Church Growth Consulting: Evolution of an Intervention

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About the Writer

Alan McMahan has pastored churches in North America and on the Pacific Rim as well as taught in the areas of missiology, anthropology, folk religions, leadership, organizational development, evangelism, and church growth. He has been active in training undergraduate and graduate students, mid-career professionals, Bible school teachers, pastors, and denominational leaders throughout the U.S. and Southeast Asia in the effective means to develop missional leaders and plant and grow churches. At the Alliance Theological Seminary in Nyack, New York he was instrumental in the founding of the Alliance Graduate School of Missions which employs a robust array of tools and experiences to equip emerging leaders in the theory and practice of cultural exegesis and missional engagement. With more than 15 years experience in the field, Alan maintains an active church growth consulting service in the New York City area and has been appointed as the incoming President of the American Society of Church Growth. His dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary was entitled, "Training Turnaround Leaders, Systemic Approaches to Reinstate Growth in Plateaued Churches." He is currently the Academic Dean at The King's College, the flagship college of Campus Crusade, located in mid-town Manhattan. Alan and his wife, Terri, have two sons, Billy and Jonathan and live in Nyack, New York.

The rise of the church growth movement in the early 1970's[1] produced new insights and understanding as to how churches experienced growth and decline. In the years since then an entire industry has emerged to further church growth research and to deliver the resulting insights to pastors and churches. These delivery methods have taken many different forms ranging from formal seminary curriculums, to seminars and workshops, to

books and audio or videotapes and computer programs, to expert consultations. As might be predicted, the ability of each delivery system to actually empower lasting, fruitful change among churches and leaders varies.

Some methods of empowerment focus primarily on the transmission of knowledge, most usually in the form of principles or strategies buttressed with case studies of successful churches. Yet these methods leave the local pastor alone to understand the unique needs and context of his church and modify the application of the principles accordingly. Some pastors are able to do this successfully, but most need some help. Other methods serve mostly to inspire and motivate pastors to install church growth strategies but again it is up to the local pastor to understand how to implement them successfully.

Out of all the delivery methods for disseminating church growth research, consulting would seem to hold the most promise for helping churches "stuck" in a pattern of non-growth.[2] Indeed only in the case of consulting does an intervener who is not part of the local church system come on-site to the local church to assess the particular threats and opportunities that await the implementation of church growth strategies and perspectives. As local realities may greatly influence how a particular strategy may be installed and subsequently perform, such an empowerment methodology yields the greatest potential for lasting change. Therefore out of the delivery systems available for the dissemination of church growth concepts, consulting is, perhaps, the most effective, albeit in a manner that is intensive (in a relatively few local churches) rather than extensive (across a region).

History of Church Growth Consulting

If, in its most basic definition, consulting is "giving advice when you are not in charge," then arguably church consulting has been around as long as the church has been in existence and most of the apostle Paul's writings could be viewed in this light. However, church growth consulting as a distinct field of endeavor took a significant turn in 1975 with the founding of the Fuller Evangelistic Association in Pasadena, California later named the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth (CEFI). Though not the first agency to take on the task of church growth consulting, CEFI may have had one of the largest impacts. First under John Wimber and then in 1978 under Carl George's leadership CEFI began delivering a whole range of church growth consulting services from coaching pastors to do self-studies; to conducting clinics, workshops, and retreats for

local church leaders; to offering diagnostic tools and analysis for church growth and health; to executing a "total church development model;" to doing casual or occasional consulting (George 1986:165-6).

Chief among CEFI's strategies for impacting churches was the training of church growth consultants. Collaborating with Fuller Theological Seminary, CEFI developed an accredited consultant training program, called "Diagnosis with Impact." This program sought to train consultants through a two-year internship, working with actual case studies under the guidance of experienced consultants (George 1986:166). Dozens of consultants were eventually trained through this process and a consulting network was established. The results continued on for some time, well after the consultant training program was discontinued in 1992. Since CEFI's contribution to the field a plethora of church growth consulting firms, and denominational and mission offices have arisen to deliver a wide range of services and interventional methods. Some of these approaches are highlighted in other articles in this edition of the Journal.

A New Generation of Interventions

In more recent years the practice of church growth consulting has experienced a significant redirection or evolution in the methods employed and the set of tools that are used. This change in approach has been observed both among the seasoned veterans of consulting as well as in the popular new intervention models that have been advanced for assessing and establishing church health. The shift grows out of an emerging understanding of the nature of the church and how it responds to planned change. To understand the nature of this shift in consulting practice it is helpful to look at how interventionists approach their craft now compared to a few years ago.

The cadre of consultants who emerged in the late 1980s, for example, became masters in gathering information on the state of a client congregation. This information took the form of "soft" data (insights into prevailing attitudes among the churched and unchurched, corporate culture, the cohesion of the leadership team, etc.) and "hard" data (participation statistics, budgets, planning documents, zip code distributions of attenders, etc.). In some cases this information was then analyzed and exhibited in countless graphs, charts, and 100 page reports, perhaps in an effort to prove value to the client. An unintended consequence, however, was that the entire process could consume months or years, the findings were often shelved without being acted upon, and some congregations experienced "paralysis by analysis."

In more recent years, however, many of these same consultants are indicating they are relying less and less on mountains of data. Rather they are moving to more intuitive, more systemic responses to dilemmas they face in client churches. Perhaps this movement is related to their expertise built over time to diagnose obstacles preventing growth or to differentiate between perceived versus actual needs. Yet experience alone does not sufficiently explain the shift in orientation. Rather, many of the interventions now proposed from consultant to client reflect a growing understanding of the complex, interrelated systemic nature of the church as a living system. Of the models with which I am most familiar a strategic shift in focus is detected in how the church is viewed and understood.[3] Carl George's Meta-Church model, Dan Reeve's Life-Systems approach, and Church Resource Ministries' (CRM) Refocusing Networks all represent a new generation of systemic approaches to church growth interventions.

Likewise, among the popularized models of church health there is also more recently a perceptible shift in orientation. Rather than instruct a congregation in the use of a single, dominant strategy such as seeker-sensitive services, a particular evangelism approach, or a discipleship tool, newer models are more apt to identify multiple variables that affect church vitality and growth. Christian Schwartz's *Natural Church Development* identifies eight essential elements of congregational health. Stephen Macchia lists 10 Characteristics of a Healthy Church, Kennon Callahan details *12 Keys to an Effective Church*, Waldo Werning tabulates *12 Pillars of a Healthy Church*, Stanley Ott gives *12 Dynamic Shifts for Transforming Your Church*, and Leonard Sweet posits *11 Genetic Gateways to Spiritual Awakening*. Though the church health movement has some significant short-comings[4] it represents, nevertheless, a growing awareness that multiple, highly interconnected factors come together to influence church vitality. The church is more like an organism than an organization.

Perhaps these changes in approach in church growth consulting are coincidental. It is the judgment of this writer, however, that the changes being observed represent something of a paradigm shift that has occurred in the field. They are all attempts to look at the church from the perspective of systemic causation rather than the earlier, more linear approaches to church intervention strategy.

The Emerging Field of Systems Theory

In an effort to grapple with the complexities characteristic of

the natural world, organizations, and organisms, systems theory has emerged as a helpful approach to the sciences and social sciences. More recently systems thinking as a corollary discipline has been popularized through the writings of Senge and his associates at the Sloan School of Management at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Systems theory's earliest roots date back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with such thinkers as Herbert Spencer. Spencer spent twenty years producing an elaborate organic model of the societal system. However, greater definition came in the 1930s with Ludwig von Bertallanfy. Bertallanfy, a biologist by profession, came to understand that a living organism could not be adequately described with the language of the day. Nor could it be sufficiently understood by the classical Newtonian method in science, which regarded each object as a collection of distinct and disconnected parts. In fact, neither the parts nor the whole could be understood unless the interrelationships of the parts were understood. Clearly the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. What was needed was a way to describe the interactions of the components of the organism in a way that better explained their complex interdependencies.

Emerging from these beginnings, a discipline of systems thinking evolved that has had major ramifications.

As a new way of thinking about reality, systems theory has recently been applied to a host of other fields including transportation systems, national financial planning, outer space exploration, leadership and management, and large, complex organizations. It has penetrated all fields of science and has proven to be one of the best ways of understanding and managing large organizations and complex realities (Stevens and Collins 1993:xxii).

Certainly, the church as an organization/organism, albeit divinely sustained and empowered, has much in common with other human institutions. However, before looking at ministry applications it may be more helpful to more fully explore what systems thinking actually is, along with its key concepts.

What is Systems Thinking?

Before presenting formal definitions it is perhaps better to understand systems thinking through illustrations. For example, when the clouds grow dark on the horizon, the air cools, the leaves turn upward, we know the rain is coming. We also know that when the rain does fall it will run off into the ground water many miles away, only later to return to the air where it repeats the cycle. If one concentrates only on one aspect of the above scene, he or she is likely to miss the more complex processes and

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interactions going on in the background. No part reveals the complexity of the whole pattern.

Businesses, churches, educational institutions and other human endeavors can also be seen as systems. They are composed of countless and often invisible interactions between people, beliefs, events, and external forces. The implication of these components upon one another may take years to fully play out. The linkage between cause and effect are not obvious, especially to us who are personally engaged in our own corner of the operation. Therefore, "we tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system, and wonder why our deepest problems never seem to get solved (Senge 1990:7).

Senge (1990:69) points out that today more than ever we are being overwhelmed by complexity and the pace of change. In our modern world we have the capacity to produce information far beyond anyone's ability to grasp. Our inability to deal with these complexities has led to "systemic breakdowns" such as problems with global warming, ozone depletion, and the international drug trade, none of which have a simple, local cause. Such complexity undermines confidence and responsibility. What we need is a new language, systems theory, that begins restructuring how we think.

The U.S. believed . . .

U.S.S.R. arms   ➡   Threat to Americans   ➡   Need to Build U.S. arms

While the U.S.S.R. believed . . .

U.S. Arms   ➡   Threat to Soviets   ➡   Need to build U.S.S.R. arms
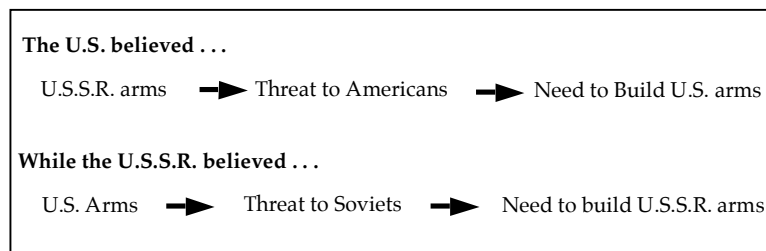

Figure 1. Arms Race from a Linear Perspective (Senge 1990:70)

The need for systems thinking was illustrated in the former U.S. – U.S.S.R. arms race. The root cause of the arms race was in the way of thinking that both sides shared. Though each nation pursued linear, non-systemic viewpoints, (Figure 1) the interactions of their worldviews produced a system where one set of variables influenced another. The resulting interaction is better depicted in the following diagram (Figure 2). Senge points out that here as in many systems, doing what is obvious does not produce the obvious desired result. In pursuing greater security, each side creates greater insecurity for all.
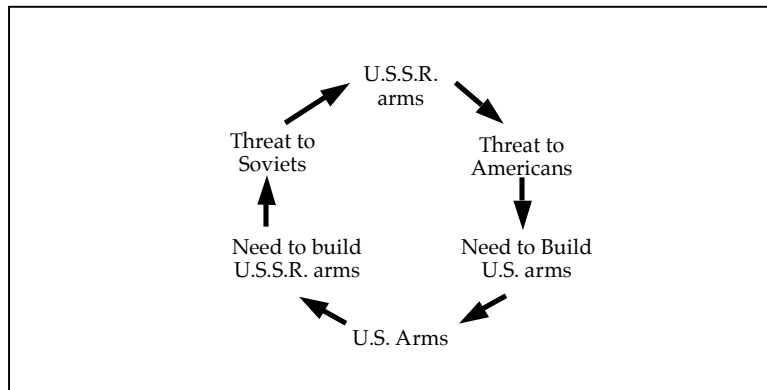
Figure 2. Arms Race from a Systemic Perspective (Senge 1990:70)

The same scenario is recreated in countless human organizations every day where years of bureaucratic re-engineering, strategic planning programs, and sophisticated change efforts have often failed to produce dramatic breakthroughs. Senge points out that this is because they are designed to handle "detail complexity" but not "dynamic complexity."

When the same action has dramatically different effects in the short run and the long, there is dynamic complexity. When an action has one set of consequences locally and a very different set of consequences in another part of the system, there is dynamic complexity. When obvious interventions produce non-obvious consequences, there is dynamic complexity (1990:71).

However, (and this is key!) "the real leverage in most management situations lies in understanding dynamic complexity, not detail complexity (Senge 1990:72). Unfortunately, even most analyses that claim to be systemic focus on detail complexity not dynamic complexity, that is devising more and more complicated solutions to solve increasingly complex problems. True systems thinking simplifies life with a new language to describe many types of relationships and patterns of change. The details of this language will be forthcoming, but now a definition is in order.

Definitions

Just what is a "system" as we are using it? Two definitions will be offered. First is one promoted by Art Kleiner at MIT. "A system is a perceived whole whose elements 'hang together' because they continually affect each other over time and operate toward a common purpose" (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, and Smith 1994:90). From the operation of a system, a structure

emerges that becomes a point of study for systems dynamicists. Thus systemic structure is:

The pattern of interrelationships among key components of the system. That might include the hierarchy and process flows, but it also includes attitudes and perceptions, the quality of products, the ways in which decisions are made and hundreds of other factors. Systemic structures are often invisible – until someone points them out . . . Structures in systems are not necessarily built consciously. They are built out of the choices people make consciously, over time (Senge et al. 1994:90).

This, then, becomes the basis for describing systems dynamics in studies of organizational interactions. The following will outline some of the key characteristics of systems thinking. From this will grow an understanding of how systemic change may be brought into plateaued churches by church growth consulting agencies.

Key Characteristics of Systems Thinking

The terms "wholeness," "synergy," "isomorphism," "compensating feedback," "homeostasis," "systems boundary," and "systems integrity," are part of the nomenclature of systems thinking in academic circles. These provided helpful labels by which processes and characteristics of systems can be discussed. They are not, however, very user-friendly to the average leader. Instead, in a more engaging form, Senge and his associates have developed a list, called the "Laws of the Fifth Discipline"[5] that yield insights collected over years of consulting as to the nature of systems dynamics (Senge 1990:57-67; and Roberts and Kemeny 1994:91-94). The study of these "laws" will form a basis for much of the analysis that follows regarding systemic church growth interventions.

1. *Today's problems come from yesterday's solutions.* Like the rug merchant who keeps trying to flatten out the bump in the middle of the rug only to have it shift to another spot, many of our change efforts solve the immediate problem symptom only to have it reappear in a different place and time. Heightened drug enforcement on 30th Street moves the dealers to 40th Street. Downsizing the workforce due to budget constraints leaves the company short on skilled labor and leads to diminishing produce quality. In its efforts to improve Sunday School teaching, a church consolidates ten classes under their five best teachers leaving less ports of entry for new attenders to make friends in small group settings. Very often, "solutions that merely shift problems from one part of the

system to another often go undetected because . . . those who 'solved' the first problem are different from those who inherit the new problem" (Senge 1990:58).

2. *The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back.* When first confronted by an obstacle, our natural tendency is to apply more of the solution, to push harder. If our initial efforts fail to achieve our goals, we become more diligent in monitoring our own behavior. And yet it seems that the more effort we put forth to solve the problem the more effort that is required. In systems terminology this is called, "'compensating feedback': when well-intentioned efforts call forth responses from the system that offset the benefits of the interventions" (Senge 1990:58). For example, efforts to suppress guerrilla fighters by foreign powers lead to the strengthening of the guerrilla's cause, a hardening of the peoples' resolve and greater resistance to the foreign intervention. A company loses customers and so launches an aggressive advertising campaign which further drains funds from quality improvement efforts which further loses more customers. Senge points out that,

Pushing harder, whether through an increasingly aggressive intervention or through increasingly stressful withholding of natural instincts is exhausting. Yet as individuals and organizations, we not only get drawn into compensating feedback, we often glorify the suffering that ensures (1990:59).

Another systems concept that comes into play here is "homeostasis" or "the tendency of people in relationships to develop patterns and keep doing things in the same way . . . Once an organization or system gets in motion, it tends to keep going the same way" (Parson and Leas 1993:7). A certain amount of homeostasis helps people interact in predictable ways and for organizations to survive threats from within or without. Yet if homeostatic forces are too strong, growth and adaptation cannot occur. The tendency of the system to maintain itself as it is and repel intervening forces creates compensating feedback (Figure 3).
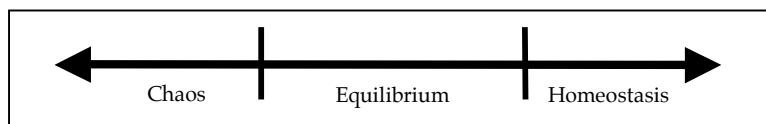

Figure 3. Homeostasis Continuum

3. *Behavior grows better before it grows worse.* In large, com-

plex systems it is almost always easy to make things look better in the short run. Pleasing the boss, or maintaining the peace brings a certain satisfaction. A fresh coat of paint will hide the rotting wood . . . for a while. What makes many short-term, low-leverage solutions so appealing is that they might actually work, temporarily. But in most cases, the long-term problem eventually comes back, and it is worse than before. In systems thinking, this concept of "delay" explains why so many problems go undiagnosed and unsolved. A solution may feel great at the time and may, in fact, solve the problem or drive it underground for two, three, or four years. By the time it or another problem comes back (and in greater force) someone else is sitting in the chair.[6]

4. *The easy way out usually leads back in.* When challenged with a problem our natural instinct is to fall back on what has worked in the past. After all, Senge notes, that if the solution were easy to see, someone else would have already solved it. Yet, "pushing harder and harder on familiar solutions while fundamental problems persist or worsen, is a reliable indicator of non-systemic thinking – what we often call the "what we need is a bigger hammer syndrome'" (Senge 1990:61). Frequently, this is seen in the church as when attendance declines and a special guest speaker is brought in or if giving declines and more announcements are made in the bulletin. However, as Charlotte Roberts and Jennifer Kemeny point out,

Beware the easiest, fastest solution. Most people prefer to intervene in a system at the level of rules, physical structure, work processes, material and information flows, reward systems, and control mechanisms – where the elements are more visible and it requires less skill to work with them. But as you move toward intangible elements, such as people's deep-seated attitudes and beliefs, your leverage for effective change increases (Roberts and Kemeny 1994:93).

5. *The cure can be worse than the disease.* Application of a familiar solution can not only be ineffective, it can be addictive and dangerous. Turning to alcohol for reasons of poor self-esteem not only does not deal with the real problem, but it actually further devalues one's sense of self-worth. Likewise a church's (or business') use of an outside consultant to advise them through a particular problem can backfire if the congregation becomes de-

pendent on outside sources to take them through suc-
cessive hurdles they encounter. A missions agency that
seeks to plant churches quickly by providing salaries for
national pastors may create long-term dependencies that
undermine the efforts of the national church to become
self-supporting.

The long-term most insidious consequence of applying
non-systemic solutions is increased need for more and
more of the solution . . . The phenomenon of short-term
improvements leading to long-term dependency is so
common, it has its own name among systems thinkers –
it's called "Shifting the Burden to the Intervener" (Senge
1990:62).

Any long-term, systemic solution must empower the system
to solve its own problems.

6. *Faster is slower.* The tendency in our modern world is to
    go faster and faster. Thus, we think faster is better. Yet
    all natural systems from rabbits to urban centers to
    churches have intrinsic, optimal rates of growth. Opti-
    mal growth rates are almost always slower than the fast-
    est possible growth rate. When growth becomes exces-
    sively fast, the system itself will often compensate by
    slowing down, at times putting the organism or institu-
    tion at risk. In such systems there will almost always be
    some limiting factor whether it is leadership, available
    energy, needed skills, or something else that will slow
    the total system down until these support services can
    grow to meet demand.

7. *Cause and effect are not closely related in time and space.* By
    "effect" Senge means the obvious symptoms that indi-
    cate there are problems. By "cause" he means the "inter-
    action of the underlying system that is most responsible
    for generating the symptoms and which, if recognized,
    could lead to changes producing lasting improvement"
    (1990:63). In educational institutions, churches, and
    businesses it is often assumed that the problem and the
    source of the problem are closely related. Perhaps this
    stems from our inability apart from systems thinking
    tools to see the interrelationship of disparate parts of the
    system. Perhaps, many difficulties do not stem from
    some stubborn problem or an evil adversary, but our-
    selves. To solve systemic problems Charlotte Roberts

and Jennifer Kemeny remark:

Don't look for leverage near the symptoms of your problem. Go upstream and back in time to ferret out the root cause. Often, the most effective action is the subtlest. Sometimes it is better to do nothing, letting the system make its own correction or guide the action. Other times, the highest leverage is found in a completely unexpected source (1994:92).

8. *Small changes can produce big results – but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious.* An individual pushing broadly on a huge boulder does not usually achieve movement. If pure energy in the form of a bulldozer were used the bulldozer would achieve movement. However, in most plateaued institutions there is not enough energy or even a common will sufficiently large to promote large-scale change. Senge notes:

Systems thinking also shows that small, well-focused actions can sometimes produce significant enduring improvements, if they're in the right place. Systems thinkers refer to this principle as "leverage." Tackling a difficult problem is often a matter of seeing where the high leverage lies, a change which-with minimum effort – would lead to lasting, significant improvement. The only problem is that high-leverage changes are usually highly non-obvious to most participants in the system (1990:63-64).

To illustrate this point, one might consider how a ship is steered. Pushing the bow around requires enormous amounts of energy. Yet if one understands the forces of hydrodynamics, a non obvious component, the rudder, can be used to leverage great effect. By counter-intuitively moving the rudder handle to the left, the ship turns right as its rear end is "sucked around." On large ships even the rudder is too large to turn without difficulty. In these instances, a "trim tab" (a small rudder on the rudder) turns in the opposite direction than the rudder is supposed to turn. In much the same way, high-leverage points are often not obvious unless one understands the forces that are at work in the system. Senge points out that there are no dependable ways to find the points of high leverage. However, there are ways to make finding them more likely (Senge 1990:64).

9. *You can have your cake and eat it too.* Many of the problems encountered in diagnosing plateaued churches are

not really problems at all. They are, instead the result of "snapshot" thinking rather than "process" thinking. They assume linear or even multiple causation, but not systemic causation (see Figure 4). By way of illustration, pastors often feel they must choose between spending time training lay leaders to do a task (i.e. hospital visitation) and just getting the task completed themselves which may be far easier. What is often overlooked is that if they would apprentice lay leaders by taking them with them for "on-the-job-training" they could accomplish both tasks simultaneously. If they would take a process perspective rather than one based on static perceptions they could achieve both goals of leadership training and giving care to the flock. Rather than either-or they could have both-and. To do so, though, requires taking into account the necessary time delays that often accompany addressing the long-term fundamental problem.
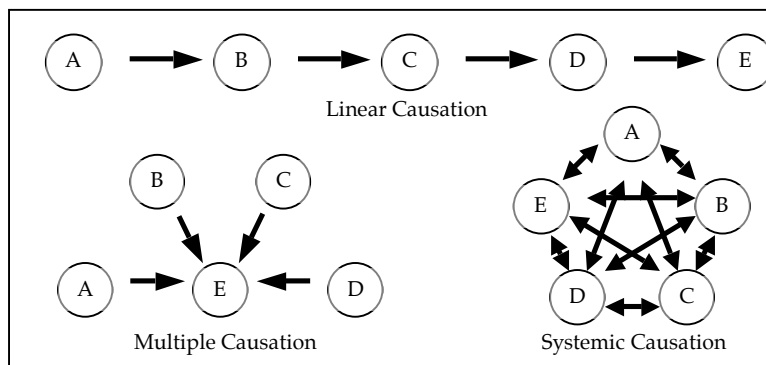

Figure 4. Linear, Multiple, and Systemic Causation (Stevens and Collins 1993:23-25)

10. *Dividing an elephant in half does not produce two small elephants.* Like the three blind men who examined an elephant, the one grasping the leg and concluding it is like a pillar, another the rough skin on the side and concluding the elephant is like a rug, and one grasping the trunk and concluding an elephant is like a pipe, many of the participants in human organizations cannot see beyond their own division or area of influence. This short parable illustrates another systems dynamic, that of "systems integrity." Like biological systems, churches, businesses, schools, and other endeavors in which mankind engages have an internal integrity that is common in liv-

ing systems. That is, there are aspects of their nature and character that can only be seen by looking at the whole. The problem is that we can each see our own department or church and see its problems clearly but without adequate tools we can not see the interactions of the whole system. Moreover, many organizations are designed in a way that important cross-functional interactions are not visible to most observers. Senge points out that these internal barriers to communication arise in two ways (1990:66-67). The first is by maintaining rigid internal divisions that inhibit inquiry. In a church, for example, the decisions and actions of an evangelism committee may not take into account decisions also being made in the Christian Education committee. Governing Board actions may not reflect the needs and perspectives of new members, for example. A second way is by leaving problems behind for someone else to clean up. The lack of continuity between leadership roles (as seen in personnel transitions) can cause observers to miss the important and often subtle interactions among systems components.

Though some problems in an organization can indeed by analyzed and fixed by looking only at certain sub-systems or components, Senge points out in most cases that when the elephant is divided up, you simply have a mess. "By a mess, I mean, a complicated problem where there is no leverage because the leverage lies in interactions that cannot be seen from looking only at the piece you are holding" (1990:67).

One other systems concept that should be noted here is that of "systems boundary" (Senge 1990:66). This key principle states that the interactions that should be examined are those relevant to the problem, regardless of whether those interactions neatly fit within organizational boundaries. Thus, any interactions between an organization and its environment or with other organizations need to be factored into any systems analysis.

11. *There is no blame.* Usually when there are problems in the organization, people tend to blame someone else or something else outside the organization. "The people here are too resistant to the gospel" or "if we had more people in the church that would take responsibilities, the church leadership would not be so overworked." Senge remarks, "Systems thinking shows us that there is not outside; that you and the cause of your problems are part of a single system. The cure lies in your relationship to your "enemy'" (1990:67). Without discounting the

possibility of individual or corporate sin within the organization and the presence of the forces of evil at work in this world, there is a lot of truth to the fact that many times we create our own problems. These problems arise because of our lack of understanding of systemic forces within our own human interactions in the organizations we erect.

12. *There are no right answers.* Using tools to map systems dynamics reveals points of high and low leverage within the system. From these possible options there is no right answer, there are simply trade-offs as each option will produce some desired results as well as potentially undesired and unintended results. Systems thinking, however, clarifies these ramifications and enables the intervener to make choices accordingly.

Levels of Systemic Understanding

Systems thinkers have realized for some time that systems thinking offers a higher level of leverage in intervening in organizational systems than responding to events or patterns-of-events over time. In fact, systems thinkers identify four levels of understanding that are relevant to change interventions as seen in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5. Levels of Understanding (Kim 1994:4)

In this chart, the term "mental models" is often substituted by some systems thinkers for "shared vision." Others have referred to this as "corporate culture" though this latter term may encompass more than is meant by the terms "shared vision" or

"mental models." In any event, there is common agreement that as one moves up the scale there is greater abstraction and yet greater leverage for change.

In diagnosing systemic forces in organizational settings there are many tools that could be used yet one usually starts by "telling the story" of the organizational situation beginning at the level of "events." Events (level 1) require an immediate reaction like that of putting out a burning house.[7] Sometimes a quick response is the only appropriate action. Patterns of events (level 2) emerge based on the accumulation of memories. Using the fire-fighting analogy, this would be equivalent to putting more fire stations in fire-prone neighborhoods. The "reactive stance" better anticipates problems but does not prevent them.

Once a range of patterns of behavior have been plotted, systems archetypes (see Senge 1990:93ff) can be employed that better illustrate the relationship of systemic forces. Once the pattern is matched to the systemic archetype, points of leverage can be discovered and the inter-play of forces can be better understood. Again using the analogy of the fire department, attention to systemic structures would be equivalent to checking for smoke detectors, providing building codes for more flame retardant materials, educating the public as to safety practices, as examples. Efforts made at this level may effect the future and are therefore "creative" because they may actually reduce the number and severity of fires.

Finally, once the systemic dynamics are understood, further probing will reveal the mental models that lie behind systemic structures. A "cultural audit" such as proposed by Hans Finzel (1989) or other methods more common to the fields of sociology and anthropology would help discover the implicit attitudes and assumptions that lie behind the structure. This is the level that most effects the future and gives the greatest leverage for change. It is also the level which is most immune to interventions from the outside. Using the fire-fighting analogy, this would be equivalent to identifying values such as the importance of human life, the amount of resources that should be devoted to fire-fighting and so on. Intervention at this level can be generative because it is from this source that new dreams become crafted into the systemic structures that ultimately guides the patterns of behavior and issues forth into the level of events.

Characteristics of Systemic Church Growth Interventions

For centuries there has been no lack of advice on how to improve the ministry of the local church. For three decades now the Church Growth Movement has brought greatly needed insight

in how churches may better fulfill the Great Commission. From this has resulted great benefit as many have been brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and churches have been planted around the world. In the last several years, however, there have arisen several models of church growth interventions that claim to be systemic in nature. From this there naturally arises the question of what makes an approach "systemic?" What are the characteristics of systemic interventions and how do they contrast with non-systemic ones? While later in this article this topic will be briefly addressed in regard to Refocusing Networks and the Meta-Church, it may be helpful at this point to list some identifying characteristics of systemic interventions:

1. *A systemic intervention recognizes that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.* As in a living organism, human organizations produce something greater than simply the total aggregate of interactions of individuals. How much more is this true of the church, the Body of Christ, which in its essence is organic in nature? Moreover, Stevens and Collins point out that pastors, who operate with the systemic nature of the church in mind "work with the whole church, not merely a collection of individuals. The basic unit of the church is not the individual but the church as a whole, even though Western culture contrives to make us believe the opposite (1993: xviii).

2. *A systemic intervention recognizes systems integrity.* Just as the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, a living system's character depends on the whole. Dividing a system into its various components may clarify detail complexity but loses the ability to see dynamic complexity. Thus real leverage lies in the relationships between people and components. Therefore, a systemic intervention will at least seek to treat the whole system (i.e. the church) as an integrated, indivisible unit though it may also include some interventions directed to parts or subsystems of the system.

3. A systemic intervention maps the interactions of interrelating forces or components with the goal of assessing relationships and affective causes one upon another. In this way, the nature of a system can be understood and often subtle patterns can be detected. Such mapping also aids in identifying points of leverage for change initiatives and highlights unhealthy linkages.

4. *Systemic interventions recognize that key to shaping systemic*

structures are the modifications of more deeply held and often unseen shared mental models (and/or corporate culture). Interventions can, in fact, can be applied at any level, from that of events, to behaviors over time, to systemic structures, to mental models. However, the most enduring and the most powerful interventions will impact the participant's mental models.

5. *Systemic interventions address more than one issue (problem) at a time.* Due to the interconnected nature of systems, appropriate interventions will often address multiple concerns simultaneously (such as providing symptomatic relief as well as dealing with the foundational problem). Even if an intervention intends to deal with only one issue, the effects will be felt in some way throughout the system much as pulling on a single strand of a spider's web distorts the pattern of the whole.

6. *Systemic interventions are wary of scapegoating and blame-shifting.* In a system every part affects every other and therefore to a certain extent everyone bears a certain measure of responsibility for the nature of the system. Efforts to find the "culprit" can mask ones own contribution to the problem. Though this principle does not deny individual responsibility, it does point out the corporate nature of systemic illnesses.[8] Often the true source of the problem is in the nature of systemic interactions themselves.

7. *Systemic interventions distinguish between symptomatic "quick fixes" and long-term fundamental solutions.* By analyzing behavior over time and the systemic structures behind them, systemic solution givers avoid being deceived in applying temporary band-aids which only allow the real problem to worsen and reappear at a later time. Long-term pastoral tenures are needed to adequately address these issues.

8. *Systemic interventions anticipate "delays" and modify the solution set accordingly, often with the goal of shortening the delay.* A tell-tale symptom of a non-systemic intervention is to over-compensate for a response from the system. Rather than adjusting responses to the timing of the system, non-systemic interventions exacerbate the problem, producing even wider swings in system response. When our "solution" fails to produce the immediate, desired response, more of the solution is applied which later requires greater counter-response to cover for the excesses

of the previous solution.

9. *Systemic interventions, because they seek to understand a situation broadly, do not necessarily look for the cause of a problem to reside near the symptom.* Often the real source of an organizational problem may be a deeply seated value that only resurfaces over a span of years. For example, Terry Walling at CRM reports the most typical periods in which most pastors resign from their churches is in years two to three of their tenure, years five to seven, or years fifteen to seventeen. The reasons for resignations at two to three years are that the pastor never "fit" the system of the congregation. The resignations at years fifteen to seventeen occurred because at that point the pastor most often made a decision as to whether his entire career would be spent with that church or if he would move on. However, pastors resigning in years five to seven did so because it was typically at that time that they ran head long into a values conflict with the church (Walling 1996). This is illustrative as to how systemic conflict can go unnoticed for years then rear its ugly head at a later time. Because pastoral turnover occurs and the new candidate optimistically believes it will be different for him, many deep-seated issues are swept under the rug, only to reappear later. Unless a full picture is developed with a systemic view, such problems will eventually lead to church decline or death.

10. *Systemic interventions recognize that most organizational problems are complex and therefore any intervention must focus on high leverage issues and have a self-sustaining, multiplicational dynamic.* Most pastors in smaller churches (eighty to two hundred attenders) struggle to perform all the expected duties placed on them, from preaching, visitation, leadership development, evangelism training, and so on. In light of this, a systems thinker recognizes the need to identify points of high leverage. With finite resources (e.g. time, energy, credibility) interventions must have the ability to identify points of high leverage that can be self-sustaining in a widening circle of influence in order to achieve major change.

11. *Systemic interventions also seek to identify long-term consequences and unintentional side effects.* Every intervention produces side effects not anticipated when it is introduced. Many of these take months or years to fully develop. By comparing one's local church situation to systems archetypes tracked in thousands of diverse organi-

zational contexts, one can begin to anticipate longer term impacts of any suggested changes. However, each situation will be unique and will need to be studied in that light.

12. *Systemic interventions anticipate compensating feedback (where pushing harder on usual answers produce increasingly diminishing results).* Such interventions then will not simply empower the church to better perform what they have always done as important as it may be to recognize God's working in the past. Rather change agents with a systems perspective will seed client churches with new ideas for growth as well as identify unexploited strengths already resident in the system.

13. *Systemic interventions cultivate a healthy interdependence between the participants in a system.* Just as a single, linear intervention can be short-sighted, an individual cannot sufficiently diagnose a system single-handedly. Good systemic analysis is synergistic, involving cross-functional teams of people who from multiple viewpoints, skills, and influential positions can identify the mental models and systemic structures that create the observable events of the church's life. By engaging participants in dialogue and problem solving, key leverage points can be utilized and shared vision can emerge.

14. *Systemic interventions look for the source of today's problems among yesterday's solutions.* Regardless of how clever and well-intentioned previous solutions were, the law of unintended side effects, the reality of institutionalization, and the nature of reinforcing and balancing cycles means that the secrets to the current structure will often be found by looking in the past. Sometimes this will include the distant past but more often than not will be found more closely linked to decisions made more recently. Systemic mapping will be aimed at uncovering such issues.

15. *Systemic interventions empower the participants of a system to diagnose their own situations and continually resource each other.* Any intervention that keeps the client church dependent on outside resources ultimately disempowers the system.

16. *Systemic interventions distinguish between multiple levels of systemic reality (events, patterns of events, systemic structures and mental models).* Most interventions are aimed at surface-level observable symptoms which are characterized by events or at best patterns of events. However,

many of the more deeply-rooted organizational problems reside at the level of systemic structures or mental models (corporate culture). These often go untreated by typical consulting methods and church growth interventions. Yet, it is when interventions exercise changes in systemic structure and mental models that they achieve their greatest amount of leverage.

Systemic Church Growth Interventions: Case Studies

Church growth consultants realize that church growth interventions imposed on local congregations in a piecemeal fashion do not work, and perhaps more seriously, create unintended consequences (Stevens and Collins 1993:xii). Indeed many pastors, who in their eagerness to see vitality restored to their congregations, rush off to the latest seminar and return to install a new model, only to have it blow up in their faces. As a result, some consultants have taken a larger systems view of congregational life and crafted interventions that are systems-aware (George 1994:32, 109). This approach results in church growth strategies that are sensitive to the complex interdependencies found in organizational systems. By equipping pastors with a system view of their churches and by giving them tools to successfully intervene, these consultants are offering new hope for plateaued churches. In my doctoral research, two systemic church growth interventions, Carl George's "Meta-Church" model and Church Resource Ministries' "Refocusing Networks" were studied. Though space does not permit an extensive analysis of these two intervention strategies some generalized observations can be noted.

Both Refocusing Networks and the Meta-Church model demonstrate the qualities of systemic church growth interventions earlier in this study. For empowering turnaround in churches they both included technologies for mapping systemic variables. In the Refocusing process the "Minimum Barrel" illustration is used to map a church's progress in "Eight Essential Elements." In the Meta-Church the Meta-Globe and apprentice-mapping conventions focus attention on hidden, systemic variables in a church's leadership and ministry structure.

Moreover, they both assume that the interplay of complex forces operate in churches to produce observable outcomes. Most of these forces are not under the immediate control of the pastor or change agent. Consequently both church growth interventions seek leverage points for amplifying the change throughout the client church system. The Refocusing process does this by seeking first to impact the personal vision and call-

ing of the pastor in Phase One of the Refocusing process. The transformation he experiences then becomes the springboard from which congregational impact is sought. In the Meta-Church a key leverage point for systemic change is the ability to identify and enhance coaching-apprenticing relationships. The exchange of resources that happens in these coaching relationships strengthens the systemic inter-connectivity of the whole organism. Like a neuron firing electrical impulses, each coach-apprentice relationship serves as a vital link in the flow of information and skills throughout the whole body.

It is also important to differentiate in both systemic interventions (Refocusing and the Meta-Church) between the visible form of the strategy ("networks" in the case of the former or "small groups," in the case of the later) and the systemic power that operates underneath the hood. Indeed most "end-users" of these strategies (lay-people or pastors) will not understand or appreciate how the intervention strategy used manipulates hidden dynamics within the church. For example, most congregations will not understand that in the context of the network or small group that a shared vision has the opportunity to emerge in ways not common to larger assemblages of people. They will not be cognizant that the mental models they implicitly hold (one of the levels of systemic reality) may be challenged or modified in their exchange one with another in the context of a small group.

Clearly, much more could be written concerning how both the Meta-Church and Refocusing networks achieve or exhibit systemic purposes. Suffice it to say now that each intervention strategy contain elements that give them transformational impact (or conversely detract from their impact) within church systems. The desired result will be a better understanding of how systemic church growth interventions work in local congregations.

Conclusion

As more has been learned about how congregations respond to planned change church growth consulting has undergone a paradigm shift to incorporate insights emerging from the field of systems theory. This shift promises to dramatically improve the effectiveness of the interventions that are installed while minimizing the occurrence of unintended consequences. To better understand the nature of this development and the promises it may bring further research is needed. For now, it may suffice to recognize the trends and to observe the continued developments in the field of church growth consulting.

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The Holy Bible.

NOTES

[1]. Church growth research was brought to the forefront of the evangelical community with Donald McGavran's book, <u>Understanding Church Growth</u>, in 1970.

[2]. This is not to ascribe an inordinate amount of power to "technological" strategies or conceptual models for helping churches that are not growing. As Peter Wagner has pointed out, church growth results from a combination of spiritual, institutional, and contextual factors (Wagner 1987:108). Without a doubt brilliant church growth insights are no substitute for the divine work of God in a congregation. Nevertheless, if outside intervention is needed, consulting seems to offer the most impact whether the intervener advises the congregation regarding spiritual, institutional, or contextual issues.

[3]. My Ph.D. dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission entitled, "Training Turnaround Leaders: Systemic Approaches for Reinstating Growth in Plateaued Churches," (1998) examines in some depth Carl George's Meta-Church model and CRM's Refocusing Networks as systemic interventions.

[4]. For insightful critiques to the Natural Church Development model see Ella and Yeakley's spring 1999 book review on *Natural Church Development* in the Journal of the American Society for Church Growth or George Hunter's article, "Examining the 'Natural Church Development Project" listed in the Endnotes.

[5]. The Fifth Discipline is that discipline of systems thinking when Senge says undergirds the other four disciplines that make up a "learning organization."

[6]. One wonders why the average tenure of the North American pastor is 3 and ½ years!

[7]. The fire-fighting analogy used here was taken from Kim's work (1992:3).

[8]. Though Achan confessed and was stoned for his sin, all of Israel was held responsible for the failure (Joshua 7:1-10).