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## My Pilgrimage in Church Growth

Elmer L. Towns

*Liberty University*, [eltowns@liberty.edu](mailto:eltowns@liberty.edu)

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## My Pilgrimage in Church Growth

Elmer L. Towns

My pilgrimage with Church Growth began with my conversion. It was a deep conversion that affected every part of my life and it was a hard struggle because I didn't want to give up my self-righteousness. My mother had met my father at a dance in Savannah, Georgia, and my father was an alcoholic who eventually died of cirrhosis of the liver. There was not much godly influence in my boyhood home.

At age 6 a Jewel Tea route coffee man picked me up in his truck and took me to Eastern Heights Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia. Even though my mother wasn't highly religious, she was a woman of deep character and discipline. So she made sure that I went every Sunday to get a gold attendance pin and the coffee salesman was always there to take me to church. I had perfect attendance for fourteen years.

On Easter Sunday 1944 my entire Sunday school class went through confirmation class and we joined the church. The pastor asked each of the ones in the class a question, then he would turn to the rest of us and say, "Do you agree?" We nodded our heads. My question was, "Do you believe in the virgin birth?" I wasn't even sure what a virgin was, but I shook my head "yes" because I was supposed to. The last question was, "Do you believe that Christ is coming again?" I nodded my head "yes," but knew in my heart I was not ready to meet Him.

Throughout high school I knew that salvation was calling on the Lord, so as I would ride my bicycle to deliver papers, I would cry out maybe two or three dozen times, "Lord, save me." Even after I prayed, I knew I was not saved.

I asked a girl for a date to go to the movies, but she wanted to go to a prayer meeting at Bonna Bella Presbyterian Church where two boys from Columbia Bible College were weekend

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pastors. There were only a half-dozen at the prayer meeting, so we sat in a circle on the platform behind the pulpit. He did something that I had never seen before, he outlined his Bible message on a chalk board, and I followed along in my Bible. For the first time in my life I felt God was talking to me from Scripture.

The sun was setting as we began praying but when we finished, mosquitoes filled the room. The church had a new large concrete block sanctuary, but didn't have money to buy screens. The windows were open because it was hot, and mosquitoes flooded in. One of the pastors announced, "Let's ask God to give us screens and to show that we really mean it, let's all kneel." That was the first time I remembered kneeling in public. But it was not the fact of kneeling that irritated me, rather; asking God to personally intervene in life to give us screens was not a part of my theology.

After prayer meeting I said to the other young people standing around in front of the church, "You don't ask God to give you screens, you ask God to bless the President, bless your parents, and things like that."

The next Sunday during the closing exercises of Sunday school, Mr. Burroughs stood to address the group of about fifty people there, "You all know me, I own the local general store. If we're going to have a revival meeting at night, we've gotta have screens on these windows. I just counted, there are 34 screens in the church and each screen costs \$4.98. I'll buy the first four!" then he sat down.

Mrs. Acorn yelled across the church, "Can I buy four at that price?"

"Yes, Woman, that's what I meant." People all over the church began lifting their hands telling how many they would buy. The young preacher stopped the process so he could get accountability, and began writing names on the chalk board. I lifted my hand and said, "I'll buy two." Growing up in the Presbyterian church I had been assigned an offering envelope, and since the first grade I had always put in \$.10 each week. Even when I made more money delivering the papers, I didn't give more. But when I gave \$10.00 for screens that was the first time I remember giving to God. That experience convinced me there was a personal God who heard and answered prayer. But it also convinced me I didn't know Him.

Each night at the revival meeting there were between five and twelve people saved. The entire community was moved

along with a sense of God's working in the local Presbyterian church. On Thursday night July 25, no one came forward. One of the student pastors, Bill Harding, came to the front of the communion table and said, "Someone here is supposed to get saved tonight, and you are too fearful to come forward. You are holding on to that pew in front of you and refusing to come forward." I looked down at my hands clutching the pew, and instantly removed them. The student pastor appealed, "Let go of that pew and come forward." I was under deep conviction, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"Go home and kneel down by your bed," Bill Harding said, then continued, "look into Heaven and say 'Lord Jesus, I've never done it before; I'm lost, come into my heart and save me.'" Standing toward the back of the church I determined to do that.

Around 11:15 as I got into bed, I was struggling with what Bill Harding told me to do. I got out of my bed, looked into Heaven, but I couldn't say "save me" because I had prayed it so many times. Only those who have been converted understand the power of Satan to keep people out of the kingdom of Heaven. I refused to pray what Bill Harding had told me, so I prayed the Lord's Prayer and got back in bed. For about five minutes I tossed and turned, my conviction growing deeper. Then I got out of bed to pray again, but still couldn't bring myself to admit I was lost or ask God to save me, so I prayed, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die . . ."

Again I got back into bed and conviction overwhelmed me to the fact I could hardly breathe. There was a supernatural struggle going on for my soul, and God wouldn't let me go.

A third time I got down on my knees, and did exactly as Bill Harding had instructed. I looked out through the bedroom window into Heaven, "Lord Jesus, I've never done it before; I'm lost . . ." When I confessed that I was lost, an overwhelming dread gripped me, as though I were already in Hell. It only took two or three seconds for me to cry out loud, "Lord Jesus, come into my heart and save me." He did and I have never to this day doubted my salvation. Just as a blind man who was healed knows he can see, so I know I was lost and now I know I am found.

I did two things in that darkened room, first I jumped to my feet and began singing *Amazing Grace*. My father was drunk in the bed next to me asleep, so I sang quietly under my breath. Then I went to the dresser where I kept my Bible, found Romans 1:16 and memorized it, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16).

That night I had been ashamed to go forward in the revival meeting, but I determined I would not be ashamed of my Lord again.

I had a scholarship to Armstrong State College that not only paid my tuition, but was from the Chamber of Commerce. The businessmen in the community who were members of the Chamber were going to give me suits, shirts, shoes, the entire outfit for college. I went to the office and turned the scholarship down, telling them that I had been called to preach the Gospel. I went to Columbia Bible College to study for the ministry.

The first Saturday night at college, Jack Seay a World War II Merchant Marine, found me sitting alone in my room, and took me to the Greyhound Bus station, "Let's win some souls," he announced. I didn't know how to do it so he gave me a Gospel tract by the Gideons, *The Roman Road to Salvation*.<sup>1</sup> He instructed me to just sit down next to someone, make friendly conversation and read the tract to them. "If you get in any trouble, come get me and I'll help you." That evening I witnessed several times, but don't remember winning anyone to Christ. But Jack Seay led two different people to pray to receive Christ.

I was a whirlwind of Christian service activity during my freshman year. Every Saturday night I worked a street meeting in downtown Columbia, South Carolina, and it was there I first led someone to Jesus Christ. On Sunday morning I taught Sunday school in a mission work called Capital Heights Presbyterian Church. Sunday afternoon I taught a Good News Bible class to children in an African-American neighborhood.

At the beginning of my second semester in college, I shared a suite with three other boys. We decided to start a church in the neighborhood where we taught Good News Bible classes. We decided to locate the church in an old "shotgun" house on a dirt street that faced the railroad tracks. My roommate went by the realty office and paid \$4 rent for the first month. Every night the four of us would pray long and hard for God to bless that church. I had a vision of God blessing that work so that maybe forty or fifty people would get saved. I could see us tearing out all the walls to make a small chapel (the house didn't have running water and out back was a biffy).

The first Sunday morning we canvassed the neighborhood going to every house inviting people to our church service. We had one lady and five or six children. I didn't preach, but I taught a Sunday school class of two or three children in the kitchen. During the week we prayed even harder and the next Sunday we again canvassed the neighborhood and a different lady attended with seven or eight children. We were growing.

During the week we prayed even harder for God's blessing. The next Sunday after we canvassed the neighborhood, no one came to the church. A lady who attended told us, "We are not coming to a white boys church." They also stopped the children from coming. I had failed in my first attempt at church planting, even though my heart was pure, and I prayed extensively for the blessing of God. I had much to learn about New Testament soul winning, church planting and cross-cultural evangelism.

I began my second year of college in a different dormitory where there were a number of World War II veterans. Because they were older, most of them had weekend country churches, i.e., Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist. As I prayed with them for their churches, I began to pray, "God give me a church." By all reasoning, I was too young to pastor a church, I was ignorant of all that a pastor did, and I was too immature to know that I was immature. But God answered my prayer and I became weekend pastor of a church in Savannah, Georgia.

In late September 1952, I led singing at a Youth for Christ rally in Savannah, Georgia. Mrs. Silla Hair, a petite woman of great character, approached me after the Saturday night service to ask, "Would you preach in my church tomorrow?" I told her "no," I had to go to my Sunday school class to thank them for the money they had given me for college tuition. Sunday morning I did as I told her, and when I finished thanking the class, the door to the room slightly opened and Mrs. Hair was motioning for me. She thought I meant I would preach after I finished with the Sunday school class, I thought I had told her "no."

That morning I preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church to five women and approximately twelve children. The church building had once been a beautiful southern "lady" with four large columns, a steeple and five stained-glass windows on each side of the auditorium. The chancel was mahogany and the crushed velvet cushions had the musty smell of age. But like a beautiful elderly woman with wrinkles, the white paint on the framed church had cracked and many of the frames around the stained-glass windows were rotten. It was a dilapidated building. Mrs. Hair felt children in the neighborhood needed Bible teaching.

Located in the west part of Savannah, the church had once been the home to the wealthy who inhabited the large two story mansions in the neighborhood. But after World War II the rich moved out to the suburbs, and the mansions were divided into two and three apartments for the poor.

Mrs. Hair had checked and found out I could catch a train from Savannah back to Columbia, South Carolina, at 8:00 p.m.

on Sunday evening so she asked; "Will you preach the evening service?" They promised to have a crowd, and that evening there were approximately ten adults in attendance. Mr. William Miller, the biggest drunk in the neighborhood, came forward to receive Christ as Savior. He became one of my greatest supporters during the next year.

I began practicing Church Growth principles on that little Presbyterian church and had a vision of seeing at least four hundred in attendance, even though the auditorium would hold only 175. I began pastoring that church when I was 19 years of age, but shortly I turned 20. Each Saturday morning I traveled 150 miles to Savannah and that afternoon I would make 20 or 30 evangelistic calls throughout the neighborhood. People came to kneel at the altar to receive Christ. The little church grew during the year to an average of over 75. Easter Sunday in 1953 we had over a 100 in attendance and I thought the millennium was around the corner. The book *Stories About My First Church*<sup>2</sup> tells many of the defeats I had in this wonderful little congregation, as well as a few victories. The main emphasis of this book was not what I did for the church or the people, but rather what God was doing in my heart to prepare me for His service. I loved the people of that church and realize that when I focused on soul winning, the little church grew.

While at Columbia Bible College I was greatly influenced by my Presbyterian heritage. I was reformed in theology, and amillennial in eschatology. I was infected with the sophomore disease of "knowing it all," so I argued with any and everyone at college about predestination and five-point Calvinism. Don't sophomores have all the theological answers? Yet there was a great dichotomy between my theology and practice. I never questioned whether a person was predestinated when I was trying to win them to Christ. Technically, I evangelized like a committed Armenian, but theoretically I was a committed Calvinist.

The same dichotomy influenced my Sunday morning worship service. For the first thirty minutes I conducted a traditional Presbyterian liturgical church service. I began with the Invocation and included all of the things that were practiced on me as I grew up in a Presbyterian church, i.e., The Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, pastoral prayer and of course we had responsive readings from both the Old and New Testament. When I stood in the pulpit to preach, I preached like a Pentecostal or Baptist: loud, emotionally, and gave urgent invitations for people to repent and come kneel at the altar.

While in the church, I was voted undercare of the Presbytery (this is the same as Baptists who give a license for ministerial

candidates). I was originally assigned to be supervised by Dr. Charles Woodbridge of the Independent Presbyterian Church, but he left to become one of the founding faculty members of Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California. Since Dr. Woodbridge had made such an impact on my life, I determined to go to Fuller Theological Seminary but the Presbytery balked, they said, "No!" because it was not Presbyterian.

I applied to Fuller but they turned me down because Columbia Bible College was not accredited. I wrote to Dr. Woodbridge and asked for his intervention, and applied a second time. They told me to transfer to an accredited college if I wanted to attend Fuller. Between my junior and senior year, I transferred to Northwestern College, Minneapolis, Minnesota, where Billy Graham had just resigned as president. This experience deepened my view of evangelism.<sup>3</sup>

Little did I know that Northwestern was primarily a dispensational school, quite different from my covenant background. Also, Columbia Bible College had been a deeper-life orientation to the Christian life, but Northwestern had a much stronger evangelistic environment. God was stretching my perspective. For my Bible major in seminary, I read the *Dawn of World Redemption*<sup>4</sup> and *The Triumph of the Crucified*.<sup>5</sup> These books were a theological interpretation of dispensationalism, and they functionally changed my theological thinking to become a dispensationalist.<sup>6</sup>

Fuller Theological Seminary turned me down a third time. So I applied and was accepted at Dallas Theological Seminary, becoming a major in Systematic Theology. I investigated the principles by which biblical data was placed into a system, and that influenced my later thinking when I arranged biblical and cultural data into a system of principles for evangelism and Church Growth.<sup>7</sup>

The second week at Dallas, my wife and I attended a Presbyterian church in the morning—which was evangelistically dead—and in the evening we attended the First Baptist Church where W. A. Criswell was pastor. It was a great church of 4,000 in attendance, and there was a warmth in the service, plus a passionate invitation for people to get saved. I loved the church, but I was not Baptist. That evening my wife had severe cramps and we had to rush her to the emergency room where a large cyst was removed from her ovaries. While she was in the emergency room, I filled out the hospital application papers, and told the receptionist we absolutely had no money. The receptionist asked, "What is your church?" I told her I was a new student at Dallas Seminary and hadn't joined a church yet. Since it was a



Baptist hospital and I attended First Baptist Church, she put down I was "Baptist."

When I was allowed into the recovery room, Dr. Schaffer, the visitation pastor from First Baptist Church, was by her bed. He greeted me,

"Don't worry, Kids," the gray-head Schaffer told us, "First Baptist Church will take care of everything for you." I was overwhelmed that one of the largest churches in America would be concerned about a young couple. Schaffer went on to say, "And someone from your Sunday school class will be at your house every night." We hadn't even attended Sunday school, but we were assigned to an age-graded class. When I got home that evening, a couple was sitting in their car at the curb in front of our duplex. He introduced himself as our Sunday school teacher, his wife went in and cleaned the house, and prepared dinner. Before they left they said, "Someone will be here every night from the class."

I told my wife, "Let's go to this church and learn how to build a great church to the glory of God—but let's don't become Baptists."

In the first thirteen years of First Baptist Church Dr. Criswell preached chapter by chapter from Genesis through Revelation. We attended the church from Romans 4 to 1 Corinthians 1. When it came to Romans 6, he announced, "The baptism in Romans, chapter 6, is not water baptism . . ." I agreed with him. That evening I brought my Greek New Testament and sat five rows from the front of the church. Dr. Criswell then read, "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4, *KJV*). Then he said, "This is not water . . .," and to that I echoed, "AMEN."

Can one sermon change a life? Absolutely! At the end of his sermon Dr. Criswell said, "If you have been buried with Jesus Christ in spiritual baptism . . . if you have been raised again to new life . . ." Criswell stopped and dramatically repeated the statement five or six times. Finally he asked, "If . . . you've been baptized into Jesus by the Holy Spirit, why not tell the world in water?"<sup>8</sup>

"AMEN" I said, and at that moment, I became a Baptist. I was willing to be immersed and turned my back on my Presbyterian heritage. All of the arguments I used against my Baptist friends at Columbia Bible College vanished. All of my Calvinistic five-point biases evaporated. That sermon changed forever my view of the church and how it should grow.<sup>9</sup>

I remained a friend of Dr. Criswell until his death, and had the privilege of preaching in both his Sunday morning and Wednesday night prayer meetings. So to show my appreciation for his influence on my life, I wrote the story I just included and mailed it to him. He received it and read it the day before he died. This letter was read at his funeral, how a Presbyterian ministerial student became a Baptist under his influence.

The last two years at Dallas Theological Seminary, I pastored Faith Bible Church in a poor section of West Dallas. Approximately 25 people attended when they called me as pastor. I made the same commitment to door-to-door evangelism I made in West Savannah and built the church up to about 105 in attendance. I did not understand much about Church Growth, I just tried to win people to Christ.

I had Homer Duncan, editor of the *Missionary Crusader*, speak at our church while he was also speaking at a missions conference at Dallas Theological Seminary. Homer stayed in our home, and as he was telling us goodbye, he asked, "What do you think of my newspaper?" No one should ever ask my opinion, because I am always very free to give it. So I responded, "Actually, it's not very missionary . . ." The newspaper included three sermons from great pulpiteers from the past such as Spurgeon, Moody, or Wesley. There were several other Christian newspapers like it, so I said, "Your paper doesn't have enough difference to make people want to read it and I don't think it's a good investment of God's money."

"How would you change the newspaper?" Homer Duncan asked me.

"I would fill it with missionary news," was my simple answer.

He said nothing in reply, but once he got back to his home he wrote to ask me to write a monthly article entitled, "Missionary World at a Glance."

For the next six years I wrote a monthly article surveying what was happening among foreign missionaries. At that time this approach was innovative because there was no interdenominational Christian magazine giving an overview of what was happening for the cause of Christ around the world. I determined to be a reporter of the news, rather than write devotional or theological articles about missions. Little did I know that I would become a reporter of great churches in the Church Growth movement.

In the library at Dallas Theological Seminary was a very large magazine rack containing missionary letters and magazines from most of the interdenominational mission boards.

Once a month I would go to the library around 9:00 pm at night and read one magazine after another, writing short summary paragraphs, not finishing till 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning.

My missionary writing opened the door to my first teaching position at Dallas Bible College, located a block away from Dallas Theological Seminary. The missions professor at Dallas Bible College had returned suddenly to the mission field because of an emergency. I was asked to teach "Introduction to Foreign Missions" and I agreed. Then they asked if I would teach a second course, i.e., "Introduction to Philosophy," a course also taught by the missions professor. I also agreed to that.

During my four years at Dallas I attended Southern Methodist University during summer school, working on a MA in philosophy of education. I was learning that one can do a lot of work for God if you discipline yourself to do one project at a time, and eliminate many of the things you do for pleasure and entertainment.

During my last year at Dallas I was pastoring Faith Bible Church, taking a full load at Dallas Theological Seminary, teaching two courses at Dallas Bible College, plus I was working on two theses at the same time. I was writing my thesis for Dallas Theological Seminary, as well as for Southern Methodist University.

Upon graduation from Dallas Theological Seminary and Southern Methodist University, I became an instructor of Christian Education at Midwest Bible College at St. Louis, Missouri. It was a small non-accredited Bible college with fewer than 200 students, yet during my first year there it became accredited with the American Association of Bible Colleges. Two events that first year changed my life.

First, I attended a Sunday school convention in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where I also attended the Research Commission of the National Sunday School Association. Some of the most respected teachers of Bible colleges attended, i.e., Henrietta Mears, Howard Hendricks, Lois LeBar, etc.

Members of the research commission were invited to the home of Drs. Ed and Francis Simpson to talk about accrediting degrees in Christian Education. That evening I took minutes of the discussion. At the end of the meeting, the president of the AABC appointed a committee to write the standards for Christian Education majors in Bible colleges. And because I had taken minutes, I was placed on the committee. I learned that when you are around great Christian leaders, do their "grunt" work if you want to be influential.<sup>10</sup>

Because of that committee, I traveled to Western Canada vis-

iting the cities of Winnipeg, Manitoba; Calgary and Three Hills, Alberta, conducting seminars to prepare Bible colleges for accreditation.<sup>11</sup> I had no idea that that work would prepare me to be president of Winnipeg Bible College, 1961-65.

A second thing happened in Fort Wayne, Indiana, I met Dr. Clay Risley, president of the National Sunday School Association, and when I got home I wrote him a friendly letter thanking him for his influence on the Sunday school movement. Two days later I got a long-distance call asking if I would be willing to head up a national Sunday school convention in St. Louis. At the time, there was no effective pastoral and/or interdenominational organization among evangelicals in St. Louis. Dr. Risley asked if I would pull the churches together, raise money to rent the city auditorium, and host a national convention. This experience taught me to think city-wide, think big, and trust God for the results.

When I signed a contract to rent Kiehl Auditorium for approximately \$4,000, I was only making \$3,600 a year in total salary; that rental price overwhelmed me.

I invited all the city pastors to an organizing lunch, they in turn hired me as executive director for the St. Louis Sunday School Association. I visited all the churches, raising support and money for the Sunday school convention. Until that time my mind had shut out Pentecostals. I just didn't understand the movement. But during those days I spoke in many Pentecostal churches, met with many of their pastors, and found that they loved the Lord as much as we did and they lived godly pure lives. From that event forward, I became committed to the total body of Christ and the work God was doing on this earth.

While a student at Dallas, I had lunch with Dr. Criswell where he shared with me the laws of Sunday school growth. Criswell got these from A. V. Washburn who had been president at the Sunday school Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (1957-1978).<sup>12</sup> Criswell told me that these laws would work in every church, no matter what denomination, no matter what size, and he concluded the conversation by saying, "If you build your Sunday school, your Sunday school will build your church." That perspective became a foundation for my Church Growth orientation.<sup>13</sup>

1. Enrollment increases in proportion to workers at a ratio of ten to one.
2. The building sets the pattern for educational growth.
3. Sunday school units usually reach *maximum growth in a few months*.
4. Dividing classes by school grades provide the logical ba-

sis for adding new units.

5. Enrollment and attendance increase in proportion to outreach.<sup>14</sup>

I developed a sermon that I had learned from Dr. Criswell on the laws of Sunday school growth. I went to all the evangelical churches of St. Louis preaching growth through Sunday school outreach. It was a sermon of encouragement, challenge and vision for what God could do in their church. Therefore, I was sharpening my focus on Church Growth. I knew the Southern Baptists had discovered workable principles to grow a Sunday school, later I expanded my focus to include total Church Growth.

The National Sunday School Convention was held in October 1960, since it was election month our theme was "VOTE Sunday School." They had the largest registration until that time. I was on the platform making announcements, coordinating events and solving problems. I taught a number of workshops, one was, "The Laws of Sunday School Growth." Henrietta Mears, President of Gospel Light, and director of Christian Education at First Presbyterian Church, Hollywood, California, came and sat on the second row.<sup>15</sup> I should have been intimidated by her presence, but I don't think I was. Her presence was more of an encouragement than intimidation. Afterwards she told me, "I want you to preach this message to every church in America; every church needs the challenge of growing by winning souls and teaching the Word of God."

While at Midwest Bible College, I wrote my first book. I didn't have a clue how to get a book published, so I decided to do it myself. I couldn't find any resources or textbooks for the course on youth work, so I began writing up some of my class notes. Also, I had some students write up my lectures as term papers. Then as a class projects, we decided to print the books ourselves. I purchased 10,000 sheets of paper and hauled them into a classroom. Students brought in three typewriters and began typing the 11 chapters onto mimeograph stencils. Some students were typing, some were running the mimeograph machine, and others were punching holes for the plastic binder. And in one evening, we produced a book beginning around 6:00 pm, and working to midnight, we produced a hundred copies of *Teaching Teens*.<sup>16</sup>

I sponsored a city-wide youth workers' convention with approximately 200 in attendance. After giving a free book to each class member, around 11 students, we sold the rest of the books for \$5.00 each to pay for supplies and lots of pizza.

Then I got the idea of putting on seminars in different

churches to train lay workers for successful youth work. I bought another 10,000 sheets of paper, borrowed the school's mimeograph machine, and one evening at home mimeographed the entire book in my basement. Then, as I needed copies of the book for my seminars, I punched the holes and bound them with plastic binders. I remember having 82 piles of paper around the edge of my basement. There were stacks of paper on the washer, the dryer, and the ping-pong table; plus boxes, suitcases, etc. My children walked around the basement to help me collate the books. When they complained, I told them, "When we get these books finished and sold, I'll take you to McDonald's." After that, my kids would ask, "Do you have any more books we can help make?" This experience taught me it's one thing to be an exciting speaker on youth work, but when you have written a book you have credibility in the eyes of your listeners.

Because I was on the research council for the Accrediting Association for Bible Colleges (AABC), I became president of Winnipeg Bible College, Winnipeg, Canada, when I was only 27 years old. I was thrust into a position that I naively thought I could do. I had no idea of the intricacies of running a college, but I jumped into it with the enthusiasm of youth. The college doubled in students twice while I was there, plus it became accredited by the AABC and received a vote by the Manitoba legislature giving us the right to offer collegiate and seminary degrees (equivalent to regional accreditation in the United States).

The college yearbook staff did their own paste-up for the yearbook. I thought, "Why can't I do the same thing for my book *Teaching Teens*?" So, I paid to have the transcript typeset, then I pasted up the pages so they were camera ready.

I met Bob Butts, director of the Calgary Youth for Christ. He not only was a great preacher, but he had great talent drawing cartoons. Bob announced my speaking with a poster of a bunch of high school kids in a hot rod, it appealed to the youth of that day. I asked if he could do a series of cartoons for my book *Teaching Teens*. The artwork made the book more sellable.

Everywhere I went preaching for the college, I used preaching opportunities at youth rallies to recruit for the college and that made attendance grow. I gave away copies to potential donors, demonstrating to them that I understood youth and could reach them.

I still didn't know how to publish a book. I received a phone call from Christian Publishing Company in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, asking if they could buy the book. I sold it for \$500, the largest amount of money I had ever seen in my life.

After five years in Canada, I became part of the founding

faculty of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois.<sup>17</sup> It seems that every college where I taught was struggling financially. Trinity had 95 students when I arrived, the administration was housed in a large mansion in Bannockburn, Illinois, and there was a small classroom building with four classrooms, one large enough for chapel.

Dr. Ken Kantzer, dean, had a great vision of building a divinity school atmosphere to prepare young men and women for full-time Christian service. To him a divinity school was different from a theological seminary because it had the research foundation of a university, yet the curriculum of a seminary. Many of the leading evangelical scholars in Christianity came to teach at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, i.e., Wilbur Smith, Gleason Archer, Oliver Buswell, Carl F. H. Henry, Kenneth Scott Latourette, John Warwick Montgomery, plus Paul Little from Intersarsity Christian Fellowship. In the early days, I was one of four unknown faculty members who did most of the “grunt” work, i.e., what was usually done by committees. The scholars just taught and counseled with students. Our weekly faculty meeting consisted of three hours of scholarly discussion concerning the merits of proposed thesis and dissertation topics. Here I was stretched in every direction by the scholarship of some of the best minds in evangelicalism.

During the last 60s Donald McGavran took his sabbatical from Fuller Theological Seminary and taught for a quarter at Trinity. We had several conversations together, usually before or after faculty meetings. At the time, I never realized I would be a part of the Church Growth movement, nor did I realize there would be such a movement. I saw him as a professor of foreign missions who was interested in evangelism through church planting on the mission field. I never realized then he would become a factor in the American Church Growth movement.

I was Associate Professor of Christian Education and my main thrust was building churches by building strong Sunday schools. One day while teaching a class, I mentioned that the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, was the largest church in America. One of my students disagreed saying, “Dr. Jack Hyles of First Baptist Church in Hammond, Indiana, has the largest church in America.” When I asked how many that church had in attendance, the student said, “2,600 in weekly attendance.” I offered that Dr. Criswell at the First Baptist Church in Dallas had 4,200 in weekly attendance.

“I think you’re both wrong,” a student in the back row interrupted us, “there is a hillbilly preacher in Ohio—I think it’s Akron—who has the biggest Sunday school in the world.” The stu-

dent went on to say that he thought his Sunday school was over 6,000. I didn't give it much thought at the time.

Next Sunday afternoon I was reading the list of the ten best selling books in the Sunday edition of the *Chicago Tribune*. Then the thought hit me, "What would be the ten largest churches in America?" When an idea captures you, you must have the courage to take it to its full fruition. I began planning how I would find the ten largest churches in America.

First of all, I realized that churches do not keep attendance of worship, so I would have to find the ten largest Sunday schools. Second, I assumed that the largest churches would be in the South because of the Christian influence of the Bible Belt (that was a wrong assumption, the largest were in Indiana, Michigan and Ohio). Next, I assumed that the largest churches would be Southern Baptist because they understood the laws of Sunday school growth (that was a wrong assumption, the largest were Independent Baptist). Finally, I assumed that the largest churches would be the most liberal in theology and/or those who would compromise their standards of separation from worldly amusements. My assumption was that people would attend a church where they let down their standards of membership and attendance. Again, I was wrong; churches with the strongest commitment to its doctrine and lifestyle were growing. I should have realized that sheep don't jump into a pasture when the fence is down, they jump out.

To find the ten largest Sunday schools, I planned a three-fold strategy. First, I advertised in *Christian Life* magazine (where I was Sunday school editor). During the late 60s *Christian Life* magazine was the largest and most influential in evangelical circles. Second, I wrote to every major denomination using my friendship with Sunday school directors as a leverage to get every denomination to help me find the largest Sunday schools in their constituency. Third, I had preached in many Sunday school conventions by this time, so I wrote to every director of local Sunday school conventions asking them to help me find the ten largest Sunday schools in their city and/or state.

As the data began to pour in, my first listing was not the ten largest, but the 50 largest Sunday schools. Bob Walker, editor and publisher of *Christian Life* magazine said, "The list of the ten largest Sunday schools hit the evangelical world like a thunder clap."<sup>18</sup> Walker noted that the secular press had convinced people that the future of the church was with the small groups, i.e., group dynamics. *The New York Times* had said in 1958, "When is a school not a school, when it's a Sunday school." Then it changed, "Sunday school is the most wasted hour of the



week.”<sup>19</sup>

No one recognized that there was a moral majority of churches that were evangelistic, vibrant, and growing. Russ Chandler, a reporter with the *Los Angeles Times* and friend, went on line with the *Associate Press* with my listing of the largest Sunday schools. This was picked up yearly by almost every newspaper in America. Suddenly, newspaper articles appeared all over America listing the largest Sunday schools telling everyone why they grew. I feel this was one of the major factors that gave credibility to the American Church Growth movement.

The second year the list grew to the 100 largest Sunday schools, but I included much more data than just attendance. I included statistics on visitation, new converts, how many baptisms, offerings, etc..

In the third year I added some data from my own enlightenment. I asked each pastor what college or seminary he attended that gave him the passion and/or principles to build one of the 100 largest churches in America. I was absolutely overwhelmed with my findings. Some of the best known seminaries in America were missing from the list, i.e., Dallas Theological Seminary, Biola College, Moody Bible Institute, Nyack College, Columbia Bible College, etc. Traditional evangelical schools were not there. The pastors of twenty-three of the largest Sunday schools in America said they got their vision from Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Missouri, a small new school that most Americans didn't know existed. However, another thing shocked me. Thirty-three pastors said they never went to college or seminary.

Later, I visited Springfield, Missouri, and sat in the classes of Baptist Bible College and determined that it was not their academic program, library or the usual things done in a college that helped them produce many church builders. It was the passion and vision of its chapel speakers that motivated its young men to plant and build great churches.

I was invited to speak to the ministerial association of The Evangelical Free Church of Texas. There were only 13 pastors in attendance, and one might think that not much can be accomplished with such a small meeting. However, instead of preaching my last sermon I decided to share with the pastors my research on the 100 largest Sunday schools. As I shared with them stories of fast-growing churches, I saw excitement, vision and hope in the eyes of the 13 pastors who were listening to me. Several phoned their pastor friends long-distance, urging them to invite me to their ministerial associations. I found myself being invited all over the mid-West to preach a sermon on *The Ten*

*Largest Sunday Schools.*<sup>20</sup>

Within a month I spoke to the Greater Chicago Ministerial Association with over 200 pastors present. Again, I could see excitement in their eyes. Two years later, I spoke to the same ministerial group at a dessert reception near O'Hare Field, and there were almost 2,000 in attendance (including wives). But this was after the book, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools* was published and the pastors wanted to know more about Church Growth.

When I began work on *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools*, I decided to do three things: first, I visited each church to describe what the building look like, how the services were conducted, and the perspective of the pastor that led the church to grow. Second, I counted the people in Sunday school; I had run across some churches that lied about their large attendance. Third, I decided to use a case study research approach to guide my data gathering and drawing of conclusions. I was taking graduate work at Garrett Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois, at the time and used my research on *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools* as a "guinea pig" for a seminar on research techniques. I wanted to follow a systematic research model in displaying data and conclusions. I feel that the strength of *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools* was Chapter 13 entitled, "Methods Research."<sup>21</sup>

Pete Wagner says that *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools* was the first American book on Church Growth and the first book on the mega church movement.<sup>22</sup>

As I was preaching in churches and ministerial meetings, I always had a box of books drop-shipped, and sold them to those in attendance. Before the days of inflation the book only cost \$2.00. I knew how many copies I was selling, but it perplexed me that for four or five months it never made the best-selling list in *Christian Booksellers*. One day I asked Robert Walker who was also publisher of *Christian Booksellers* why my book never made the best-selling list. He picked up the phone and called Baker Book House to ask how many copies they had sold in the last three or four months. They were selling over a thousand copies a month. His eyes got wide with excitement. Then he phoned his production editor with the figures. The next month it was listed as the 8<sup>th</sup> best-seller in the nation. Then I realized the list of best-sellers was not an accurate list, politics is involved. When editors perceive a book is a best-seller, they check to add it to the list. And when the public perceives it is a best-seller, they will buy it much quicker. This book gave recognition to the Church Growth movement.

In the next three years I published a best seller each year, i.e., *The Church Aflame* (with Jerry Falwell),<sup>23</sup> *America's Fastest Grow-*

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*ing Churches* (with Jerry Falwell),<sup>24</sup> *Capturing Your Town for Christ* (with Jerry Falwell).<sup>25</sup> My first four books on Church Growth each sold over 100,000 copies; in its day, a record amount.

The book, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools*, gave me a reputation as an authority in American Church Growth during the late 60s. This was before McGavran, Win Arn, and C. Peter Wagner became known in Church Growth circles. However, my expertise was always tied to Sunday school, not pure Church Growth as was theirs.

Because of my love for growing churches, it was only inevitable that I would leave Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and attach myself to one of the rapid growing churches of America. On the last Saturday of January 1971, I was in Canton, Ohio, preparing to preach at the Canton Baptist Temple (the fourth largest church in America). The night before, I was in the home of Harold Henniger, pastor, and he said to me, "Elmer, you ought to go help Jerry Falwell get a college started; you two are like two peas in a pod." I told Harold that Jerry was probably five or six years away from starting a college, and dropped the subject. As I left Dr. Henniger's home, he said again, "I want you to promise me when you get back to the church (I was staying in the prophet's chamber in the local church), I want you to pick up the telephone and charge it to our account. Phone Jerry Falwell and talk to him about starting a college in his church." I promised.

When I got back to my room in the church, I phoned Jerry Falwell and the first thing he said to me was, "What are we going to call the college?" He didn't ask me if I wanted to start the college, he didn't say anything else about the college, he just asked me about the name. I was dumbfounded, but yet I felt God was in the conversation. I remember telling him, "The name of the college has to reflect the kind of college we're going to start." I told Jerry Falwell that he shouldn't start a Bible college, but a liberal arts college to train pastors, doctors, lawyers, educators, etc. He agreed with me. Jerry didn't like the term "liberal arts," he said, "Why can't we just call it an "arts college?"

Jerry and I talked about an hour planning the focus of the college, the curriculum, and details. That was February 1971 and we planned to start the following September. After I hung up I thought to call my wife.

"I've been praying for you for over an hour," my wife said when she picked up the phone. The whole while Jerry and I were planning Liberty University®, my wife Ruth was home praying for me and the college. I did not know that approximately fifteen minutes before I called Jerry Falwell, he had called

my house in Greater Chicago and told Ruth, "I've never talked to a woman about her husband coming to work for me, but do you think that Elmer would come and start a college for me?" It was then that Ruth told him that I was the ideal man to start his college because I had been a college president, and I had been associated with the AABC, the Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges.

I believe that God was in the founding of the college, and I planned to use my influence in the college as a springboard to prepare men and women to go plant churches or build super-aggressive local churches.<sup>26</sup> I wanted Thomas Road Baptist Church to be a laboratory and example for Church Growth to the world.

For the first two years in Lynchburg, I was the Sunday school director, i.e., (Christian Education director); and the Sunday school grew from approximately 3,000 in attendance to over 6,000 in attendance. When I wrote the book, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools*, Thomas Road Baptist Church was ninth on the list with 2,640 in attendance. Jack Hyles, First Baptist Church, Hammond, Indiana, had an immense bus ministry and also had access to the vast population of the Southside of Chicago; and it was impossible for Thomas Road Baptist Church to overtake his church because of its enormous growth.

Thomas Road Baptist Church grew because it had over 100 bus routes with people driving buses in every direction every Sunday morning to pick up children, and bring them to church where they could learn the Word of God. In addition, the church began a multiple number of Sunday school classes that provided growth. The students from Liberty University® taught those classes.

Liberty University® grew as the church grew. The first year the University had 154 students, the second year 420, the third 650 and the fourth year there were over a thousand in enrollment. Jerry Falwell recruited the students and raised the money through television. As acting president the first two years, and academic dean, I hired the faculty and set the educational policies.

I conducted a journalism seminar in Gainesville, Florida, home of the University of Florida, and one of my co-teachers was a professor of journalism at the University. It was there that I met John Vaughan, a future Church Growth leader. I promised everyone an A in the course if they got an article published, and John submitted an article to *Christian Life* magazine. That was his first published article.

Vaughan and I established a friendship at that seminar and

decided to write an extensive book examining the principles of Church Growth. The book was entitled *The Complete Book of Church Growth*.<sup>27</sup> As we did research for this book, we were like two hunters lost in the forest looking at different kinds of trees, not knowing what we were seeing. I wrote most of the profiles of great growing churches that appeared in the front of the book. John did the research on the principles of growth. Since most of the great growing churches were fundamental in theological stance, he wrote the first chapter on *Fundamentalism*. But we were perplexed when we ran across churches that were growing that didn't fit the description of fundamentalism. We found evangelical Bible churches where they didn't have strong evangelistic visitation, bus ministries, nor did they give a Gospel invitation at the end of sermons. So, we included a second chapter called *Evangelical Bible Churches*. Then we began to discover that there were Pentecostal churches that were growing because of their dynamic platform. These churches did not have evangelistic visitation, bus ministries, nor did they have a strong outreach. It was the uniqueness of their message, and we wrote a third chapter entitled, *Charismatic Renewal Growth*. Then, we began to see churches with small group outreach, and we were influenced by the writings of Ray Steadman who wrote the book, *Body Life*.<sup>28</sup> So we called the fourth chapter in our book, *Body Life*.

I preached for Dave Seifert, pastor of Big Valley Grace Community Church, Modesto, California, and on a Sunday afternoon I was sitting in his office looking for something to read. I began reading his doctoral dissertation from the California Graduate School of Theology whereby he classified two other groups we had left out, i.e., Southern Baptist church growth, and mainline denominational church growth.

So the three of us were co-editors on *The Complete Book of Church Growth* published by Tyndale House Publishers which became a standard textbook for most colleges and seminaries, 1979-1990. We dropped the publication in 1991 because the data of the churches in the book was out of date.

But in writing this book I found out that there was more than one type of church growth. Churches grew because of their exciting platform; other churches grew because of their Bible teaching ministry, while still other churches grew because of their strong evangelistic outreach. This approach to Church Growth fit into what I had previously learned at Garrett Theological Seminary, i.e., the case study approach to research. Today, most people recognize six types of Church Growth, i.e., 1. The evangelistic church, 2. The body-life church, 3. The renewal church, 4. The expositional Bible church, 5. The congregational

church, and 6. The liturgical church.<sup>29</sup>

About this time, C. Peter Wagner began writing an encyclopedia of Church Growth and I was invited to be a part of the project. I wrote three articles, i.e., *Evangelism: The Why and How*,<sup>30</sup> and *The Great Commission in Church Planting*,<sup>31</sup> and, *The Gift of Faith in Church Growth*.<sup>32</sup> Wagner found out that writing an encyclopedia was a much larger project and more intense than he had planned. So he released the book with twenty-two chapters, and called it *Church Growth: State of the Art*. It was an outstanding book but not a complete book. It was then that I determined that I would write a complete encyclopedia of Church Growth and evangelism.

I presented the project to Regal Books, and they gave approval for the writing of the encyclopedia. I gathered a list of twelve associate editors for the *Encyclopedia* who represented a broad selection of denominations, and theological perspectives.<sup>33</sup>

The *Encyclopedia* has a total of 707 articles and I ended up writing many of these articles. The editors were busy with their projects; each one of them contributed some articles to its final selection. However, the editors all read and corrected the *Encyclopedia* for its completeness, comprehensiveness, and accuracy. I shall always be thankful for the great leaders who pioneered with me in this project. Technically, this is the first encyclopedia that has ever been done on evangelism and Church Growth.

In 1995 there was some controversy about whether Church Growth was declining or not. Since evangelism was a much stronger term and well known among all Christian groups, I decided to call it an *Encyclopedia of Evangelism and Church Growth*, putting evangelism before Church Growth.

I had written three earlier books, each one featuring ten churches, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools*, *America's Fastest Growing Churches* and ten church plants were described in the book, *Getting A Church Started in the Face of Insurmountable Odds with Limited Resources in Difficult Circumstances*.<sup>34</sup> Since the number "ten" had been successful for me I decided to write another book entitled, *Ten of Today's Most Innovative Churches*.<sup>35</sup>

Beginning in 1986 I had been doing a seminar across America for baby boomers entitled, *How to Reach the Baby Boomers and Win Them to Christ*.<sup>36</sup> When I presented the seminar in the Hilton Hotel next to the Burbank Airport in Burbank, California, Bill Greig, Jr., president of Regal Books asked me, "Would you write a book for us telling churches how to change?" I told him "No," I didn't think people would be interested in a book on change. His response was, "Look how many are here today, if this many are interested in every town, this book will be a best seller."

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As I thought and prayed about the topic, I told Bill Grieg, Jr., that I would rather write how ten innovative churches successfully applied the lesson of change learned from the baby boomers. I told him I would find ten churches that were growing and reaching out to a whole new generation. *Ten of Today's Most Innovative Churches* was both innovative and controversial, however today, what was innovative in 1991 is common place in many of our churches today.

These churches featured Skyline Wesleyan Church, San Diego, California, and Pastor John Maxwell who was managing change for growth. Next, was Willow Creek Church and Pastor Bill Hybels who was successfully reaching baby boomers with an innovative platform of drama, praise worship music, practical sermons, and use of high technology. Then I featured the Church on the Way and Pastor Jack Hayford who was using contemporary praise worship to attract and evangelize. Next New Hope Community Church in Portland, Oregon, was featured because Pastor Dale Galloway was using small groups to evangelize and build up his congregation. The next church was the Perimeter Church in Greater Atlanta where Pastor Randy Pope had an extended geographical parish church with plans to begin 100 churches (all part of one local church) around the perimeter (beltway) of Atlanta, Georgia. The next church was First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Florida, where two pastors were applying multiple staff ministry for outreach and growth. Yet even with the growth of contemporary worship, the Central Community Church of Wichita, Kansas, was growing using traditional worship services and traditional ministries under the leadership of Pastor Ray Cotton. The Second Baptist Church, Houston, Texas, under the leadership of Pastor Ed Young, added multiple adult classes in Sunday school to reach a new type of suburbansite. And finally, Mount Paran Church of God in Greater Atlanta, Georgia, was one church in three locations. Dr. Paul Walker, the pastor, led that great church in its growth and outreach.

Ever since I have been teaching in colleges and seminaries, I found myself on Saturdays doing Sunday school conferences for local churches and/or denominations. Some of these conferences were very effective, especially when a denomination was involved. However, sometimes local church Sunday school conferences were very small in attendance and I wondered if they were worth the investment of my time. One of my students, Larry Gilbert, had been the owner of a sign business and I was impressed with the work he did on posters, fliers, and book covers. Larry was also interested in spiritual gifts, and had created a spiritual gift inventory to help individuals discover their poten-

tial usefulness in serving God.

I approached Larry Gilbert to help me put together a seminar to be more effective in helping churches grow. I wrote a complete package of information, facts, and experiences necessary to cause a local church to expand its Sunday school and reach out to its community. When my package was finished there were 154 points to cover in a Saturday seminar. I called it *154 Steps to Revitalize Your Sunday School and Keep Your Church Growing*.<sup>37</sup> Larry Gilbert was the production editor who formatted it into a worktext. Then I told him to advertise it as a Sunday school conference to every church in Roanoke, Virginia, and charge a local church \$100 to send as many delegates as they wanted to the conference. I told him to pay for the postage, printing, and all expenses, and keep all the profits. The conference barely paid expenses. Approximately a month later we advertised the conference in the south side section of Atlanta, Georgia and after paying all expenses, Larry cleared approximately \$2,400. With that success we organized Church Growth Institute and shortly thereafter we purchased a building on Waterlick Road in Lynchburg, Virginia. Within a few years it became the largest Church Growth organization with a \$3.5 million dollar income per year. I found myself doing thirty-five to forty conferences every year over the next twelve years.

Part of the *154 Steps Seminar* was instruction in how a local church can plan and conduct a *Friend Day*.<sup>38</sup> This was an evangelistic campaign to reach lost people through inviting friends to attend a special celebration on a pre-designated Sunday.

Larry and I put together a resource packet called *Friend Day*. This was a step-by-step organizational package to lead the pastor or Sunday school director through eight weeks of preparation leading up to *Friend Day*. This step-by-step process was so detailed it told leaders what to advertise, when to do it, how to mail, and even how to make announcements to the local church. The packet included patterns for posters, stationary envelopes, tracts, and fliers. A copy machine could put a local church in the printing business. The resource packet also included Sunday school lessons, sermons for the pastor, plus a videotape of motivational messages to inspire the workers to reach out to their friends.

In October of 1984, we took fifty resource packages of *Friend Day* to the International Christian Education Convention held at Cobo Hall in downtown Detroit, Michigan. This convention was famous for drawing over 5,000 people for three days of messages and workshops. That weekend we sold all fifty copies of *Friend Day* (\$5,000 at \$99 each), and realized we could have sold an-



other fifty. Since 1984, Church Growth Institute has sold over 44,000 resource packets, which makes it one of the most successful evangelistic programs available to local churches.

Dr. Rick Rasberry in his Doctor of Ministries dissertation surveyed 5,000 churches that had conducted a *Friend Day* campaign in the previous two years to 1995 (date of his dissertation year). Dr. Rasberry found out that the average church was able to grow by adding 14% of first time visitors they attracted on their *Friend Day*.<sup>39</sup>

In 1986, Larry Gilbert and I determined that a change was happening within our churches that I called a "social revolution." The baby boomers (those born between 1946-1966, i.e., a generation is twenty years) were changing the way church was done. As baby boomers became pastors, they operated with different attitudes than did the previous generation. As baby boomers entered our churches, they wanted something different in worship.

I began reading everything I could on the baby boomer, putting together a one day seminar to help pastors understand what was coming. The whole premise of the seminar was cross-cultural evangelism. Just as much as missionaries face E-2 and E-3 barriers when they preach the Gospel cross culturally, so our American churches were facing E-2 barriers,<sup>40</sup> i.e., a conflict between the boomer generation and their parents, i.e., the builder generation. This seminar focused on contemporary worship music, team leadership, changing attitudes toward casual dress, etc. The baby boomer seminar was usually taught two days a week (Friday and Saturday) because I didn't want to leave my classes at Liberty University®. Church Growth Institute charged \$100 a person, and that included a top-rated meal in a top-line hotel (we usually used the Hilton and Marriott).

We were surprised at the large response of the churches; price was not an issue. The seminar was conducted in every major city in America and Canada, with sometimes as many as 350 in attendance.

Drs. Mark Senter, chairman of the Department of Christian Education at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and Timothy Paul Jones wrote a profile of most influential Christian education teachers for the National Association of Professors of Christian Education, and indicated that I was one of those teachers.<sup>41</sup> In their profile they said that one of my greatest contributions was in the area of understanding and applying culture (mandatory for a definition of Church Growth).<sup>42</sup> Concerning the baby boomer seminar, they said,

In 1986, the target audience shifted from lay-people to pas-

tors with the launch of Towns' highly successful *How to Reach the Baby Boomer* seminar. The content of this seminar followed the same pattern that Towns had established nearly two decades earlier when he served as the Sunday School editor of *Christian Life*—using sociological insights to deal with issues related to church growth while retaining a Scripture-centered fundamentalist theology. Towns highlighted five methodological changes that would assist churches in reaching Baby Boomers:

1. The pastor must move from functioning as the church's professional minister to functioning as an equipper of lay-people, so that they may become the church's ministers.
2. Churches must change their worship styles, moving toward biblical exposition coupled with either contemporary or liturgical worship.
3. Churches must market themselves in ways that are understandable and appealing to the unsaved.
4. Churches must move from confrontational evangelism to relational evangelism.
5. Churches must understand and respond to Boomer expectations.

A simple axiom summarized Towns' approach in the Baby Boomer seminars: "Data-driven, Bible-based."<sup>43</sup>

During the mid-nineties, I like many other authorities began to recognize Church Growth was no longer sitting in the spotlight.<sup>44</sup> Part of the problem was some who criticized the use of numbers by Church Growth. But the real issue was that Church Growth became a casualty of its own success. New churches were being planted, mega churches were appearing on the scene, and mission agencies were changing their strategy in keeping with the principles discovered by Church Growth authorities. No longer were leaders in Church Growth coming from seminary educators and denominational leaders (such as Pete Wagner, Elmer Towns, Flavil Yeakley, George Hunter, Bill Sullivan and Win Arn). A new set of leaders were becoming predominant. These were pastors who took the principles of Church Growth and made their local churches grow, and then wrote books to popularize their principles, i.e., John Maxwell at Skyline Wesleyan Church in San Diego, *Developing The Leader Within You*;<sup>45</sup> Bill Hybels, Willow Creek Community Church, Greater Chicago; Rick Warren, Saddleback Community Church, *The Purpose Driven Church*.<sup>46</sup> Beyond these three well-recognized leaders, there were a multitude of other lesser known names (because their books didn't sell as well, or because their churches were not near as large), but nevertheless were just as important in advancing the cause of Church Growth and influencing others with

their principles.

I've always seen myself as one who travels to colleges to communicate the principles of Church Growth, or to defend them if need be. During the rise of Church Growth I have given lectures or taught courses in 84 colleges and theological seminaries. Dr. Gabe Etzel in his doctoral dissertation surveyed the colleges where I lectured and his results are found in his dissertation "A Chronological Presentation of the Writings of Elmer L. Towns from 1999-2005, Noting the Interrelatedness of His Teachings and Writings from 1980-2005." Etzel found that I had published a total of 119 books, 33 resources packets for Church Growth Institute and Gospel Light, Regal Books, also a number of smaller pamphlets. Etzel also listed those college and seminary courses I had prepared that were distributed through distance learning at Liberty University®, i.e., a total of nine videotaped courses to teach individuals the principles of Church Growth.<sup>47</sup>

I've always been committed to Church Growth, because it grows out of the Great Commission, i.e., "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). Obviously making disciples of all nations involves crossing ethnic barriers, planting churches, and evangelizing the nations. But, there is a second part of the Great Commission that is just as compulsive, i.e., "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). Therefore over half of my writings have been in the areas of Bible, theology, Christian life, and general church ministry.

Some have told me that I could have accomplished more if I had stayed solely in Church Growth/evangelism and focused on helping churches reach the lost. However, I feel the strength of my ministry has come from commitment to all aspects of the Great Commission. To build great churches we must preach the Gospel to the lost and teach the Word of God to the saints; and that involves developing an entire infrastructure to involve every person in the ministry God has for them.

In the mid-nineties, Church Growth seminars began to wane, so did Sunday school seminars. Then I realized with the changes in the American church, the secret for continual evangelism and outreach was not better programs, i.e., teaching people how to do evangelism, or even coming up with another great *Friend Day*. What our churches needed more than anything else were godly men and women committed to the Word of God. During the mid-nineties, I began to turn my focus to writing books on spirituality.

Larry Gilbert said to me, "You can't change horses in the middle of the stream, and nobody is going to buy your books on spirituality." Gilbert is brilliant when it comes to marketing, so he said to me, "McDonald's has positioned itself with hamburgers, they can never make money selling fried chicken like Kentucky Fried Chicken; and in the same way you have positioned yourself as a Church Growth leader, and no one is going to buy your books on spirituality." However, my biggest sellers of all time have been my books on spirituality.

*Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough*<sup>48</sup> has sold approximately 350,000 copies and those are individual sales through local bookstores. *Praying the Lord's Prayer for Spiritual Breakthrough*,<sup>49</sup> has distributed over 250,000 copies, so has *Praying the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm*.<sup>50</sup> Both of the last two books were distributed by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association which contributed to their immense circulation.

I wrote *Understanding the Deeper Life*<sup>51</sup> almost as a theological discourse on the deeper Christian life. This is my orientation to Christianity that I received at Columbia Bible College, and this book contains the principles by which I live.

A second spirituality book is *The Ten Greatest Revivals Ever*<sup>52</sup> published by Servant Publications. Again I followed Church Growth research principles in writing this book. J. Edward Orr had been Professor of Awakenings in the School of Missions at Fuller Theological Seminary along with C. P. Wagner and Donald McGavran. According to Orr, revival is the left side of the brain (the passion side) whereas Church Growth and its principles are on the right side of the brain. I went on to say that both sides were needed to build great churches.

I used a case study approach to analyze the different revivals and the impact they had on the church and the culture in which the churches were located. I defined revival as, "God pouring His presence on His people" (Joel 2:26, Acts 3:19).

Ten revivals are listed in the order of importance by 19 different Church Growth and evangelistic authorities that were recruited to give objective judgment to their selection.<sup>53</sup> Let me quickly add that today I don't agree with the order, even though it is in my book. The revivals are listed by the voting preference of the committee. I believe the greatest revival to influence history was the Second Great Awakening beginning in 1800. During the Second Great Awakening more principles for evangelistic outreach and church renewal were discovered, practiced and passed on to other churches. Perhaps the classic work of Charles Finney's *Lessons of Revival*<sup>54</sup> gave great insights into the principles that cause revival, because they come from the legal mind

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(Finney was a lawyer when he was converted), and one influenced by law. The ten great revivals are:

1. The 1904 Revival, Beginning in Wales  
Evan Roberts, Korea, Manchurian Revival, Azusa Street
2. The First Great Awakening, 1727-50  
Zinzendorf, Wesley, Whitefield, Jonathon Edwards
3. The Second Great Awakening, 1780-1810  
Cane Ridge
4. The General Awakening, 1830-40  
Charles Finney, Hawaii, Jamaica
5. The Layman's Prayer Revival, 1857-61  
Phoebe Palmer, Lanphier, D. L. Moody
6. The World War II Revival, 1935-50  
Billy Graham, Duncan Campbell, New Zealand
7. The Baby Boomer Revival, 1965-71  
The Jesus People, The Prairie Revival, Asbury
8. The Pre-Reformation Revival, 1300-1500  
Lollards, Wycliffe, Hus, Savonarola
9. The Protestant Reformation, 1517  
Martin Luther, John Calvin, Zwingli, Knox
10. Pentecost: The Beginning of Revival, A.D. 30  
Peter, Paul.<sup>55</sup>

Church Growth methodology influenced two other of my books on spirituality. *Biblical Meditation for Spiritual Breakthrough*, i.e., is a scientific analysis of the different ways people in the Bible meditated, what meditation produced, and how God used it.<sup>56</sup> I felt an analytical understanding of meditation would help people become more godly. However the sparse sales of this book tell me people didn't respond to an analytical analysis of something so emotional as meditation.

The various ways of meditating are:

1. The David Model: Considering God's Creation and Majesty
2. The Mary Model: Pondering the Person of Jesus
3. The Saint John Model: Thinking About the Cross
4. The Joshua Model: Focusing on Biblical Principles
5. The Saint Paul Model: Becoming Like Christ
6. The Timothy Model: Meditating on Your Calling and Gifts
7. The Haggai Model: Considering Your Failures
8. The Asaph Model: Meditating on God's Intervention
9. The Malachi Model: Meditation on God's Name
10. The Korah Model: Contemplating Intimacy With God<sup>57</sup>

But the book on spirituality that helped the most people is *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough*.<sup>58</sup> I used a case study approach to study the various different ways that people in the Bible fasted, what God did through fasting, and the results of fasting on individuals, churches, and culture. The successful sales of this book verify the research methodology, i.e., over 350,000 sold. The nine different ways of fasting are:

1. The Disciple's Fast: Fasting for freedom from addiction (see Matt. 17:20,21). If we fast, we can break the besetting sins that limit a life of freedom in Christ.
2. The Ezra Fast: Fasting to solve problems (see Ezra 8:21-23). If we fast for a specific purpose, we may solve a debilitating problem.
3. The Samuel Fast: Fasting to win people to Christ (see 1 Sam. 7:1-8). If we fast and pray for revival, God will pour Himself on His people.
4. The Elijah Fast: Fasting to break crippling fears and other mental problems (see 1 Kings 19:2-18). Through fasting, God will show us how to overcome negative emotional and personal habits.
5. The Widow's Fast: Fasting to provide for the needy (see 1 Kings 17:12). When we sacrifice our own physical needs, God enables us to focus on and provide for the needs of others.
6. The Saint Paul Fast: Fasting for insight and decision making (see Acts 9:9-19). If we fast to subject our will to God's, He will reveal His will to us.
7. The Daniel Fast: Fasting for health and physical healing (see Dan 1:12-20). When we fast for physical well-being, God will touch our bodies and enrich our souls.
8. The John the Baptist Fast: Fasting for an influential testimony (see Matt. 3:4; Luke 1:15). If we fast for the influence of our testimonies, God will use us.
9. The Esther Fast: Fasting for protection from the evil one (see Esther 4:16). If we fast for protection and deliverance from Satan, God will deliver us from evil.<sup>59</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In a day when Church Growth is not as popular as it once was, I am still as committed to its principles and practices as ever. Also, in a day when Sunday school is not as popular as it once was, I am still committed to its principles and practices for

no church can be strong unless it has an aggressive outreach campaign to reach the lost, an aggressive Bible teaching program to instruct every member in the Word of God, i.e., teaching them to observe everything

Writer

Towns, Elmer L. Address: School of Religion, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia. Title: Dean. Dr. Towns holds the B.S. degree from Northwestern College, a M.A. from Southern Methodist University, a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary, a M.R.E. from Garrett Theological Seminary, and a D.Min. from Fuller Theological Seminary. He has published over 50 books with four listed on the Christian Booksellers Best Selling list. In 1995 Dr. Towns received the coveted Gold Medallion Award for the Book of the Year, *The Names of the Holy Spirit*.

NOTES

1. See <http://www.matthewmcgee.org/roman-rd.html>, (accessed 17 November 2005).

2. Elmer L. Towns, *Stories About My First Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1997).

3. In God's time I would attend Fuller Theological Seminary 32 years later and graduate with a Doctor of Ministry degree in Church Growth.

4. Erich Sauer, *The Dawn of World Redemption: A Survey of Historical Revelation in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing. Co., 1960).

5. Erich Sauer, *The Triumph of the Crucified a Survey of Historical Revelation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952).

6. I believe it is easier (but not impossible) to embrace Church Growth from a dispensational perspective, because they emphasize the "church age" and the Great Commission. A covenant theologian tends to flow from the Old into the New Testament without a distinctive emphasis on the Great Commission.

7. I was greatly influenced by the definition of systematic theology by Lewis S. Chafer, founder and president of Dallas Theological Seminary. "Systematic theology may be defined as the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting and defending of all facts from any and every source concerning God and His works." Lewis S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 16. This definition allowed me to examine cultures as I determined the principles by which God's work is done. Then, this definition was foundational to the research methodology of the Church Growth

movement.

8. In Chapter Nineteen of *Stories of My First Church*, I explain fully my transition from the Presbyterian church to the Baptist church. You may read the entire book free at [www.elmertowns.com](http://www.elmertowns.com), click on Books, Books Online.

9. I am still a general Calvinist, but not a fatalist. I agree with the five points of Calvinism if you let me define them according to Scripture, or even according to the commentaries of Calvin. But I disagree with the basic interpretation of the Council of Dort's interpretation of Calvin.

10. Out of that meeting came a report published in book form. Since I had written much of what the committee decided, this experience convinced me I could write a whole book. S. A. Witmer, *Report: Preparing Bible College Students For Ministries In Christian Education* (Fort Wayne, IN: The Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges, 1962).

11. I became president of the Canadian Conference of Christian Educators five years later, i.e., 1963-64. This is an organization of approximately 60 Bible institutes and Bible college presidents.

12. Elmer L. Towns, ed., *Towns Sunday School Encyclopedia* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1983), 602, s. v. "Washburn, Alphonzo Victor (1912-1978)."

13. *Ibid.*, xviii.

14. *Ibid.*, s. v. "Growth, Laws of Sunday School, 274-279.

15. *Ibid.*, s. v. "Mears, Henrietta Cornelia (1890-1963).

16. This book was not copyrighted until four years later. Elmer L. Towns, *Teaching Teens* (Winnipeg, Canada: Winnipeg Bible Institute Press, 1963).

17. Previously, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School was the theological seminary of The Evangelical Free Church of America, located in the north side of Chicago, Illinois.

18. Elmer L. Towns, *Ten Sunday Schools that Dared to Change* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993), 22.

19. Elmer L. Towns, *The Bright Future of Sunday School* (Minneapolis, MN: F. C. Publications, 1969), 26. F. C. Publications is the publishing arm of The Evangelical Free Church.

20. Elmer L. Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1969).

21. *Ibid.*, 147-151.

22. Elmer L. Towns, *The Practical Encyclopedia of Church Growth and Evangelism* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995), 77.

23. Jerry Falwell and Elmer L. Towns, *The Church Aflame* (Nashville, TN: Impact Books, 1972).

24. Elmer L. Towns with Jerry Falwell, *America's Fastest Growing Churches* (Nashville, TN: Impact Books, 1972).

25. Jerry Falwell and Elmer L. Towns, *Capturing a Town for Christ*



(Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1973).

26. The term was coined by me to describe the endeavors to build a church, i.e., aggressive in vision, aggressive in outreach, and aggressive in growth. Jerry Falwell coined the more popular phrase saturation evangelism, i.e., "Using every available means to reach every available person, at every available time." For full information on these terms, see *A Practical Encyclopedia: Evangelism and Church Growth*, Elmer Towns, ed. (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1995), s. v. "saturation evangelism," 348.

27. Elmer Towns, John Vaughan and David Seifert, *The Complete Book of Church Growth* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1981).

28. Ray Stedman, *Body Life* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 1972).

29. Towns, *A Practical Encyclopedia of Evangelism and Church Growth*, 394.

30. C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn, Others, *Church Growth: State of the Art, "Evangelism: The Why and How"* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989), 43-55.

31. *Ibid.*, "The Great Commission in Church Planting," 143-149.

32. *Ibid.*, 197-205.

33. The twelve editors at the time of this writing were: Dr. Robert Coleman, Billy Graham Center of Evangelism, Wheaton, Illinois; Dr. Lewis Drummond, Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth, Beeson Divinity School, Birmingham, Alabama; Dr. Gary Greig, Regent University, Virginia Beach, Virginia; Dr. Kent Hunter, Church Growth Center, Corunna, Indiana; Dr. Charles Kelly, Director, Center of Evangelism and Church Growth, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, Louisiana; Dr. Gary McIntosh, Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program, at Talbot School of Theology, Talbot School of Theology, La Mirada, California; Dr. Paige Patterson, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina; Dr. Thom S. Rainer, Dean, The Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky; Dr. Alvin L. Reid, Bailey Smith Chair of Evangelism, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina; Dr. John Vaughan, Southwestern Baptist University, Bolivar, Missouri; Dr. C. Peter Wagner, Donald McGavran Chair of Missions and Church Growth, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California.

34. Elmer L. Towns, *Getting A Church Started in the Face of Insurmountable Odds with Limited Resources in Difficult Circumstances* (Nashville, TN: Impact Books, 1975).

35. Elmer L. Towns, *Ten of Today's Most Innovative Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990).

36. Elmer L. Towns, *How to Reach the Baby Boomers and Win*

Them to Christ (Lynchburg, VA: Church Growth Institute, 1990).

37. Elmer L. Towns, *154 Steps to Revitalize Your Sunday School and Keep Your Church Growing* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1988).

38. Elmer L. Towns, *Friend Day* (Lynchburg, VA: Church Growth Institute, 1984).

39. Rick L. Rasberry, "An Analysis of the Friend Day Program, Written by Elmer Towns and Published by Church Growth Institute, Lynchburg, Virginia," (Ph.D. diss., Liberty University®, 1995).

40. Towns, *A Practical Encyclopedia*, 206. E-2 Evangelism crosses cultural and class barriers. E-3 Evangelism crosses linguistic barriers.

41. As cited by Gabriel Etzel, "A Chronological Presentation of the Writings of Elmer L. Towns from 1999-2005, Noting the Interrelatedness of His Teachings and Writings from 1980-2005," D. Min. thesis, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary [http://www.elmertowns.com/bio/Dr.\\_Gabe\\_Etzel\\_DMIN\\_Thesis.pdf](http://www.elmertowns.com/bio/Dr._Gabe_Etzel_DMIN_Thesis.pdf), (accessed 18 November, 2005).

42. The working definition of Church Growth by the American Society of Church Growth is, "Church growth is that careful discipline which investigates the nature, the function, and the health of Christian churches, as they relate to the effective implementation of the Lord's Great Commission to make disciples of all peoples (Matthew 28:19-20). It is a spiritual conviction, yet it is practical, combining the eternal principles of God's Word with the practical insights of social and behavioral sciences," <http://www.ascg.org/>, (accessed 23 November 2005).

43. As cited by David A. Brown, "A Chronological Presentation of the Writings of Elmer L. Towns From 1986-1999," D.Min. thesis, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999, [http://www.elmertowns.com/bio/Dr.\\_Browns\\_Thesis--locked.PDF](http://www.elmertowns.com/bio/Dr._Browns_Thesis--locked.PDF), (accessed 18 November, 2005).

44. For a complete discussion of the changes in Church Growth consult Gary L. McIntosh, gen. ed., *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004). See "Effective Evangelism" by Elmer L. Towns, 29-72.

45. John Maxwell, *Developing The Leader Within You* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993).

46. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1995).

47. Gabriel Etzel, "A Chronological Presentation of the Writings of Elmer L. Towns from 1999-2005, Noting the Interrelatedness of His Teachings and Writings from 1980-2005."

48. Elmer L. Towns, *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough* (Ventura CA: Regal Books, 1996).

49. Elmer L. Towns, *Praying the Lord's Prayer for Spiritual Breakthrough* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1997).

50. Elmer L. Towns, *Praying the 23rd Psalm* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001).

51. Elmer L. Towns, *Understanding the Deeper Life* (Grand Rapids,

MI: Fleming-Revell, Co., 1989). This book represents my theology of the Christian life. It didn't sell well because it's too theological and not practical enough for lay readers. This book was recently re-released by Academx Publishing Services and re-titled *Understanding the Christian Life*, 2005.

52. Elmer L. Towns, *The Ten Greatest Revivals Ever* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 2000).

53. Bill Bright, Campus Crusade for Christ, Orlando, Florida; Gerald Brooks, Grace Outreach Center, Plano, Texas; David Yonggi Cho, The Full Gospel Church, Seoul, Korea; Robert Coleman, Billy Graham Center Institute of Evangelism, Wheaton, Illinois; James O. Davis, National Evangelism Director, Assemblies of God, Springfield, Missouri; Lewis Drummond, Beeson Divinity School, Birmingham, Alabama; Dale Galloway, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky; Eddie Gibbs, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California; Jack Hayford, Charles Kelly, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, Louisiana; D. James Kennedy, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Fort Lauderdale, Florida; Ron Phillips, Pastor, Central Baptist Church, Hixson, Tennessee; Alvin Reid, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina; Chuck Smith, Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa, Santa Ana, California; Tommy Tenney, Evangelist, Pineville, Louisiana; C. Peter Wagner, World Prayer Center, Colorado Springs, Colorado; Steve Wingfield, Evangelist, Harrisonburg, Virginia.

54. E. E. Shelhammer; Charles Grandison Finney, *Finney on Revival* (London: Oliphants Ltd., no date, circa 1910).

55. Elmer L. Towns and Douglas Porter, *The Ten Greatest Revivals Ever* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 2000), n.p. (front matter of book.)

56. Elmer L. Towns, *Biblical Meditation for Spiritual Breakthrough* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1998).

57. Ibid.

58. Elmer L. Towns, *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996).

59. Ibid.