

THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE AND CHURCH GROWTH: BETTER TOGETHER?

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Abstract

The essence of the article is to offer a fresh look at Church Growth to the Church of the Nazarene. Perhaps the Church of the Nazarene is one of many denominations that struggle with plateaued and declining churches. It seems to this writer that we have failed to ask difficult questions about what we are doing and why we do those things. If we are part of the Body of Christ, then we ought to be flourishing. Instead the converse is often more true. The Church Growth movement may have brought out some people hoping to sell their latest and greatest program that would “guarantee” growth in the local church. However, the very core of the movement is to raise disciples who disciple others. An honest assessment at where we are today could be extremely vital to the future of denominations like the Church of the Nazarene.

Have you ever avoided a type of food just because it did not look or sound good? A short time ago, I went out to eat with a friend. This friend of mine is quite adventurous when it comes to food. The server arrived at our table and asked for our drink and appetizer order. I ordered water, and he ordered a coke and ceviche. I raised my eyebrows at him. He asked me if I had ever tried it. I replied, “No way.” In a few minutes, our drinks arrived, along with the ceviche served with tortilla chips. I watched him plunge the first chip into the bowl of ceviche. He took a bite and gave an approving smile. To make a long story short, he asked me if I wanted to try some. At first, I wrinkled my nose at him. Then, I gave in and tried a bite. I liked it so much, that I finished the appetizer.

What do you know about the Church Growth Movement? What about the early leaders of the movement? What is the first thought that comes to your mind when you hear the words *church growth*? Ashamedly, until a few months ago, I knew nothing of the movement or its leaders. In my mind, church growth focused solely on nickels and noses. Only after carefully studying the particulars behind the Church Growth Movement did my attitude change. I am now a passionate learner of the people and principles that fueled the movement.

Not long ago, I asked several pastors in my area, “What is the first thought that comes to your mind when you hear the words *church growth*?” The answers trickled in via email. One answer pressed my curiosity. The respondent answered the question by saying, “Church Growth...not again!” Immediately, I began firing back a response with all the benefits of the Church Growth Movement, its particulars, leaders, and principles. Before clicking on the ‘send’ button, I stopped and quickly deleted my bold response. Many questions started churning in my mind. Why did the pastor respond this way? What had been his experience that caused such a disdainful attitude towards church growth? What could be done to persuade this pastor to think differently about church growth? While I did not press for answers, I wanted to. Instead, however, I started thinking about other pastors that I had not polled in my non-scientific survey. What did they think about church growth? More specifically, what did other Nazarene pastors think about church growth?

It seems that when people are raised in a particular denomination, they tend to study and subsequently respect people of that movement more than they do people of other movements. That was definitely the case for me. After reading *Understanding Church Growth*, by Donald McGavran, I became a new fan. All of my preconceived ideas about church growth were replaced with respect for the movement and its founder Donald McGavran. “The Roots of Donald A. McGavran’s Evangelistic Insights,” by Dr. Gary McIntosh, is a great introduction to the man and his love of evangelism. The article helps the reader understand why McGavran chose church growth in the first place. According to the article,

At first [McGavran] desired to call his new missiological ideas evangelism, but found the word highly misunderstood. So he coined the term church growth as a new way to refer to evangelism, hoping that he could invest his new terminology with fresh meaning. To McGavran, church growth, or evangelism, simply meant the process of winning people to Christ and incorporating them into a local church where they could grow in their newfound faith.¹

¹ Gary L. McIntosh, “The Roots of Donald A. McGavran’s Evangelistic Insights,” Church Growth Network, May 25, 2010, www.churchgrowthnetwork.com/tag/donald-mcgavran/, accessed October 11, 2013.

Donald McGavran was a third generation missionary to India, beginning his work in 1923. He worked mostly as an educator. In *The Life and Ministry of Donald A. McGavran*, McIntosh writes,

As supervisor of eighty missionaries, five hospitals, several high schools and primary schools, evangelistic efforts, and a leprosy home, McGavran had become deeply concerned that after several decades of work his mission had only about thirty small churches, all of which were experiencing no growth.²

McGavran started asking four basic questions,

What are the causes of church growth? What are the barriers of church growth? What are the factors that can make a movement among some populations? What principles of church growth are reproducible?³

McGavran began the Church Growth Movement attempting to answer these four questions. Although Donald A. McGavran passed away over two decades ago, these questions are still laying the foundation for every church or denomination desiring to fulfill the clarion call of the Great Commission to “Go Make Disciples.”

The Church Growth Movement has faced countless number of critiques. People have given the movement unfair treatment mainly due to its heavy focus on statistics. If people gave McGavran and the Church Growth Movement a fair shake, perhaps a new generation of church leaders would find harmony in using some of the principles developed by the Church Growth Movement in reaching the lost, disciplining them, and encouraging them to become valuable churchmen and women of the future. It is best to determine in advance what using the term church growth means. Thom Rainer may have one of the better definitions on church growth.

Church growth is that discipline which seeks to understand, through biblical, sociological, historical, and behavioral study, why churches grow or decline. True church growth takes place when “Great Commission” disciples are added and evidenced by responsible church membership. The discipline began with the foundational work of Donald McGavran.⁴

To be honest, early on in my ministry, I believed that we focused too much on counting sheep. I spent my formative years growing up in really small churches. As I look back at the churches my father pastored, I can

² Gary L. McIntosh, “The Life and Ministry of Donald A. McGavran,” Church Growth Network, first presented at the American Society for Church Growth Annual Meeting, November 2005, <http://churchgrowthnetwork.com/free-resources/2010/05/25/the-life-and-ministry-of-donald-a-mcgavran/>, accessed October 11, 2013.

³ George G. Hunter III, “The Legacy of Donald A. McGavran,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 1992, 16 (4): 158.

⁴ Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 21.

easily recall many struggles. I wondered why a person would ever want to be called into that life. Then, when I was twelve years old, at a very small church in Temple, Pennsylvania, God called me to follow my father's example. While I understood that call, I did not understand what a life in ministry truly meant. If you were privileged or cursed to have me grow up in one of your churches, you may wonder how I made it at all. (I apologize to the Bristol Church of the Nazarene in Bristol, Pennsylvania. I broke a window just before we moved, and I never told anyone. Confession really is good for the soul.)

During the spring of 1996, I was sitting in a class at Nazarene Theological Seminary. Dr. Jesse Middendorf was lecturing on the "Sociology of the Small Church." He was passionate about the need for the small church and what it was uniquely created to do. At the end of the lecture, I approached Dr. Middendorf and blubbered to him that God had just called me back to the small church. (I had lost my dad to heart disease just five weeks earlier, and I was still grieving his loss.) I grew up in small churches, benefited from their generosity and tutelage, and now it was time for me to give back to the small church. In 1998, I was called to pastor a small church in rural Indiana.

During the past two years, I have been working on a doctorate of ministry at Talbot School of Theology. The emphasis of the degree is growing and multiplying churches in North America. One day while I was sitting in class, I explored the research department at Nazarene.org. The research department is one of the premier sites for church research. Dale Jones, Rich Houseal, and others continually update the site with new information. Anyone can go to the website and find local congregational data that is extremely useful for each local church. Even if someone does not care for anything related to church growth, the information found on this website will help guide a church in knowing where it is today.

I began to research the churches where I grew up. My dad, Lester L. Boady, pastored several churches in Pennsylvania (Jersey Shore, Carlisle, Temple, and Bristol), Florida (High Springs), and Delaware (Wilmington). After consulting the research department at Nazarene.org, I discovered that Carlisle was the only church that was still active. As I made this discovery, my heart sank. Looking back on all these churches, names and faces easily come to my mind. My kindergarten Sunday school teacher at High Springs was very influential in my life, and she gave me my first Bible. Before I went to eighth grade, we moved to Bristol, Pennsylvania, where I met the Beswick family. Keith was one year younger than I, but when I got married in 1999, he was in the wedding party. My senior year, we moved to Wilmington, Delaware, where Dwight McIntyre was my Sunday school teacher. Most Sundays, it was just the two of us. He helped me a great deal. In September 1989, I enlisted in the U. S. Army Reserves. Dwight ran with me three or four times per week, helping me to lose weight and get in shape for boot camp.

After dealing with the emotions of those church closings, the student in me started asking questions. What caused those churches to close? What did not happen that needed to happen to keep those churches alive? What was the ultimate blow that led the churches to close their doors finally? These and so many other questions ran through my mind. I decided I was going to take a look at the only information that I had. All this information came from Nazarene.org and the research department. I wanted to research a specific church. I keyed in Bristol and then selected Bristol, Pennsylvania. I was able to see the statistical history from 1944 to 2012. I sent an inquiry to the research department about the Bristol Church of the Nazarene. Rich Houseal replied, attaching a complete history of the church. This document listed two histories—the history of the church and the history of the pastoral relationships. The document showed that the church was listed as a new start in 1943 and organized in 1944. The church changed names in 2010 and was subsequently disorganized in 2012.

Dr. Gary McIntosh's book, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level*, is full of suggestions for encouraging churches to move forward. At the beginning of the book, McIntosh includes a lifecycle questionnaire.⁵ These questions are designed to help churches discover where they are today. In short, as churches engage the questionnaire, the responses help determine a current reality. Understanding where one's church is today will help define a starting point for where it can be tomorrow. When a person constructs a résumé, he is telling a potential employer what he has done in the past that makes him a good candidate for a job today. His educational background and past work experiences give him a strong foundation to compete for a new job. When a church realizes where it is, it can plot a course for tomorrow. The truth is, what took place in the early years made it possible for a future existence. However, those former events and people may not be able to help the current church reach today's community.

Looking at the statistics of the Bristol Church during its sixty-eight-year history raises many questions. Comparing the statistics with the history of pastoral relationships results in drawing some conclusions without any other information. However, to get a detailed picture, questions of current and former parishioners are exceptionally helpful.

Before raising some questions based upon the two histories of the church in Bristol, let me first suggest how one might benefit from the research department at Nazarene.org. The following contains systematic instructions on how to access the site. The first step is to go to www.nazarene.org.⁶ Step two, look for and click on *Our Organization* at the top right of the page.

⁵ Gary L. McIntosh, *Taking Your Church To The Next Level*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 84-86.

⁶ The following URL avoids a couple of steps: <http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/search.jsp?SearchChoice=churchReports>.

Step three, look for and click on *Administration*. Step four, look for and click on *Research Center*. Step five, click on *Congregational Statistics (world)* on the left side of the page. Step six, type the name of the desired church in the *Quick Search* section and click *Search*. Step seven has several options. If you click on the *Church Name*, you will find basic information about the location and how to contact the church. If you click on *Summary*, a PDF file with a statistical history of the church will begin downloading. If you click on *Comparative*, another PDF file will begin downloading with information that will compare your size church with other similar-sized churches in the denomination. If you click *Detailed*, an Excel spreadsheet will begin downloading with a very detailed statistical history of the church.

Go back to the page that has the church name, location, summary, comparative, and detailed options. Click on the *Summary*. If you have not deleted it, the PDF file may still be on your taskbar. Find the *Summary* that lists the statistics for your church. Please know that I fully understand that statistics tell only a small piece of the story. However, a great amount of learning is available.

The *Summary* page lists some great information that will be of interest to you and your church. Each organized church has a *Summary* sheet. This sheet shows a graph with color-coordinated shapes that highlight three statistics—full members, worship attendance, and discipleship attendance. These figures are included, along with others, of the entire history of your church. Worship attendance became a measured statistic in 1977.

While looking at the graph, you will find some high points and some low points. Take a quick glance at the extremes on the graph. What does the graph indicate? The points are connected to the year those moments occurred. For example, the church I pastor is called Valley Mission Church of the Nazarene. The *Summary* sheet indicates a modest growth line in membership from 1951 to about 2003. From 2003 to 2010, the graph indicates a period of growth. However, from 2010 to 2013, there is a significant drop in membership. Both Sunday school and morning worship statistics follow the same trend. One could ask the question, what happened in 2010 that led to the decline? The church went through a crisis and pastoral transition in the same year. From 2010 to 2013, the membership decreased from 235 to 150. Sunday school attendance also dropped from 113 to 72, and the worship service suffered the same fate, from 205 to 180. As is predictable with fewer people attending a church, the finances dipped from \$343,772 in 2010, to \$287,373 in 2013.

With a quick glance at the black and white, it is clear that something caused a decline. If just these numbers were available, then some questions about the numbers could be asked. I have already mentioned a crisis and pastoral transition as probable causes of the decline. However, looking back to the page that lists the name of the church, summary, comparative, and detailed options, more information is available to help determine what

caused the growth or decline illustrated in the graph. At Valley Mission, 2011 and 2012 illustrate a significant amount of people who transferred to other churches or who were removed from the church membership roll.

One can see many benefits to looking back at the past few years or even decade. Two such benefits are extremely important. The first benefit is to see where a church is today. Has there been growth or decline? An intentional look back at the past few years will help determine the statistical condition of the church today. The other benefit is to see what might happen in the future. If a church is in a five- or ten-year slump, the slump will turn into fifteen or twenty years if nothing is done. Perhaps people shy away from statistical reviews because once they understand the problems, they might just become accountable for solving them. Someone has said, "If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem." Look at the summary sheet and see where your church has been over the past five or ten years. What will happen during the next five or ten years if nothing changes? Yes, God could do it all by Himself. What if God is calling us to do it? What if God raised up your church so that it could make a strong impact on your community? What if God called you, whether you are clergy or laity, to that specific church and community to give hope to the people? If you understand where the road has led you, you and your church can plot a course to change the future.

A few months ago, I searched for the Bristol Church of the Nazarene in Bristol, Pennsylvania. I could not find anything. I then did a generic search on Google and found an article titled, "Nazarene Church Closing." By the time I found the article, the church had been closed for almost two years. Chris English is a staff writer for phillyburbs.com. He wrote, "The church, open since 1947, is being closed because of steadily declining membership. Only about 20 people still regularly attend services at the Bristol church."⁷ The article went on to say that the church changed its name to the Bristol Haven House Community Church in 2010.

A simple glance at the summary sheet for the church illustrates a steady decline. Now would be the time to ask parishioners and former pastors about the details of the plateau and decline. District leaders and administrators are rarely good sources to contact. Nobody wants to talk about death, especially dying churches. We often look at the death of a church as a failure. Stephen Gray and Franklin Dummond write, "Whether a church has existed for four months or four years, there will come a time in the life of every church when God completes his mission."⁸ While sadness is a natural response to the death of a church, the truth is all churches have a lifecycle.

⁷ Chris English, "Nazarene Church Closing," phillyburbs.com, Sunday, July 10, 2011, accessed June 29, 2013.

⁸ Stephen Gray and Franklin Dummond, *Legacy Churches* (St. Charles: ChurchSmart Resources, 2009), 35.

The New Testament churches are no longer alive. Each one of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation is no longer alive. They all played a valuable role in the history of the church, but not one of them exists today.

Dr. Gary McIntosh's lifecycle questionnaire in *Taking Your Church to the Next Level* is well worth the purchase of the book. The way the questionnaire works is simple. McIntosh suggests that the church leaders and a group of laypeople complete the questionnaire. Comparing results will help distinguish where on the lifecycle each group of people feel the church is currently positioned. Each question has a numerical value added to it. Tallying the values for each column reveals a numerical total. Placing the totaled number on the lifecycle grid is the next step. The grid lists the following five movements in the life of a church: emerging church, growing church, consolidating church, declining church, and dying church. The book describes each of the movements through which typical churches move. Once a church determines its position in the lifecycle (based upon the survey results), church leaders and laity alike can begin to ask critical questions.

One very important question may be an obvious one, but McIntosh asks, "What have you discovered about your church?"⁹ If the results of the questionnaire place a church in the declining or dying section, is there hope to turn it around? To discover the hope, leaders will have to covenant with each other and God to pray about the future direction of the church. An additional book written by Gary McIntosh titled, "There's Hope for Your Church,"¹⁰ is another great resource. Together, both resources will help establish a current reality.

Two questions always come to mind when churches understand their current reality. First, what can we do? Second, what will we do? Sadly, many churches are rarely willing to make the necessary or drastic adjustments to their current situation.

What if after doing some research about your local church you discovered that your church was ten or twenty years away from closing? If that question does not move you, ask, What will my children have when I am gone? This question has stirred in my mind for several years. I grew up watching churches and church boards focus on items that helped the church survive, not thrive. When a church is constantly faced with its own survival, there is little time or resources to reach out to the community. When a church reaches the point where it exists to keep the doors open, or when a church exists just for the members inside, the church begins to walk on a slippery slope. Sadly, the statistics of the church in America are beyond bleak. What would happen if a church made adjustments along the way and continued

⁹ McIntosh, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level*, 86.

¹⁰ Gary L. McIntosh, *There's Hope for Your Church*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012).

to thrive, not just exist, in its community? What if a group of people called Nazarenes discovered their current reality and realized that unless they made modifications, doors would close, and influence would be lost? What if we moved away from striving to survive and instead became churches that thrived? What would that do for our communities?

In the March 1977 “Church Growth Bulletin,” George Hunter III wrote, “Wherever, anywhere in the world over the last 19 centuries, when the Christian Movement has emphasized disciple-making, two things have happened... We have made some new disciples and planted some churches and have had a social influence out of proportion to our numbers. But whenever the Christian mission has neglected disciple-making... we have not made many disciples or planted many churches and have not had much social influence either!”¹¹

What Hunter said in 1977 is still true today. If we decide that making disciples is no longer a priority at the local level, what will become of the Church of the Nazarene and the optimism it had in the early years to transform the world? That is one reason the denomination came into existence. Follow Wesley’s desire to help free people from the chains that bind them. Follow Phoebe Palmer and her Propagation of the Gospel meetings. Follow Jesus who said, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” We must return to our roots to make certain that we are following our Lord’s commission to “go make disciples.” Is there any greater calling than that?

I do not believe we need to return to the raised hankies or shout from the amen corner. What we do need to do is to pick up the banner that is our watchword and song and go make disciples. Discovering where we are today by celebrating our past will surely enable us to have a strong future, where life transformation takes place on a daily basis at the local congregational level. Surely, we need to help the sick and the poor, the widows and the orphans; but what we need more than anything is to discover where we are so we know what we can do. We can do many great things. The question is whether or not we will do them.

It may not be ceviche. It could be some other interesting food. We must be willing to try something new if we are going to mirror the enthusiasm of our early beginnings. We must be willing to do whatever it takes if we are going to take the Promised Land, Jericho, and beyond. We must be willing to help the church make all the necessary discoveries in order to make all the needed adjustments if the local congregations are going to once again have influence and raise up a new generation of transformed Nazarenes.

¹¹ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 23.

Something interesting happened after Joshua took the reins from Moses. Many successes and failures occur, but one thing is certain. The following comes from the second chapter of Judges.

⁶After Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, they went to take possession of the land, each to their own inheritance. ⁷The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel. ⁸Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. ⁹And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres^[b] in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. ¹⁰After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. ¹¹Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. ¹²They forsook the LORD...

Is the Church of the Nazarene more contented without principles and rhetoric associated with church growth? I would like to think that my generation would be willing to do whatever it takes to not only raise up a future generation who has a memory of the past, but also one that has a vision set on the future. Are there parts of the Church Growth Movement we could disregard? Of course, but some will turn up their noses to church growth before they have tried it. I would think we all could stomach a bit of ceviche or church growth or whatever we needed to do our part to ensure that the future of the CHURCH and the CHURCH of the NAZARENE is one of vitality and influence on the communities where the Nazarenes call home.

About the Author

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