

MY PILGRIMAGE IN CHURCH GROWTH

Dr. Ray Ellis

— Editor's note: In an ongoing effort to provide a written history of the Church Growth Movement, the Great Commission Research Journal will publish from time-to-time, articles written by former leaders in the North American Church Growth Movement.

It is hoped that these remembrances will provide an ongoing history of the Church Growth Movement for future generations.

My pilgrimage began when I became a follower of Jesus. I was a second year student at Sterling, Kansas High School. Through the influence of my mother and my high school Sunday school teacher, I decided to follow Jesus.

My pilgrimage in church growth started in a Kansas wheat field while a student at Central Christian College in McPherson, Kansas. I worked during the summer driving a truck and a combine following the wheat harvest starting in Texas, then to Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, and Montana. It was during my second year on the combine crew while cutting wheat that a song kept coming to my mind. I believe Jesus was speaking to me through the words of a song, "Ray, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Won't you become a laborer for me in the harvest of souls?" From that point on, I began to prepare for full-time Christian ministry.

Transferring to Greenville College in Greenville, Illinois, I served as Director of Field Service and scheduled teams that traveled to nearby churches for ministry, music, and the Word. I also served and spoke at the Salvation Army mission in downtown St. Louis, Missouri.

My pilgrimage took me to Asbury Theological Seminary from Greenville College. While a student at Asbury Theological Seminary, I enrolled in all the evangelism courses I could that were taught by Dr. Robert E. Coleman and in the mission courses taught by Dr. J.T. Seamands. I went street witnessing with Dr. Coleman. I also went house to house in the area near Wilmore, Kentucky, talking to people about Jesus.

After graduating from Asbury Seminary, I became pastor of a Free Methodist Church in Kansas City, Kansas. The church was landlocked with very few parking spaces. I helped lead the church in selling the property and relocating to a three and one-half acre plot in a new area.

After serving five years in Kansas City, Kansas, I was asked to move to Taylor, Michigan (a suburb of Detroit), and plant a church. I served as founding pastor at Taylor Free Methodist for twelve years. During that time, I attended a denominational sponsored seminar in 1974 with Dr. Win Arn as the speaker. It was during that seminar that I first learned about the Church Growth Movement, and after that training, I purchased *The Bridges of God* by Donald McGavran. I still have McGavran's books, *The Bridges of God* and *Understanding Church Growth*, in my library today.

After serving twelve years as church planter in Michigan, I was asked to become the conference superintendent of the Florida Conference of the Free Methodist Church. I discovered that many of the churches were in decline or on a plateau. One of my first experiences in learning about church growth principles was in 1983 when I attended a conference on church growth sponsored by Dr. Win Arn. One of the speakers was Dr. Donald McGavran. I remember Dr. McGavran spoke with conviction on the importance of making disciples. At that conference, I learned about the meeting in November 1983 of the North American Society for Church Growth at Fuller Seminary. Peter Wagner was one of the speakers. I learned he had written a book entitled, *Your Church Can Grow, Seven Vital Signs of a Healthy Church*. When I returned to Florida, I purchased the book and read it during the first part of 1984.

I registered to attend the North American Society for Church Growth meeting in Pasadena, California, later in 1984. I decided to meet, if possible, with Dr. Peter Wagner while I was at the church growth leaders gathering in Pasadena. I called his office at Fuller and his wife Doris scheduled a meeting for me with her husband, following the gathering of leaders attending the North American Society for Church Growth.

In my meeting with Peter Wagner, I told him I needed guidance in working with churches that were in decline or plateaued. He encouraged me to give leadership in planting new churches and to enroll in the Church Consultant Training, *Diagnostic Analysis With Impact*, being offered by the Fuller Institute of Evangelism the following month. When I arrived back in Florida, I arranged to fly back to California and begin the study to become a certified Church Growth Consultant. After traveling to and from Cali-

fornia over a two-year period and then taking on-the-job training with Dr. Carl George and leading five local church consultations, I was certified as a Church Growth Consultant on June 1, 1986.

Following my training, I was asked to serve on the Free Methodist denomination Commission of Evangelism and the Free Methodist Church of North America Board of Evangelism. In that position, I led the first Free Methodist National Church Growth Conference in Indianapolis, Indiana, with nationally known speakers in the field of church growth.

When I became superintendent of the Florida Conference in 1980, there were twenty-two Free Methodist churches in the state of Florida. After serving eight years as conference superintendent, we had thirty-six Free Methodist Churches in Florida. At that point, I was asked by the leadership of the Free Methodist Church of North America to become the director of evangelism and church growth in 1988 at the Free Methodist World Headquarters, at that time located in Winona Lake, Indiana. In 1990, a move was made to Indianapolis, Indiana, and the name was changed to the Free Methodist World Ministries Center.

As director of evangelism, I gave leadership to a yearly national church growth conference. I gave oversight to our national church planting strategies, and initiated one of the first denominational church planting assessment events that we held in various parts of the United States. The assessment centers were developed to help assess individuals and couples that possessed the gifts and graces to plant a congregation from scratch. We used the following assessment tools during a two-day experience: Personality Profile, Taylor Johnson Temperament Analysis, Enrich-Building A Strong Marriage, and a Behavioral Interview using the model developed by Dr. Charles Ridley. We also had the candidates preach a message as if it were the message given on the first day of their public worship service. Time was also spent helping the candidates develop a timeline from the first day of public worship back to six months to a year of preparation in the community before the first service. At the end of the two-day experience, our assessment team gave the candidates a green light if we recommended them to become church planters. We gave a yellow light if they needed additional training or experience. If they did not demonstrate the gifts and graces to become a church planter and needed to consider serving in other areas of ministry, we gave them a red light.

Most of my writings have been manuals for church planting and strategies to assist local churches toward health and growth. My writings include the following: *Strategizing for New Churches—A Guide for the Selection and Deployment of Church Planters* (1989), *Great Commission Churches—A Guide for Churches Planting Churches* (1989), *How to Plant a Free Methodist Church—Effective Models for the 90's* (1990), *Great Commission Growth Manual—A Self-Analysis for Health and Growth of the Local Church* (1990, second printing 1992, and third printing 1993), and *Train to Win—Practical Spiritual Disciplines for a Life that Wins* (E-book, 2014).

While serving as director of evangelism and church growth, I held sixty local church consultations and several cluster consultations involving forty different pastors and congregations. We used the Ten Life Systems Process developed by Dr. Dan Reeves as our resource for the cluster consultations. The cluster consultations involved nine-day meetings over the course of a twelve-month period. As part of the cluster process, I also made weekend visits to each of the churches to conduct an onsite consultation, with recommendations given to the congregation on Sunday afternoon.

In November 1997, I accepted the position of lead pastor of the San Jose, California, Willow Vale Community Church, a Free Methodist Congregation. While serving as lead pastor, I also served as director of the Church Consulting Network for the Free Methodist Church of North America. In that position, I held yearly training sessions for pastors wanting to lead turnaround churches. In 2011, I retired from serving as director of the Church Consulting Network and now continue to do freelance consulting across the United States, primarily in Free Methodist Churches.

I had the privilege of serving as president of the American Society for Church Growth during the years 1999 and 2000. In 2002, I had the honor of receiving the Donald A. McGavran Award. In 1998, I gave the president elect address to the American Society for Church Growth on the topic, "Spiritual Factors Impacting Church Health and Growth in the 21st Century." Since 1984 to 2014, I have been active first in the North American Society for Church Growth, then American Society for Church Growth, and now The Great Commission Research Network. Every year I include on my planning calendar the date for the gathering of members of the Great Commission Research Network.

My passion is to work with churches and assist them in developing strategies to become healthy, growing, reproducing congregations. I affirm what Dr. Donald McGavran wrote in his book, *Understanding Church Growth*,

Let us, then, lay down that defeatist attitude which keeps us convinced that the Church is not only at a standstill but in retreat. Let us lay aside our contentment in changing a few aspects of non-Christian thinking for the better. Let us brush aside the cobwebs of opinion which obstruct our vision and lead us to believe that the morality and concern for others which rises from a Christian base may equally well rise from a non-Christian base.

Let us realize that all we desire and hope for in the world can come only from peoples who acknowledge God as Lord and Christ as Savior and the Holy Spirit as Faithful Guide.

Let us face the fact that the world is open to belief in Christ as widespread as is our power to proclaim Him. The Church can move forward mightily. It is God's will that she do so. His power will bless us as we devote ourselves with heart, mind, and will to the multiplying of churches from earth's one end to the other.