The question of church growth has taken on new significance in recent years, a significance which would scarcely have suggested itself to American denominations two generations ago. A variety of factors have contributed to the added dimensions of the issue today. First and most obvious of these factors is the phenomenal, almost geometrical, increase in population, popularly known (in world terms) as the population explosion.

This has been intertwined with the growing concern of American mainline churches with the issue of the role of the Christian church(es) in public life. That is to say, major Protestant bodies, under the impetus of the newer social awareness of Christians, have been exercised at the point of the active extension of Christian influences into society. Church membership thus appeared to be a vital factor in the outreach of the Christian message into the world.

Historically, the issue was thrust into the thinking of church leaders with the rise of what some church historians have called "sect-type" or "free" churches. The majority of today's denominations had their origins here. In their earlier stages of development, free-type churches tended to derive membership from evangelism, from conversions. In colonial America, problems arose at this point, particularly in New England Congregationalism, where the concept of the Christian commonwealth was a guiding element. In some cases at least, church membership was to all intents and purposes an equivalent of voting citizenship. The issue became crucial as New England families became more affluent, but whose second and third generation members lacked the vital Christian vision — and experience — of their forbearers.

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This forced upon Congregationalism a rethinking of the issues of church membership and church growth, a rethinking which ultimately affected most of the new world denominations. Here two models tended to exist in mild tension: that of membership by personal conversion, and that of more inclusive standards for church adherence. Both derived their norms or paradigms from the New Testament, the former from the experiences of the Christian body as recorded in the Book of Acts, the latter from such parables as those of the tares and of the dragnet (Mt. 13:24-30; 47-50).

The more socially-oriented denominations tended perhaps unselfconsciously toward the latter model. The decline in interest in public evangelism upon the part of mainline denominations lent encouragement in this direction, until the rise of what some have termed “Fuller Brush evangelism” appeared two decades ago.

Upon the basis of the foregoing, the church growth movement of today has taken a two-fold course. On the one hand, numerical increase has been the major objective, and membership policies have been derived from it. On the other hand, some have sought to think the matter through on a basis of less of inclusivism. While these have seldom followed the earlier slogans, such as “small is beautiful,” or “yours for a little but clean church,” they do seek to retain some form of conversion-standards for church membership.

Further dimensions have been added to the question by contact of North American churches with the third world. Missionaries to lands in which familial conditions have made the easily-accepted (by us) concepts of individual church membership forbidding, and at times almost impossible, have made us aware of the complexity of the entire question of church growth.

Again, the rising demand upon the part of third world churches, especially those of South America, for newer degrees of social, economic and political involvement by Christians, is leading to a new and deeper consideration of the standards for church membership. Latin American evangelicals remind us that no concept of church growth can be regarded to be adequate which does not take into consideration the crying demand for social and economic justice in their lands. The full implications of this factor are yet to be worked out.

The faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary hope that this issue of The Asbury Seminarian may serve to cast light upon at least some aspects and some dimensions of the question of church growth.
Newer Dimensions in Church Growth

We of the Editorial Committee are gratified to see this issue elevated to the level of a theological discipline, and applaud the scholars who are today exploring its implications in depth.