computer. In spite of his health, my dad was up and ready to get the rest of us to church every Sunday. He always picked the front row under the pulpit, perhaps to keep me awake, since most Saturday nights I partied quite late. I also noticed that when a new Bible came out, called *Good News for Modern Man*, he bought copies of the New Testament. He came home with a shopping bag full of them, a bargain at twenty-five cents each. I asked him what he was going to do with them, and he said, “I’m going to distribute them to my fellow workers at the shop.” At the time, I had no idea the influence my dad and pastor would have on me, planting seeds on ground that was not yet soft.

When I was released from the hospital, I wanted to explore ministry. I met with Pastor Vic. This is when I discovered he was an outstanding person. He would become a significant influence in my life. I asked, “How do you know you are called to be a pastor?” “How do you get from here to there?” Pastor Vic explained the only route he knew—go to one of our denomination’s colleges and then to the seminary. He said, “As you study for ministry, you’ll know if you are called.” As a result, I began to pursue this new direction.

SCHOOL BEGINS

The journey to ministry began with a disappointing experience. My pastor took me to Ann Arbor, Michigan, the closest Lutheran college. When we visited the Dean of Students, he looked at my high school transcript. In front of me, he said to Pastor Vic, “This man is not ministerial material.” My first hurdle—rejected!

Pastor Vic had told me about how desperately our denomination needed pastors. Many were retiring, and he said that there were “500 vacant pulpits,

and no one to fill them.” There I sat, with a calling in my heart and a school that turned me down.

My only option was to attend Schoolcraft Community College in Livonia, Michigan. This was also the college choice of my high school girlfriend. However, now I was really focused to earn good grades, get into a Christian school, and become a pastor. Meanwhile, my girlfriend Gloria had a different focus—marriage, a second big hurdle. I knew that in those days, my denomination (The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod) would not allow men studying for the ministry to be married until they had graduated from college and transferred to seminary. That was four years. This was a big faith decision; if God wanted us to be married, she would wait. I spent most of my time at the community college hiding from my girlfriend among the stacks of books in the library. Since I had poor study habits, it was a huge challenge to get through that first semester. (Gloria married someone else a year later.)

After a semester, the college in Ann Arbor accepted me on probation. My grades at the community college were the best I had ever achieved. I had lofty ideas about the spiritual and commitment level of students at a Christian school. Then I met my roommate Dennis. When I asked why there was an empty bed in his room, he told me his previous roommate had been shipped to a mental institution! He asked me if I smoked, and I said no. He encouraged me to start, and he told me where he kept his cigarettes. He also indicated that on Thursday nights, I would have to leave the room between 8 and 10 because that was when his girlfriend crawled in the window, and they had sex. That was a shock!

My second shock was the curriculum. There were courses in Greek and Latin. “Latin,” I wondered. “Why would we study a dead language?” Then I had to take German. That is when I first realized Lutherans were somewhat stuck in their historic traditionalism. One day, I was told by my Greek professor, “Since you struggle with Greek, you will never make it through a year of Hebrew.” I thought, “What have I gotten into?” Nevertheless, I was not deterred. Whatever the hurdles, I was a man on a mission.

My first two years in junior college were a struggle. In high school, I had no plan for my life except to party, chase girls, and play football. I enjoyed the classes on Bible and theology but did not see much use for all the general courses required for a bachelor’s degree. I had a physiology professor who belittled students in front of everyone else, and I realized that even professors at a Christian college could be dysfunctional human beings. When I went to chapel, I quickly realized that it was “old school” and liturgical. The chapel was beautiful, the organ sounded exceptional, and the messages were outstanding. However, the worship style was closer to the sixteenth century. As a mission-minded person, I already began to question how one could communicate to a culture of unchurched people by using methods that communicate that God is old and out of date, and for that matter, German. For therapy, I played the piano in a low-level band with Yohan Vandertol, a

cool guy from the Netherlands. We had a lot of fun and banged out Beatles' songs.

Since the community college was on the semester system, and some of my courses did not transfer, I was behind the rest of my class. I spent the next three summers attending summer school and working two jobs. As one of my summer jobs, I started a tree removal company with three workers. I made good money and taught myself to climb and "top trees." God miraculously protected me from killing myself. However, I learned to lead my little company. I also worked the night shift at a Ford Motor Company parts depot.

After two years, I went on to the Senior College in Fort Wayne, Indiana. This school (which no longer exists) proved to be a somewhat strange community of all men, all studying to get into a Lutheran seminary. Few of the courses focused directly on ministry. I had to do something to keep myself focused on God's mission.

CHRIST FOR YOUTH TODAY

With eagerness to reach people for Jesus Christ, I started a nonprofit ministry called Christ for Youth Today. The mission was outreach to youth in the Fort Wayne area. In reflection, this allowed me to **do** ministry. It also continued to hone my leadership and organizational skills. About forty students at this Senior College participated in one way or another. We provided rallies, worked with church youth groups, and equipped young Christians for outreach. Long before I knew about "Church Growth," the movement was in my blood.

Christ for Youth Today occupied more of my time than my studies. The only way I made it through was by reaching people for Jesus. My grades were not the best, but I made it. I attended summer school and continued to work at Ford Motor Company and run the tree company. At the beginning of my last year of college, I met my future life partner Janet, while working with a youth group at Trinity Suburban Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne. After graduation, we were married. We left for St. Louis the next day.

SEMINARY

As I began seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, I realized that the student body was not well known for a passion for outreach. I was still a bit of an "odd-ball." However, the seminary knew I was coming and asked if I would represent the school at the US Congress on Evangelism in Minneapolis, led by Billy Graham and a well-known Lutheran named Oswald Hoffmann. The day after we arrived at our new apartment in St. Louis, I left my new wife and traveled to Minneapolis for the ten-day conference. I arrived back just in time for my first day of seminary classes. Janet, a Lutheran teacher, had started teaching at a local Christian school.

The seminary courses, though somewhat academic, were more focused on ministry. The classes were heavily concentrated on theology, which I loved! I was intrigued with the courses that focused on how to study the Scripture and to think systematically. Many of the rest of the classes were on church history and the Reformation.

Two elements of seminary were my greatest struggle. One was the “Amish” approach to the delivery of great theology. It was like the worship styles, music, buildings, and approaches were frozen in time with Martin Luther. This was a significant disconnect. The more I learned about Luther, the more I felt that this stylistic approach was one of the issues Luther had with the Catholics. In the 1600s, Luther and other reformers liberated Christians from corrupt theology and out-of-date worship styles. I discovered that much of the Lutheran theology—which I loved—was paralyzed in sixteenth century German culture! I appreciated Reformation Theology but struggled with the irrelevant methods. As a mission-minded person who loves the apostle Paul (“I will become all things to all people so that by any means some might be saved,” 1 Corinthians 9:22), I sensed a major confusion between good theology and outworn methods. It was frustrating. I also struggled because it seemed that few were passionate about reaching the lost. In my perception, most of our courses and the attitudes of our professors were on preserving and maintaining, rather than reaching out to the lost. I had to do more.

CHRIST FOR YOUTH TODAY ST. LOUIS

It was not long before I incorporated Christ for Youth Today in the state of Missouri. In time, over fifty seminary students volunteered in one way or another. The President of the seminary, Dr. John Tietjen, and the Development Director, Dr. Bob Grunow, were key support partners and encouragers for me. Bob Grunow introduced me to an amazing Christian couple, Bob and Nonie Whittle, who lived in St. Louis. They became spiritual parents to me and great encouragers. Oswald Hoffmann was the voice of The Lutheran Hour worldwide radio program. He and Leroy Biesenthal, the denomination’s Executive for Evangelism, were very encouraging. God provided these great mentors to get me through my first year of seminary and to provide opportunities for my enthusiasm to reach out with the Gospel.

Christ for Youth Today grew and reached many young people in the St. Louis area. We developed an outreach coffee house at Washington University and a twenty-four-hour hotline for teenagers facing challenges called Youth Line, with ads on television. I wrote and provided a pilot television show (like Sesame Street), using people dressed up as animals (including my wife as a bear) called “God’s Back Porch.” We developed our own set, and a local musician named Jim Flachsbart provided an original score for the theme song. Children from around the St. Louis area auditioned for the project. We recorded the show as a “pilot.” I used it as a class project. Our

greatest attempt through Christ for Youth Today was to rent Kiel Auditorium and hire a contemporary Christian band from California. For a place that seats thousands, we attracted a few hundred. (Marketing has always been my shortcoming!) I learned a big dose of humility and a good lesson—“Better to have tried and failed, than to never have tried at all.” (My shortened version of Theodore Roosevelt’s address at Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910.) God was using all of this (challenge and joy, practiced experience, and failure) to prepare me for the Church Growth Movement. However, the Lord’s timing was not yet. A few more foundational blocks were still needed.

SEMINARY OVERSEAS

In the summer between my first and second year of seminary, Janet and I began to talk and pray about the experience of living in another country. I would attend a seminary, and she would teach school. We took a close look at Nigeria, England, and Australia. We decided on the “land down under.” Since Australia is seasonally opposite of the Northern Hemisphere, school does not start there until the beginning of February. Therefore, I attended my first quarter of my second year of seminary in St. Louis. After Thanksgiving, we moved out of our apartment and stored everything at my parents’ house in Northville, Michigan. We went to work through the month of December cutting firewood and selling it to raise money. The day after Christmas, we left for Adelaide, South Australia.

We spent three weeks traveling to Australia. We flew from Detroit to Los Angeles, and then to Tahiti where we camped in the jungle and hitchhiked around the island. Then we flew to Fiji, where we spent a week hitchhiking around the main island. We met an Asian Indian family that invited us to stay with them. Then we flew to Sydney and took the train to Adelaide. We arrived in Adelaide, South Australia, with twenty dollars, no place to live, no jobs, and no friends or relatives nearby.

AUSTRALIA

The Lutheran Seminary in Australia welcomed us graciously, and they allowed me to attend classes at no cost. We found a flat to rent. Janet got a job teaching in a public school, and I lined up a job at the largest Lutheran church in Australia, Bethlehem, Flinders Street, Adelaide.

While I attended seminary, I enjoyed serving under the Senior Pastor Gary Fisher at Bethlehem. Bethlehem had two worship services each Sunday, one in the morning and one in the evening. With different services, I had the opportunity to preach every week. This was a great experience.

I enjoyed the seminary in Australia. I got used to listening to lectures with the Australian accent and enjoyed having morning and afternoon tea with my classmates. I even played a little cricket with my fellow seminarians.

The school year, which began in February, ended in November. I worked for a month at the Adelaide Post Office, sorting Christmas mail. After Christmas, we took the money I earned, bought a VW with 100,000 miles on it, and traveled a thousand miles on the dirt road to the center of the Australian Outback, Alice Springs. We stayed at the Lutheran Aboriginal Mission in Hermannsburg, Australia. We then traveled east a thousand miles by dirt road to Queensland, where we snorkeled on the Great Barrier Reef. We then traveled south to Sydney.

Using the money Janet had earned teaching, we boarded a British ship, the *Oransay*, and sailed home by way of Darwin, Singapore, Hong Kong, Kobe and Yokohama, Japan, Honolulu, and Vancouver, Canada. All this exposure gave us a global worldview. We became world Christians. Our year abroad was yet another building block to prepare us for the Church Growth Movement... and a career beyond.

INTERNSHIP IN THE U.S.

The third year of seminary in the Lutheran system is a year of internship. My internship was at Grace Lutheran Church in Winter Haven, Florida, pastored by Dr. August Bernthal, who was my supervisor. He was also the District President of Lutheran churches in Florida and Georgia, which meant he traveled frequently. I was blessed with more good experience. He deployed me for pulpit supply all over Florida, which helped me to grow and practice my evangelistic passion. I was interested in church growth more than ever. However, still I did not know a movement existed.

BACK TO ST. LOUIS

During my final year of seminary, I discovered (1) I had learned a lot of great theology, (2) I endured a fair amount of Lutheran history and impractical information (I perceive as not being very useful), and (3) I did not learn much that was useful to reach lost people for Jesus Christ. My conclusion was that I must pursue more education. With some persistence, I was accepted into the three-year program for doctoral studies and began to take postgraduate classes during my final M.Div. year. My classmates graduated to become pastors. I stayed to learn what was still missing.

In the next two years, I studied year round and completed the three-year curriculum in two years, earning a PhD in Theology. Just before the acceptance of my dissertation, the seminary exploded. Many professors left and formed a "seminary in exile," or "Seminex." This was another chapter in the somewhat dysfunctional family called the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. My doctoral advisor Dr. Richard Caemmerer went with Seminex. The graduate school I was attending lost accreditation and temporarily shut down. The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, a seminary of the

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, was allowed to take “under their wings” those of us who were caught in the crossfire. They issued my PhD in Theology, so it would be accredited. I loved my PhD program and learned how to process theology at an extraordinary level. However, I still had not learned (to my satisfaction) the outreach and mission that I desired.

I did not think my hunger for church growth (a term I did not even know yet) could get any greater. Having taken every form of education I knew, I then followed the only path remaining (so I thought)—to tell the denomination that I was ready to be placed as a pastor in a church. I was placed as the senior and only pastor at Our Saviour Lutheran Church in Detroit, Michigan. It was unusual, but I would come to learn that God had a plan for my evangelistic passion! However, it would come during a desert time.

OUR SAVIOUR LUTHERAN CHURCH

An inner city church on the near east side of Detroit, Our Saviour had declined by 67 percent over the previous decade. My first official act as an ordained pastor was to sign the letters of transfer from 250 families who lived in the suburbs and used the vacancy before my arrival as an opportunity to find a church closer to home.

Church attendance at Our Saviour was about 1,200, mostly older, and all Anglos. This seemed interesting to me because the church was located in a neighborhood of mostly young African-American families with young children. Most of the families in the community were functionally unchurched. I saw this as a great opportunity for evangelistic outreach! I could call it “church growth,” except I had still not *ever* heard the terminology!

With my passion to reach the lost, it did not take long before I organized a small group of willing members, training them in *Evangelism Explosion*, a program developed by D. James Kennedy. Since the church never had a visit from one of our black neighbors (not even one!), we could not call on people who were first-time guests at the church. Consequently, our visits were “cold calls.” People were friendly, and a few actually received Christ. Yet, no matter how hard we tried, our all-white crowd and massive gothic architecture just seemed too intimidating. We could not get any black people from our neighborhood to come to church!

A SEARCH FOR HELP

In frustration, I called my judicatory office. My call for help was humble, “I have a passion to reach the lost. I have an M.Div. and a PhD in Theology, and I know nothing about reaching cross-culturally. Nothing we do works. I can’t believe ... I won’t believe ... God doesn’t want these people reached for Christ, and I refuse to accept that our theology is the roadblock. It has to be the style or the methods we’re using. Can you tell me of another Lutheran

church in Detroit that has been effectively reaching African-Americans, so I can visit and learn?” The reply was astonishing, “We don’t do well with that. We’ve already closed twenty-six churches in Detroit, and they’re all similar to your situation.”

Really? Really? I could not believe the defeated attitude. I thought, “That guy would never make it into the Hebrews 11 Hall of Fame—people of great faith in our God who does what we often consider impossible!”

I called the Mission Department of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in St. Louis, Missouri. Again, I asked, “Tell me about where it’s working—anywhere in the U.S.—I’ll go and learn what I don’t know. There has to be a strategy.” The reply was the same, “We don’t have a working model that we are aware of.”

“Are you kidding me?” I responded. “Then tell me about a church of any denomination, anywhere.” The answer was myopic, I thought. He said, “Oh, we don’t talk to others.”

I felt like a truck of discouragement had hit me. I entered into what I call “my desert time.” Sometimes, as in Scripture, God still does some of His best work in the desert! Finally, God had me ready... really ready, for the Church Growth Movement.

MY INTRODUCTION TO FULLER SEMINARY

One day, as I was crying out to God, I received some “junk mail” from a place called Fuller Seminary. I had never heard of it. What caught my attention was the description as one of the largest mission schools in the world. I thought, “That’s what I’m facing. I’m a missionary on a mission field, here in this neighborhood.” Years later, I would realize that every pastor, every Christian is a missionary on a mission field—and recognize a major deficiency of my (and many) ministry training approaches.

The brochure said Fuller offered a D.Min. for busy pastors. Courses were two weeks at a time, so ministers missed only one Sunday in the pulpit. I thought, “Maybe they can give me some insight.” I spoke with my wife, who replied, “You’ve been in school our whole married life. Will this go on forever?” I shared my frustration about our lack of effective outreach and suggested that perhaps I could take one course, then we could reevaluate. Janet agreed. The church board gave me the time off, but I would have to pay all the travel, lodging, and tuition myself. I enthusiastically responded, “Deal!” My first two weeks came a few months later.

Attending a non-Lutheran school was a first for me. Honestly, it was a little frightening. It quickly became one of my most refreshing experiences! I took my next steps—a big leap—as a world Christian, and I have never looked back. In addition, I have never left my denominational family, and I have grown in my appreciation for my extensive training in theology even more.

Since finances were tight, I stayed at the Pasadena YMCA. The first twenty-four hours were the most strenuous culture shock I had ever experienced! God was preparing me as a world traveler who is now comfortable in any culture.

My first visit to Fuller was invigorating in every way. One day at lunch, a Presbyterian pastor and I were comparing notes, looking at which courses we would each take next. He said, "Have you done Church Growth with Peter Wagner?" I said, "No, but it sounds exactly what, in my situation, I need." That turned out to be the greatest understatement of my life!

THE WAGNER EXPERIENCE

By the time I read the prescribed material for Wagner's class, I had already begun the road to becoming a missionary—one incurably committed to the growth of the kingdom. I was literally on fire! The first day of class began the journey that would redefine my life and shape me in a career I could have never predicted. God used Peter Wagner to nourish what was flowing in my veins from the day I was called into ministry in that hospital bed in Detroit. I experienced one leap forward—a transformation—in my passion to reach the lost for Jesus Christ.

In Church Growth I, I intuitively did something I had never done before—I took notes so furiously my wrist ached. Each night, locked in my little room at the YMCA, I typed up the notes, every word I could capture. I knew I had found what I had been looking for in the previous four years of college, four years of seminary, and two years of postgraduate school—ten years!

After Church Growth I, I took Church Growth II. Later, after graduating in the D.Min. program, I audited Church Growth II again, because John Wimber was now on the teaching staff. When Fuller asked if our church in Detroit would host Church Growth I for pastors in the region, I traded the money they would pay me for the opportunity for our whole staff, (which had grown to fourteen) to attend and audit the course. I enthusiastically joined in the formation of the North American Society for Church Growth. Dr. McGavran took a liking to me, for reasons I will never understand this side of heaven. He challenged me to take over the publishing of the *Church Growth Bulletin*, which later became known as *Global Church Growth*, and then, at a later date, as *Strategies for Today's Leader*.

CHURCH GROWTH AT OUR SAVIOUR CHURCH

How did this affect my church? By God's grace, somehow I knew that without forcing it, I would begin gently developing a church growth culture among the people of my church. I did not use all the terminology, but I began teaching the great principles. With my background in theology, I

carefully integrated the biblical tone of missions. My people began to grow, and many experienced the most exhilarating time of their entire lives as Christians.

Meanwhile, my denomination was experiencing a season of openness and excitement for the Great Commission. I later discovered that as I was learning church growth, the mission and evangelism executives of all the U.S. Districts of our Lutheran church were participating in a church growth workshop Wagner taught specifically for them. I found myself in the middle of the healthiest season I have experienced in my lifetime in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

BREAKTHROUGH AT OUR SAVIOUR LUTHERAN CHURCH

Our strategy at Our Saviour Lutheran Church greatly changed. Instead of pushing a gospel presentation and inviting strangers to attend church, we began to approach our community as missionaries. I had learned about “felt needs” (not rocket science, but a totally new concept to me). Instead of telling our neighbors about us and God, we began to ask them what people in the neighborhood needed. In about everyone we had met, the Holy Spirit had divinely placed one issue, “We need better education for our children.” The felt need for most of these young families was that their children would some day go to college. However, the local grade school was not providing the education to prepare them for high school and college. I met with the principal at that grade school. He said they were overcrowded, with up to forty-five children per classroom. “Our teachers can’t teach. With that many kids, we babysit.” He told us, if we would provide a grade school in the neighborhood, it would be the best thing for his school. He added, “The Detroit Public School System is broken. They talk about busing—not for racial equality, but to take the pressure off our school. But black mothers and fathers don’t want their kids traveling all over Detroit on a bus any more than white parents do.”

Our building at church was built in the 1950s for one of the largest Sunday schools in the denomination at that time. To bring it up to code for a grade school would take about \$150,000. We had two weeks to raise the money. We reached the goal in ten days, and a reporter wrote an article that appeared in *The Detroit News*. This became a symbol of what can happen when God develops a church growth, mission-minded culture. We hired nine teachers, not knowing if anyone would enroll their children. God’s people, with a Great Commission worldview, take risks and trust God’s direction. They make decisions based on what they believe is God’s will, not “the way we’ve always done it” or “we can’t afford it.” They believe at a new level, “God pays for what He orders.”

On the first day of school in early September, the enrollment was 250 children in kindergarten and first through eighth grades—full capacity!

This all-white church launched a school that was 99 percent black. We began to bridge the culture of our neighborhood!

The teachers were all trained to cultivate relationships with the parents and with an evangelistic commitment. Soon there were baptism requests. Those of us on the ministry staff realized that a baptism event could be an extended family opportunity, if nurtured properly. Many times, we baptized over ten people from the same extended family, all at once. Within months, African-Americans connected with the school were attending church, becoming ushers, Sunday school teachers, and, in a short time, leaders at every level.

Frank Grepke, the “street evangelist” on staff, discovered some strongly ethnic blacks who simply did not feel comfortable attending “a honkie church,” typical slang for that era in Detroit. As a result, we began house churches. The Church Growth Movement would call it “bridging growth.” When we found a receptive person who did not feel comfortable to come to us, we asked if we could come to them. We asked if they would open their home and invite their friends and relatives. Our staff leaders (all white, except our amazing black principal Tony Ramsey) would preach and teach in packed-out living rooms. In time, we would teach about baptism. We would ask, “Okay, where do you want to do it? Your place or the church?” They would make a group decision. It would tell us if the house church would continue, or simply be a stepping-stone—a transition—to the established church. After baptism emphasis, we focused on relational discipling. When our African-American leaders in the church started discipling other African-Americans, the movement greatly expanded.

The role of my church growth training in all of this was central, yet it was not just my training. It was the training of our staff and much of our congregation. It changed the culture of our church—from fear, avoidance, and maintenance, to mission and discipleship. So many of the members, life-long Lutherans in their sixties and seventies, said it was the most exciting chapter of their Christian history.

DENOMINATIONAL ATTENTION

While we did not focus much on communication outside of our church, it was not long before the denominational annual reports revealed the large number of baptisms and the reversal from dramatic decline to amazing growth in the church membership. Key leaders from the evangelism and mission areas of the denomination began investigating. Since many had experienced the great teaching of Peter Wagner, they saw tangible evidence of church growth in a challenging situation.

The denominational headquarters in St. Louis asked me to write a small booklet, *Lutheran School: Opportunity for Mission*, which sparked a paradigm shift for many churches with schools. I began writing other books

and teaching, as the invitations came pouring in. Under the great leadership of Dave Anderson, I began speaking at conferences called “Created to Praise,” located all over the United States. My friend Arlen Salte invited me to speak for his annual conference, “Breakforth Canada.” I became a regular speaker for Walt Kallestad at his leadership conferences hosted by Community of Joy in Phoenix, Arizona. Soon I was overwhelmed. My friend Alan Barber, an attorney in our church (who later became a Lutheran pastor), advised me to start a nonprofit ministry so I could develop staff and expand. This was the birth of what today is called Church Doctor Ministries (www.churchdoctor.org).

As the church grew, I groomed my assistant to take over. As my activities increased, Pastor Warren Arndt of Faith Lutheran Church in Troy, Michigan, asked me to consult his congregation. No one had ever called me a “consultant” before, so I checked the dictionary to make sure I understood the assignment. Soon I was consulting other churches and adding part-time staff to Church Doctor Ministries.

TRANSITION TO WRITE

During this time, I left Our Saviour and took a self-imposed time off with my wife Janet. We moved to a cabin in Northern Michigan. I felt a strong calling to write. I had so many ideas and so much excitement moving around in my brain. I wrote, and Janet typed and edited my manuscripts. During our eighteen months away, I wrote six books. We had no income, heated the cabin with firewood, and ate fish from the lake, squirrel and venison from the woods, and vegetables from our garden.

During this time, I traveled only occasionally. Janet and I were able to attend a conference led by one of my heroes Lyle Schaller. In one short conversation, he told me (1) he had read one of my books (I was shocked; I had read about thirty-five of his), (2) he asked me to write a book in a series he was editing for Abingdon Press, *The Creative Leadership Series*, and (3) he offered to train me to be a consultant, on the job, at no cost, providing all the tools he used. I wrote *Your Church Has Personality: Find Your Focus/Maximize Your Mission*, edited by Lyle Schaller. I trained to be a consultant with Lyle at a church in the San Diego area.

SMALL CHURCH, DIFFERENT CULTURE

When my six books were complete, I reentered the Lutheran system and sought a small church that wanted a part-time pastor, a situation that would allow me to travel about half time and build Church Doctor Ministries. I went to Zion Lutheran Church, Corunna, Indiana. Our small Church Doctor Ministries staff, Neil and Joyce Bachman and Geraldine Dettmann, moved to Indiana from Detroit. The move to Zion, a little white-framed

building on a tar road in northern Indiana, really confused some critics who claim that church growth people are focused on the “numbers game.” I went from the very large urban church to a very small rural church! Some of my friends in ministry even privately asked me what mistake I had made to be stuck in a small church. I told them I was not “being punished” and had done nothing wrong. It was my plan to grow the church to where they could afford a full-time pastor and, at the same time, grow Church Doctor Ministries to where it would have greater impact.

When I left Detroit, I led a staff of twenty-seven. When I was installed at Zion, there were about twenty-seven in church, including my wife and her parents. I suffered, again, from culture shock! Not only was I in an environment where everything was small (no office, no secretary, no staff, but many cornfields), I had never before lived in a rural setting. This is where I wrote one of my most groundbreaking books, *The Lord’s Harvest and the Rural Church: A New Look at Ministry in the Agri-Culture*. Beacon Hill Press published it with the encouragement of my friend Bill Sullivan.

The five years at Zion were a delight. I slowly and gently developed a church growth culture among the people. The church began to grow. In the five years, we added a second worship service, built on space to accommodate a growing Sunday school for both children and adults, started a preschool, and launched a church plant in a neighboring town. (The town did not grow as projected, and the church plant failed.) Many of the people to this day say that being a part of a Great Commission church for those years was the most exciting time of their lives. This is what church growth thinking does!

CHURCH DOCTOR MINISTRIES GROWS

Meanwhile, Church Doctor Ministries really expanded, both nationally and internationally. Ellis Rottman, the Evangelism Executive of the Missouri District of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, asked me if I would develop a process to help churches grow. I developed *The Two-Year Church Growth Process*. For this process, I wrote *Launching Growth in the Local Congregation, Facing the Facts for Church Growth* (with Diane Barber), *Gifted for Growth, Your Church Has Doors: How to Open the Front and Close the Back*, and *Six Faces of the Christian Church: How to Light a Fire in a Lukewarm Church*. This *Church Growth Process* was used by hundreds of congregations throughout the United States. Soon, the *Church Growth Process* jumped denominations, being used by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Mennonite Church (now called the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches).

Church Doctor Ministries became the publisher of Dr. McGavran’s *Church Growth Bulletin* and brought invitations to write for the Lausanne Movement, with regular articles in their newspaper. I was invited as a del-

egate to the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Manila, Philippines, and the AD 2000 Movement and Beyond meeting in Singapore. An invitation came to teach a large group of pastors in Lagos, Nigeria. These instructional training events for church growth continued, taking me and the groups I led nine times to Nigeria, four times to South Africa, four times to Moscow, three times to Manaus, Brazil, three times to the Japan Church Growth Institute, twice to Kenya, twice to India, once to Kazakhstan, once to San Paulo, Brazil, and once to Belize in Central America.

Meanwhile, my book, *Foundations for Church Growth: Biblical Basics for the Local Church*, was translated into Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, and the Indian dialect of Telugu. Concordia Publishing House published *Courageous Churches*, which I co-authored with Paul Heinecke and David Luecke. My denomination also published the first edition of *Move Your Church to Action* (which was later published by Abingdon Press). Abingdon also published *A House Divided: Bridging the Generation Gaps*, co-authored with Bob Whitesel, who wrote most of the content. *The Road to Church Growth*, with the foreword by Donald McGavran, was published and translated into Norwegian and Mandarin. *Discover Your Windows: Lining up with God's Vision*, published by Abingdon, has had the largest distribution in the English language and is used with the campaign kit, *70 Days of Vision*. Abingdon also published *The Jesus Enterprise: Engaging Culture to Reach the Unchurched*. My denomination contracted me to write *Confessions of a Church Growth Enthusiast*, which was originally not published because the denomination changed politics. A private group later published it.

I was privileged to contribute to *Church Growth: State of the Art*, edited by Peter Wagner with Win Arn and Elmer Towns (Tyndale) and *Evangelism and Church Growth: A Practical Encyclopedia* by Elmer Towns (Regal). I also co-authored the university textbook, *The Leader's MBA: What Business School Instructors Wish Church Leaders Knew About Management*, with Mark Smith, David Wright, and Bob Whitesel (OCU Press).

Recent eBooks (Amazon.com) include, *Michael's Story: A Journey of Life*, *The J-Dog Journey: Where is Life?*, *Re-gen-er-a-tion: A Spiritual Pilgrimage*, and *The Future is Now: How God is Moving in the 21st Century*.

My bimonthly newsletter, *The Church Doctor Report*, is a forum for me to share new and valuable insights for Great Commission effectiveness. It contains topics I have not seen elsewhere and provides ten practical implementation ideas. This free newsletter is received by several thousand pastors and church leaders and continues to grow.

For six years, I was given the opportunity to be the radio personality, "The Church Doctor," which aired at one time on 250 Christian radio stations in the United States, as well as a number of stations in English-speaking places around the world. It was also broadcasted on shortwave radio from Quito, Ecuador, and on the Internet. Ambassador Advertising in Fullerton, Cali-

fornia, syndicated this Monday through Friday short vignette. “The Church Doctor” radio program aired for over six and one-half years, providing 1,729 individual programs.

Church Doctor Ministries has expanded its consulting ministries to churches, using seven consultants. The primary service, the *Diagnostic Consultation*, has been provided for almost 1,500 congregations from 67 denominations, networks, and fellowships in the United States and Canada. The ministry also provides specialty consultations for staff issues, church governance, worship, risk management, as well as professional ministry coaching services.

Several workshops are currently available, including Reaching Young Adults, Turning Your Church Inside Out, Spiritual Gifts, The X Factor: Multiplication Through Discipleship and Spiritual Formation, and the Outreach Clinic. We also expose pastors and church leaders through ministry learning experiences called Immersion Excursions. These are “behind the scenes” opportunities to connect with growing Christian movements and unique, cutting-edge ministries. All of this ministry activity represents vehicles, delivery systems, and learning opportunities to experience the new ways God is moving in church growth in the Christian movement.

HEALTHY CHURCHES THRIVE!

For the last ten years, I have built on the amazing foundation God gave me through the Church Growth Movement. During this time, I have developed a new initiative based on my training in theology and my exposure to missions from my many friends and colleagues at Fuller, The American Society for Church Growth, and The Great Commission Research Network, along with a great blessing of help from my colleagues at Church Doctor Ministries (especially Tracee Swank and my friend Mick Woodhead in England). With encouragement from prayer and support partners, I have been pioneering *Healthy Churches Thrive!* This twenty-four-month spiritual adventure for churches presents kingdom of God culture, which Jesus focused for His disciples every time He said, “The kingdom of God is like . . .” It is my growing conviction that when kingdom culture is developed in the local church, God moves Christians away from secular drift, toward spiritual health. The result is exponential growth in making disciples. In the building of *Healthy Churches Thrive!*, I have developed three DVD resources, including *The Biblically Different Ideas Teaching Series* (ten DVDs); *The Damascus Road: Where Christians Become Missionaries* (eighteen DVDs); and *Healthy Leaders Thrive!* (twenty-five DVDs). An additional component is a ten-month training program for young adults, located in northeast Indiana, called SEND North America (www.sendnorthamerica.com). The result for churches is amazing—renewal that sparks revival. I see this as my life achievement.

THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

God has used the Church Growth Movement in my life to such a great extent that it is beyond description. The teaching I received from Peter Wagner (and others) gave me the tools to pursue my life calling. As a legacy leader, I am especially grateful for the influence God has given to me consulting, writing, and teaching more than a hundred thousand pastors in countries around the globe. Most of all, I am grateful for the people I have mentored on our team of Church Doctors, who also consult churches and teach conferences. It has been my greatest honor to personally disciple my two children Jonathan and Laura, as well as Tracee Swank, the new leader of Church Doctor Ministries and my new boss. It has been a thrill to mentor several pastors and a number of younger men and women, as well as those who participated in SEND North America in its first three years.

At 67 years old, I feel Church Doctor Ministries is now making its greatest contribution to the mission God gave us—to help Christians and churches toward the effective implementation of the Lord’s Great Commission, to make disciples of all peoples (Matthew 28:19–20). I am eager as ever to continue in this ministry with my colleagues and support and prayer partners. I continue my daily prayer, “Lord bring revival, beginning with me.” Moreover, I say, with thanksgiving, “Thank you, Lord, for empowering me through the Church Growth Movement I am so grateful to contribute a little along the way.”

About the Author

Founder of Church Doctor Ministries, Kent R. Hunter received his M.Div from Concordia Seminary, Ph.D. from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and D.Min from Fuller Seminary. Kent has pastored churches in Michigan, Indiana, and Australia. He is founder of Church Doctor Ministries. Kent has trained pastors on six continents. He has written thirty books, 750 articles, and published *Global Church Growth* for twenty years. Kent has consulted with 1,500 churches. He created the *Healthy Churches Thrive!* Spiritual Adventure. Kent and his wife, Janet, live on a tree farm in Indiana. They have two grown, married children.