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My Journey in Church Growth

Elmer Towns

Liberty University

I was first challenged with church growth in 1952 when I was a pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Chapel, Savannah, Georgia, and a student at Columbia Bible College, Columbia, South Carolina. The little Presbyterian mission chapel had five ladies conducting a Sunday school for approximately eight children. I became their pastor and led the church to grow to approximately 60 people. I had a burden to grow the church and I felt God could do it, but I had no knowledge of how to do it, and I had never seen or experienced church growth.

Later as a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, I pastored a chapel of the Scofield Memorial Church, which was famous for its former pastor Dr. C. I. Scofield, editor of the Scofield Reference Bible, and was known for its Bible teaching ministry, not church growth or evangelism. The church consisted of around 25 people meeting in West Dallas, considered a poverty-stricken area near downtown Dallas. The neighborhood had approximately 50 two-bedroom homes cheaply built without indoor plumbing (but with outhouses), reflecting the low socio-economic condition of the neighborhood. Again, I wanted this church to grow and did all I could to reach the neighborhood. Each year I knocked on every door in that neighborhood explaining the gospel trying to get people to church. While there, we were able to construct four Sunday school classrooms and bathrooms for both men and women. On a few occasions, attendance was over 100.

While in Dallas I became a friend of W. A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church. He introduced me to the laws of Sunday school growth, well-known in the Southern Baptist Convention as the organizational

foundation for evangelism and growth. Dr. Criswell had one of the largest attended churches in America.

The Ten Largest Sunday Schools

Out of that positive experience with Dr. Criswell against a personal background of little church growth, I wrote an article on the laws of Sunday school growth that was published in the *National Sunday School Association Encyclopedia*. That article also included spiritual motivations for church growth; outreach was not just organizational adjustments. It is then I began to research and published *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools* (Baker Book House, 1969), which identified large, fast-growing churches across the United States. The book captured the attention of the evangelical world and stayed on the Christian bestsellers list for seven months in 1970.

One of the churches in that book was Thomas Road Baptist Church, pastored by Jerry Falwell, Sr., who had planted that church in his hometown of Lynchburg, Virginia. It had grown from a handful of people to over 2,700 in attendance.

Because of our friendship and that book, Falwell invited me to co-found Liberty University with him in 1971. Our passion was to train young champions for Christ who would go out to plant great soul-winning churches, just as Jerry had done, and saturate their hometowns with the gospel to reach the entire population for Jesus Christ.

The church growth movement of the college led me to publish, *Capturing Your Town for Christ* (Jerry Falwell and Elmer Towns, Fleming Revell, 1973). Again, the book hit the bestselling list and sold over 100,000 copies.

Beginning in the early 1970s I researched and listed the 100 largest Sunday schools in America on the pages of *Christian Life Magazine* for which I was the Sunday School editor. Robert Walker, the editor of the magazine, said that news of the largest Sunday schools in America hit the nation like a lightning bolt and motivated thousands of pastors and leaders to build churches as large as these churches.

Praise/Worship Churches

Twenty years later, in the early 1990s, churches were growing but not through Sunday school outreach. The dynamic ministry of the pastors, combined with the energizing worship music in the morning services reflected energy...optimism...and demonstrated the presence of God. I found churches without Sunday school growing, most of them built on

small groups or home Bible studies. In 1991, I published *Ten of Today's Most Innovative Churches* (Destiny Image Publishers), telling the story of megachurches across America reaching thousands each week.

Dynamic church growth moved away from organized Sunday school outreach to the drawing power of worship music in the auditorium. In its early days, I interviewed a middle-aged church-attending father who said, "Church was never exciting to me." Then he explained how his life was transformed, "I walked into a different church; the men there did not have ties on, and I felt a little overdressed. Then I heard the beat of the drums and the sound of the electric guitars. As soon as I reached my seat, I joined in singing the words I saw on the screen ... music I had never heard, and words that I did not know. The excitement of worship captured my heart. My hands went up in worship as tears trickled down from my eyes. The praise/worship environment captured my heart ... but most of all I found Jesus as my Savior."

A new generation – the Baby Boomer generation – did music in a new and different way, transforming the way Christians did worship. For over 400 years Protestant Christians had sung music like Martin Luther and the reformers. They had listened to sermons like those preached by John Calvin and John Wesley. That which was transforming everything was...Jesus!

Bill Hybels, in the greater Chicago suburb of Barrington, had attendance averaging over 20,000 weekly in multiple worship services. Not to be outdone, Rick Warren planted the Saddleback Church south of Los Angeles in Orange County, running over 25,000 worshippers weekly.

The music was about Jesus who became real to the worshipers. The preaching was about Jesus; again, He became real to the listeners. When worshipers were focused on Jesus, lives were transformed. Jesus was the "drawing power" for these new growing churches.

The Multisite Church Movement

In 2020, I published *Ten of the Largest Church Ministries Aggressively Touching the World* (Destiny Image Publishers). This new transformation in the church growth movement was ushered in by the power of transportation and the Internet. The ubiquity of the automobile, plus airplanes and other means of mass transportation, opened up the world to travel. This new freedom permitted Christianity to *carry* its worship of Jesus from one home church to many other church sites. Thus, the multisite church was born.

But more than transportation, there was an explosion of communication. Advances in computer networking led to the *World Wide*

Web, and with it came instant communication of text and images. Next, came instant multimedia communication. A mother church could capture their dynamic worship on a small camera and instantly communicate their worship excitement to other church locations. As a result, one local church with multiple congregations around the world can worship together. When people in one part of the world see and experience others in another part of the world lifting hands in worship, they share in the joy and enthusiasm together.

Congregations are no longer confined to a single building, whether large or small. The life-changing worship experience within the mother church is instantly communicated to daughter churches across town, across state lines, or around the world.

The multisite church has become the new means to carry the gospel around the world, doing it with multiple services in multiple locations. The prime example today is Hillsong Church in Australia with over 12,000 in attendance in its home sanctuary but reaching many national capitals around the world with worship services connected by the Internet. Christians in London, New York, Los Angeles, Suva (Fiji), Seoul, and dozens of other locations are worshipping together, almost a quarter of a million worshipers every Sunday.