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Moving from Church Growth to Kingdom Growth

Reggie McNeal

Introduction

The kingdom era has arrived. Its outcroppings are everywhere to be seen for those who know how to see. Climbing to the top of the heap of church growth can put churches on the sidelines of the new kingdom movement.

"I know what has made us successful in the past will not bring us success in the future," the pastor told me at the 20th anniversary of a very thriving congregation. "I've done everything the church growth experts have told me to do," he went on, "but the stuff we are all proud of doesn't matter to those people out there who are completely uninterested in the church we've built." He is in the process of leading that congregation to become more missional, to redesign its ministry to intersect the emerging culture.

This article examines the shift from church growth to kingdom growth. It includes some theological reflection on the mission of the church and the kingdom of God. We take a look at some demographic challenges of the kingdom era, largely as it relates to globalization and urbanization in a global context. We also note some of the shifts that church leaders must make, from perspectives to behaviors to ministry scorecard redesign.

The church growth movement legacy

The church growth movement may have been the last gasp renewal effort of the modern church. In the last quarter of the twentieth century church growth experts helped us understand congregations as systems. The church became a machine, complete with gear ratios for parking, attendance capacities of facilities, number of staff to attendance, prescribed number of con-

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tacts for turning visitors into members, and assimilation touches for turning casual participants into fully participating, dues-paying members. Numbers. Ratios. Systems. All very modern.

The church growth movement did two very important things. One, it took growth seriously, declaring unequivocally that God intended his church to grow. Intriguingly, most of the "growth" of the church growth era was simply a repackaging of the church from small shops into Sam's Wholesale Clubs. Overall market share of Christians to population both in terms of church membership and attendance has declined significantly during the church growth era. This is particularly marked in terms of generational affiliation. The only reason church attendance in North America is holding up at all is due to the fact that people are living longer.

The second contribution of the church growth movement was its missiological focus. Its emphasis on cultural exegesis helped prepare church leaders to think in different terms about connecting with the emerging culture. It set the stage for the shift from member to missionary mentality that will characterize the missional church of the next era.

In short, the church growth movement was a transition from the modern to the postmodern era. It has actually served as prelude to the emerging new work of God: the rise of the kingdom age.

Biblical and theological reflections on the kingdom of God

The kingdom and the church. The kingdom of God predates the church. It will survive the church era. The church is temporal; the kingdom is eternal.

While they are different, the church and kingdom are vitally related. Their point of contact is the redemptive mission of God in the world. The kingdom is the destination God has in mind for humanity, not the church. Jesus does not teach us to pray, "thy church come." When believers pray, "thy kingdom come," they put themselves at the disposal of a God who wants to reveal more and more his kingdom so that people will enter into it.

The Bible clearly reveals God's agenda of creating a people to partner with him in his redemptive mission in the world. The Old Testament is the record of God's creation of Israel to partner with him. As a "kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:3-6) Israel was to bear witness to the entire world about their king, who had just decidedly proven himself superior to the most powerful king on earth. The New Testament signals the transfer of this same responsibility to the new Israel, the church. Rescued out of slavery and darkness, believers are to bear witness to God (1 Pet. 2:5, 9).

Jesus used the word “church” twice; he referred to the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven approximately ninety times. Jesus was clearly about ushering in the kingdom in an unprecedented way.

The kingdom and the world. Jesus said that God so loved “the world.” The Bible is rich in revealing a God who has been working his purposes out through the nations throughout human history, often with people not considered to be part of the “chosen.”

The Old Testament is not just a story about God’s work through Israel. Melchizedek was a priest of God who instructed Abraham. Jonah is sent on an evangelistic crusade to Nineveh, and is chided by God who asked him how he could not care for a city with so many thousands. The Psalms and prophets are full of references to the perspective that the whole earth is the Lord’s, and he has redemptive purposes that extend to all the nations. In fact, the commissioning of Israel was for this express purpose, yet God did not limit himself to just using Israel to accomplish his purposes. Cyrus of Persia was even referred to in Messianic terms because of his role in repatriating Jews to their homeland. Without Esther’s work in the harem, and Nehemiah’s efforts in city-building, Ezra would have never had his Temple.

Matthew’s remarkable introduction of Jesus through the genealogical accounts intriguingly includes four women, all of whom are foreigners, some of whom are less than reputable. Tamar and Rahab were involved in prostitution, Ruth wormed her way into the story by some pretty cunning positioning, and Bathsheba enjoyed a highly celebrated adulterous relationship with David. These women represent tribes from Canaan, Moab, and the Hittites, as well as Israel. These commingled bloodlines in Jesus have led Ray Bakke to comment, “Not only did Jesus give his blood for the world, but he got his blood from the world.” And while the recruits for his initial disciple band were all Jews, Jesus trained them largely in “mission trips” in the region of the Decapolis. Jesus’ clear strategy was to demonstrate that the kingdom agenda of God involved the world beyond Israel, a direct challenge to the exclusivist tendencies and teachings of first-century Pharisaic Judaism. A clear indication of Paul’s conversion from Phariseeism was his determination to take the gospel to the world.

The kingdom and the emerging culture. Being kingdom-minded, then, would mean that we become much more attuned to the movement of God in the world at large. It means that changes in culture represent new front lines in the interface between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. This is why missional Christians see the emerging culture as a great oppor-

tunity for sharing the gospel while non-missional church people bemoan the collapse of the church culture.

Let's take a look at some of the more dramatic shifts underway today, with particular reference to the demography of simultaneous globalization and urbanization.

- Three-quarters of the sovereign nation-states that comprise the United Nations did not exist fifty years ago. During Australia's 1956 Olympics, 72 teams marched. In Sydney's 2000 games 199 teams paraded in the opening ceremonies (yet 40.5 percent of the world's population lives in just the two countries of India and China!). These new countries house and redistribute ancient cultures.
- The world isn't staying home. It's coming to North America. One Queens zip code has 133 nations in its census. The United States is the third largest Spanish speaking nation in the world; the fourth largest black nation in the world (beating out almost four dozen African nations). Missions is no longer geographically distant in North America, but it is still culturally distant.
- For the first time since the 5th century the majority of Christians are non-white, and non-Western. In 1900 over 80 percent of Christians were white, northern, and Western. Now it is just the reverse: 80 percent are brown, black, Asian and living in the southern hemisphere. Roughly 10 percent of the Arab world is Christian.
- We will add 1 billion people to the planet in the next decade. Most of them will live in cities, mirroring the urbanization of the last century. In 1900 8 percent of the world lived in cities. Now the majority of the world's population lives in cities. In China alone 30 million people move from rural to urban dwellings each year! The church is largely rural in its mindset in many countries, including North America. A kingdom agenda will force a missiology that includes 24/7 availability in cities and strategies to penetrate the towers of Hong Kong, Singapore, and Chicago (where 28,000 people daily live and work in the Hancock Tower—a population with no church).
- The new global economy is leaving billions of people and dozens of nations behind. The rules and wealth of an economy based on knowledge and networks are very different from those of the old manufacturing-based, commodities economy. The average commodity is worth one-fifth what it was a century and a half ago. This means those countries whose economics remain natural-

resource-based have to produce more and more to earn the same. As their populations grow these countries get poorer and poorer. In the mid-18th century someone working in the world's richest country was about five times wealthier than someone working in the poorest one. That ratio is no longer 5:1. It is now 390:1 and escalating rapidly. This lop-sided economic development raises kingdom issues for believers in North America, for these poor people are brothers and sisters in Christ. Remember Paul took up money from Gentiles to send back to Jews in Jerusalem.

The rehearsal of these tectonic shifts that are underway makes silly the agenda of many churches, concerned with their own organizational agenda. Does God not care about the high-rise city dwellers? Is abundant life unrelated to the chance for a person to receive education and participate in the creation of wealth? Only a kingdom-mindset will rally to these challenges.

God is always at work in the world. He is always on redemptive mission, and people are in the crosshairs of his redemptive scope. The people of God who want to experience kingdom growth have to get out in the world where God is at work and join him in his redemptive mission. This is both his invitation and his command. It is just this point that so many churches and church leaders miss. Kingdom growth is an antidote to the churchianity that grips the North American church, evidenced by its self-absorption and failure to engage the world in a redemptive way.

Shifting into kingdom growth

The shift from church growth to kingdom growth requires that we rethink our efforts in many areas of ministry.

The shift from church development to community transformation. In church growth we concentrated on building great churches with the assumption that great churches would make a difference in the community. We now know this assumption is suspect at best, if not totally off the mark. Church people are busier than ever doing church stuff. Trouble is, people outside the church don't think church is for them, so our resources are spent on the already-convicted by and large.

The driving idea behind kingdom growth is the church's being salt and light in the world, moving outside the church walls with ministry that gets the gospel into the street, targeting people for evangelism and ministry who are not (and may never be) church people. Planning no longer begins with the church calendar, but with the community calendar. Community needs are

assessed, not just church organizational needs. Every small group or Sunday School class, youth group, music ensemble, whatever, has the responsibility for determining how it will target the community beyond the church. This may mean partnering with a community agency to address a community social need. It may mean freeing up the church calendar in order to make time for the church to be active away from the church.

The shift from program-driven to people development. In the church growth era, church work largely revolved around program development. We had music programs, youth programs, education programs, programs for women, men, children, you name it, often with staff administrators who were employed by the church to run the program. Budgets were largely program budgets. Programs served as primary recruiting strategies for attracting members from other churches and became the predominate tool of evangelism strategies by giving church members something they could invite the unchurched to attend (thus getting them interested "in church" and hopefully eventually to become a believer).

In the kingdom era the emphasis is on people development. After all, people (not churches) are built to last. Life coaching will take the place of "Christian education" as people in the church give attention to fulfilling their life mission, which may or may not include making the church organization and program successful. Church members will be coached in their spiritual and life goals for their families, their finances, their ministry in the communities where they live, work, and go to school. Spiritual formation will move into prominence as people are no longer assumed to be growing simply because they are participants in church programming.

People development outside the church will take on as many forms as the need. It may mean intersecting street kids. It might mean that the church will become more involved with the arts or with providing sports and recreation opportunities for both kids and adults, sometimes in conjunction with school and community leagues and parks and recreations programs.

The shift from developing members to deploying missionaries. The church growth movement created "high expectation" church cultures with emphasis on membership. Strategies were developed for "assimilating" members into the church by helping people attend more, give more, serve more . . . guess where? At the church. People learned their gifts so they could pick up church jobs. As activities at the program-driven churches increased so did the need for an army of volunteers. The church was a very busy place, and becoming a church member meant

making a major commitment to an organization that was going to demand a lot from you for its success. That is, if you wanted to be “committed.”

Here’s a news flash: in the emerging culture, people don’t want to be “committed” or “assimilated” by the Borg or the church. They do not want to lose their life to the church. In a kingdom world, that dynamic of over-churching people is considered counter-productive to the movement. In kingdom growth, followers of Jesus strategize on how they can leverage their witness right where God has placed them in the world. They view their homes, their neighborhoods, schools, businesses, social clubs, health clubs, civic organizations, professional associations, as their primary place to be of service to the world that God loves. They may or may not see taking on church responsibilities as part of their call to be a missionary to the world. Churches who get this realize they must release their people to be missionaries, and make a priority of helping people think about how to be salt and light beyond the church. It also means a willingness to embrace multiple cultures, not just figure out how to attract more people to the church who are just like us and would make “good church members.”

By the way, North America is the largest speaking English mission field in the world. Why would we want to keep focusing on creating better church members when the need clearly is for more missionaries?

Staff responsibilities. In the old world of church growth, churches expected staff members to look after the church primarily, to provide for worship, pastoral care, and education of members and those who were attracted to the church. In this system the effectiveness of staff members was largely determined by their contribution to church programming and the satisfaction they engendered among church members. Their time was consumed by church work. The budgets they administered were line items for the various programs under their supervision.

In the new world of kingdom growth, church staff members have a different constituency, and spend their money and time differently. Increasingly they will add the community to their portfolio of responsibilities. Their ministry constituencies extend beyond those involved in their church-based and church-located programs. Their ministry agenda includes more than “outreach” concerns. It takes many forms, from the personal involvement of the staff member in community organizations and projects, to the inclusion of the community in the ministry agenda under their responsibility. Community ministry is not considered a

“second mile” assignment; it is at the core of the ministry. This means that budgetary shifts will also take place, with more money being allocated to community projects, perhaps partnering with other income stream providers for some community services.

Recontenting existing ministries. Not all ministry efforts in the kingdom era will be discarded. Many will just be re-contented. For instance, the church will become much more implicated into the various life components of teenagers: money education, educational support, and community service will receive attention in addition to traditional concerns of spiritual development and fellowship. Worship for the church will spill out of the sanctuary and into neighborhood venues. The recruitment of talent for various worship teams (particularly instrumental and technical talent) will become a major evangelistic arm of church ministry, particularly among teenagers and young adults. Small groups will add community ministry to their agendas of fellowship and spiritual growth. The list goes on and on.

Changing the scorecard. In the church growth era we measured results by what happened in the church in terms of attendance, participation, program growth, money growth, building expansion, etc.

In the kingdom era, we will not just count who comes in, but how many go out. We will celebrate life achievements of members, not just organizational achievements of the church. Staff members will be evaluated on how much time they spend on the community as well as on the satisfaction of the “clients” in their life coaching portfolio. The community leverage of the congregation will be assessed for missional effectiveness.

This scorecard redevelopment will not be easy. It will be particularly hard for those who judge themselves “successful” in church growth terms. It will require enormous courage on the part of church leaders whose primary constituencies at present are the church consumers we have created in the church growth era.

Conclusion

The move from church growth to kingdom growth is a move from a preoccupation with how to “do church” to an exploration of what it means to “be church” in the emerging world. This shift threatens many (particularly church culture people) and excites some. It is challenging to us all.

One thing is certain. God has initiated the kingdom era. He is a missionary God who is at work in the world in extraordinary ways. He is calling the church to join him on his redemptive

mission in the world. But he is not waiting on the church for permission to prosecute his agenda. The only question for us is whether we get cut in on the deal.

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