

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

# The Relevance of Church Growth Principles to Evangelism in England

EDDIE GIBBS

The term 'church growth' has become something of a catch-phrase in a great deal of recent religious promotional material. In the minds of many people it is synonymous with evangelism or corporate renewal. The author, in using the term 'church growth', subscribes to the following formal definition:

Church growth is that science which investigates the nature, function and health of the Christian church as it relates specifically to the effective implementation of God's commission to 'make disciples of all nations'. Church growth is simultaneously a theological conviction, and an applied science which strives to combine the eternal principles of God's Word with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioural sciences, employing, as its initial frame of reference, the foundational work done by Dr Donald McGavran.<sup>1</sup>

This definition makes clear that church growth does not represent a total theology of mission, but has a specific focus on the making of disciples and their incorporation into local churches. As such it is an interdisciplinary study relating missiology to ecclesiology.<sup>2</sup>

A second point of clarification is to define precisely what is meant by a 'church-growth principle'. Donald McGavran defines it this way:

A church-growth principle is a universal truth which, when properly interpreted and applied, contributes significantly to the growth of churches and denominations.<sup>3</sup>

They are not to be thought of in the same terms as the Ten Commandments, that is, as absolutes, fixed in number and final in their formulation. Rather, they should be considered as a collection of hypotheses which, in all likelihood, will need to be restated, modified and supplemented in the light of wider experience and further research.

Church-growth principles are discovered by observing where churches are growing: 'where the numbers of members are in-

creasing and new congregations are being born, and where men and women are introduced to Jesus Christ, commit their lives to him, and become responsible members of his Church.<sup>4</sup> This essentially pragmatic approach is one of the great contributions of church-growth thinking in the field of missiology,<sup>5</sup> yet at the same time it poses great dangers if such pragmatism is pursued without adequate theological undergirding and critical reflection.<sup>6</sup> James F. Engel, reflecting on the church scene in the USA, comments:

Once pragmatism replaces biblical fidelity as a guiding principle for church life, there are many pathological consequences. Two of the most serious are 'bigness as a sign of greatness' and 'prophetic tunnel vision'.<sup>7</sup>

By the latter he means 'an undue attempt to make the gospel "palatable".' Consequently, 'Moral and ethical demands, so evident in Scripture, become muted or ignored altogether, sometimes on the assumption that people will not respond evangelistically if preaching and teaching are in any way controversial and challenge the *status quo*.'<sup>8</sup>

The pragmatic approach presents a second problem in a European context, for 'principles' which have so far been formulated have largely arisen out of a Third World context, where church growth, sometimes on an amazing scale,<sup>9</sup> has been part of their normal, everyday experience. It is one thing to develop principles from the experience of rapidly expanding churches, largely composed of first generation Christians, but the question is whether or not they hold good for an area such as the United Kingdom, where most churches have a long history and have seen persistent decline in the church-going population ever since the First World War.<sup>10</sup>

It was Peter Wagner who first took McGavran's church-growth principles and related them to a non-Third World area. He develops seven vital signs of a growing church:<sup>11</sup>

- a) A pastor who is a 'possibility' thinker, and whose dynamic leadership has been used to catalyze the entire church into action for growth.
- b) A well-mobilized laity which has discovered, has developed and is using all the spiritual gifts for growth.
- c) A church big enough to provide the range of services that meet the needs and expectations of its members.
- d) The proper balance of the dynamic relationship between celebration, congregation and cell.<sup>12</sup>
- e) A membership drawn primarily from one homogeneous unit.<sup>13</sup>
- f) Evangelistic methods that have been proved to make disciples.
- g) Priorities arranged in biblical order.<sup>14</sup>

These observations were substantially verified by research undertaken by the Southern Baptists in the USA.<sup>15</sup> But, while North

America in general terms is culturally closer to Europe than most Third-World areas, it has, unlike Western Europe, been experiencing sustained numerical growth in the church-going population until very recently.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, it is an area characterized by population growth and rapid urban expansion, which create conditions conducive to church growth. It cannot, therefore, be assumed that the factors identified by Wagner would apply on this side of the Atlantic. One person decided to find out with regard to his denomination.

Paul Beasley-Murray, of Altrincham Baptist Church, with the assistance of Alan Wilkinson, a senior fellow (administration) of the Manchester Business School, put the 'signs' to the test in a computerized survey of about 350 Baptist churches around the country which had a reputation of growth. Analysis showed that five of Wagner's seven signs were broadly supported, while c) and f) could neither be proved nor disproved. Their findings did, however, highlight the significance of the small group, which involved people in ministry to one another and thereby helped them to grow in spiritual maturity.<sup>17</sup>

As far as I am aware, McGavran has nowhere brought together in summary form a list of church-growth principles,<sup>18</sup> and the 'seven vital signs' observed by Wagner do not claim to be exhaustive. In attempting to relate church-growth principles to evangelism in England, the author has formulated his own list drawn from reading on the subject. It is offered tentatively, recognizing that not all church-growth advocates will necessarily be happy with either the selection or their formulation. With so little evidence to hand, and bearing in mind our history this century, principles of non-growth and church decline can be offered with far greater confidence!<sup>19</sup> We turn now to consider twelve propositions; each followed by a brief exposition and suggested areas of application.

*1) God wills that individuals and communities should come to Christ in repentance and faith to acknowledge him as Saviour and Lord, to become his disciples and be incorporated in local churches*

The New Testament repeatedly declares Jesus to be the unique Son of God and the only Saviour of humankind. Throughout his public ministry he called people to repent of their sins and to believe the good news—in which he personally occupies the headlines—as the way to enter the kingdom of God. He not only broadcast his message to the crowds, but drew alongside individuals to meet them at their point of need, to challenge their prejudices, expose their platitudes, kindle their faith, and to invite them to follow him and thereby live a radically different life-style. To those who were ready to respond he spoke with frankness and urgency.

Around his person he gathered a community of followers—his

disciples. Such a committed group was not a model from history, signifying the creation of a new Israel with twelve foundational members, paralleling the patriarchs who gave rise to the twelve tribes. Nor was it simply a contemporary model, reflecting the Jewish system of higher education in which rabbis gathered pupils around them. It was a model for the future, to be adapted cross-culturally. He taught that 'where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them' (Matt.18:20). Such a promise of universal intimacy became possible through his ascension, and the subsequent outpouring of his Spirit on all believers.

In commissioning the eleven disciples in the upper room just prior to his crucifixion, he commanded them to continue his pattern of ministry. His appointing, teaching and sending of them was in order that the world might believe (cf. John 17 and 20:21,22). The task of the disciples was to make many more disciples (Matt.28:16-20). In his dealings with them, he had provided them with a model as to how this was to be done. It is not surprising, therefore, that following the Pentecost experience, the disciples ardently preached the true identity of Christ, boldly called people to repent of their sins and to put their trust in him as their Saviour, and spelled out what it meant to serve him as Lord. Such preaching, whether in a Jewish or Gentile context, led to the formation of communities of new believers. The emergence of the church was not an accident of circumstances, nor an optional extra, but the result of deliberate planning. Church planting was high on the agenda of the New Testament evangelists.

We must ask, therefore, to what extent the calling of individuals and communities to follow Christ, and the establishing of new groups of worshipping and witnessing Christian communities, is reflected in the praying, teaching, programming, and priorities of the majority of churches in Britain today? This is the question which McGavran has been posing:

God commands an ardent searching for the lost in order to find them. The church which our Saviour bought with his blood is made up of saved sinners engaged in beseeching others to be reconciled to God. The congregation which is not engaged in proclaiming Christ to men and persuading them to become his disciples and responsible members of his church may be a religious club, but it is not the body of Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup>

This challenge must be faced squarely by Anglican evangelicals here in England. Since the Keele Congress of 1967, we have played a fuller part in the life of our denomination. This was a healthy move in many respects, yet the gains have not been without some serious losses. In some quarters there is an Anglican arrogance which has been hurtful to our Free Church brethren,<sup>21</sup> and even more disturbing is the extent to which our preoccupation with ecclesiastical housekeeping has diverted us from our evangelistic responsibilities.

## *The Relevance of Church Growth Principles to Evangelism in England*

We thank God for the various forms of renewal which have introduced spontaneity and creativity into our worship, and have nudged us closer to our fellow-worshippers to establish closer and more honest relationships. This has resulted in a deeper level of commitment among existing members, and has brought about the restoration of some of the lapsed and the activation of some of the fringe. But we still have to find ways of speaking to the 85 per cent of the population who are beyond the range of our existing congregations. Why has not the dramatic increase in the numbers of evangelical ministers resulted in more effective evangelism and church growth in our country? Is the lack of response entirely due to an indifferent or hostile spiritual climate, or has it more to do with institutional than contextual factors? In other words, if we were structured in a different way, and were motivated to achieve a greater depth of involvement with the community, would we see a much higher level of response?

The task of the church is not to make the gospel relevant, but to show the relevance of the gospel.<sup>22</sup> In order to achieve this, the communication must be clear and the communicator credible from the standpoint of the recipient. Before effective proclamation can take place, there must be an authentic and concerned presence. Many of our church programmes seem more geared for institutional self-justification and survival than for mission. Church-growth studies indicate that the longer a person has been an active church member, the fewer the contacts he has outside the church fellowship. We suffer from a surfeit of meetings, which serve to disengage us from involvement in the neighbourhood and other circles of relationships.

The last observation under this point, is to underline some of the problems created by the parish system. While such territorial boundaries may be appropriate for the face-to-face communities in rural England, they can seriously inhibit the task of making disciples and forming Christian communities in the urban context. A church may be able to relate to a community of 500, but not to one of several thousand. If a 'parish church' is to be worthy of the name, it must have an evangelistic strategy and pastoral support network for something between 10,000 and 25,000 people. If it is only concerned to operate a programme for the 150 people of all ages who venture on to church premises, it has in effect spiritually disenfranchised the vast majority of the population it is supposed to serve. Thank God for the Free Churches, who can pick up some of those we are not reaching! The fact that we have indiscriminately baptized 60 per cent of the non-attenders is little more than 'cattle branding', which gives them an immunity from approaches by other Christian groups and makes the task of 'discipling' those whom Anglicans have failed to follow-up all the more difficult for the Free Churches.

The other problem which arises from the parish system is the fact

that, for many Anglican churches, a large proportion of those attending live outside the parish. Ministers tend to have a fixation on 'roosting areas' because, unlike most of their church members, they happen to work where they live. Furthermore, they are aware of an invisible barbed-wire fence around their parish boundaries, with neighbouring incumbents patrolling up and down on the other side! Lay Christians are often totally unaware of these boundaries, except when it comes to having their babies baptized or their banns read. The parish boundary fails to take account of the mobility of contemporary urban life. People use cars or public transport to get to work, to go shopping, for leisure activities—and to go to church. Here in the United Kingdom, people will happily travel seven miles to attend the church of their choice.<sup>23</sup> We therefore find ourselves with a structure which does not relate to the dynamics of the situation.

I remember visiting a group of clergy in a town in the south-west of England. Each of them had maps of the town with their parish marked on, and pins indicating the location of their electoral-roll members. Because of the way in which the town had developed, the parishes all converged on the centre, with the result that most of the churches had the majority of their attenders living in someone else's parish. The reality of such mobility must be faced, and a strategy evolved to operate in such circumstances. This should include the following:

- a) Encouragement of church members to use their homes as a base for witness and outreach, even when these are outside the parish in which they worship.
- b) Acknowledgment of the minister's right to work through every group created by his church members, even when these are located outside of his parish.
- c) Information to the parish minister of the location of all groups linked to other parishes.
- d) Recognition that church members are only likely to encourage contacts to join their own churches.<sup>24</sup>
- e) Co-operative church planning to work out strategy, to share resources, and to prevent the growth of one church at the expense of the remainder.

We now turn to a presentation and application of a second church-growth principle:

*2) The evangelistic task does not stop short as 'presence' and 'proclamation', but includes the necessity of 'persuasion' in response to the prompting and guiding of the Holy Spirit*

Christian presence is the essential starting-point. It is the principle of incarnation, whereby the communicator involves himself in the life situation of those he is endeavouring to reach. The church as medium, as well as message, must be open to scrutiny. However, a

silent presence is inadequate on its own. The 'mystery' of the gospel needs to be verbalized through proclamation: it can never be arrived at through human reasoning. However, the communicator's task is not simply to deliver his message on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. His goal is not simply that people will hear, but that they will respond. The gospel is not automatically regarded as self-evident good news. On the contrary, it contains unpalatable truths regarding the nature of man in his fallen state. Response to the revelation of God's saving purpose and plan often involves heart-searching and struggle, and the communicator of the gospel has the responsibility of emphasizing the importance and urgency of facing the issues and coming to a verdict. The apostle Paul did not shrink from using his powers of persuasion when he considered the situation warranted such an approach (Acts 13:43; 17:4; 18:4; 26:28; 28:23, 24; cf. 2 Cor. 5:11).

On the other hand, the Christian communicator is called to use persuasion with sensitivity and restraint. He must never exploit the vulnerability of the other person by becoming a manipulator. He must never steam-roller the other person by his strength of personality: such a tactic may precipitate a decision, but it will not fashion a disciple in the New Testament understanding of that term. Jesus did not teach by overriding the power of reason in his listeners, but constantly raised questions in their minds, so that they faced issues and came to their own conclusions. He persuaded by his integrity, perception and complete self-giving.

On the important issues of the legitimacy of persuasion, McGavran writes:

... it does not depend at all on the new course of conduct arising solely in the mind of the persuaded. Its rightness depends entirely on a) whether the action proposed is good for the persuaded, and b) whether he freely accepts it. The sleeping man in a burning building is a case in point. Is it legitimate to shake him, wake him, and persuade him to leave?<sup>25</sup>

In the free persuasion and counterpersuasion which is life, men must not be forced, tricked, or bribed into doing what they do not wish to do—even if we are very sure it would be good for them. But religious liberty must never be made to mean that persuasion is in some way a violation of personality or an infringement of the sovereignty of God. Among God's own ways of persuading is this: that he persuades through our efforts.<sup>26</sup>

The root of the verb 'to persuade', I am told, is 'by sweetness to convince'. The conviction is achieved by the combined impact of the medium and the message. The medium of gospel communication is not restricted to the individual believer, but embraces the whole Christian community of which he is a part. The key question is whether, in relation to that community, he is truly representative or an eccentricity. If the latter, then his credibility will be weakened by the contradictory image presented by the church he represents.

In his discussion of the emphasis on 'persuasion' in church-growth



thinking, Howard Snyder points out that it is not sufficient to consider the ultimate goal of evangelism as making disciples: it is also essential to include the formation of Christian community. 'Church-based evangelism is concerned, then, with propagation (in the fundamental sense of reproduction or multiplication by generation) as well as with persuasion.'<sup>27</sup> Is our 'strain' of the church of Christ sufficiently virile to be capable of propagation? And if it does succeed in bringing to birth new cells, what kind of offspring are they likely to be?

The second church-growth principle leads us to why we are not more 'persuasive' than we are. It underlines the need for a greater consistency between the message and the medium. It urges us to understand more fully the communication process as a complex two-way transaction. It uncovers the need to identify where a particular audience is in the decision-making process, and to relate our message to felt needs. Much of our tradition of evangelistic methodology is better geared to the restoration of the lapsed or nominal Christian than to primary evangelism in a non-Christian context, in which people are unaware of Christian terminology and basic gospel facts.

Engel has made a highly significant contribution in the area of Christian communication and the decision-making process.<sup>28</sup> He points out that so much of our evangelism is undertaken with unrealistic expectations, which give rise to inappropriate strategies. Thus if a resistant or apathetic community does not come to the point of commitment to Christ at the conclusion of a one-off meeting, we are apt to consider we have failed. Engel, on the other hand, shows the need for a strategy which has an extended time perspective; recognizing that people often do not change all at once but in discreet steps over time. Therefore the communicator is content to bring about a small change today and at future points, in the expectation that patience will pay off in ultimate acceptance of the good news.<sup>29</sup>

Applied to a home-meeting programme geared to non-church-going neighbours, an evangelistic goal of one meeting may be to move people from thinking of God as an impersonal force to a person who gives purpose and meaning to the universe and significance to the life of the individual. This is a more realistic expectation, and will provide a nearer base for subsequent discussion to lead them further along the decision-making way.

### *3) Much can be learned from the study of the numerical growth of denominations and congregations by geographical area and homogeneous groupings*

There is some justifiable resistance to a statistical approach in many local churches. This negative attitude is understandable, because so often such an approach has been more for the benefit of the planners than for the well-being of the churches themselves. It may well have

been with a view to 'rationalization' and planned retrenchment, and therefore it is in the interests of the survival of many a struggling local church to hide the facts about themselves! Others object that the data collected is often incomplete and biased, so that it is at best of very limited value and at its worst positively misleading.

Against such scepticism, the author has found that when local congregations face the facts about themselves and are sufficiently in touch with their local situation to interpret the data, the quantity findings lead to quality questions.

For instance, it is a common occurrence to find churches around the United Kingdom which are growing in attendance but not in membership (or regular communicants). The explanation of this phenomenon, in many cases, is that churches are succeeding in attracting young families to morning worship through their family services, but, once there, the churches do not know how to involve them further. They have no effective procedures for incorporating new members. So people remain on the periphery of church life, until they eventually drift away when their children reach their early 'teens and no longer find the worship format attractive to them.

Churches can also uncover further significant aspects of their evangelistic effectiveness from an age/sex breakdown of the congregation as compared with the community; and also analyse whether they attract singles and marrieds, and how many complete families they represent. The results of an analysis of this kind can provide pointers for future strategy. For instance, the church which has stumbled upon an effective way of reaching mothers of young families, will before long find itself with frustrated prayer groups of wives praying for their unconverted husbands if it does not apply itself to discovering equally effective ways of reaching the men. They will more often be won by other men, or in an approach to couples, rather than through the isolated testimony of the wife. Her efforts at witnessing readily throw her spouse on to the defensive, implying that there have been shortcomings in the marriage.<sup>30</sup>

It is also instructive to observe the geographical spread of church attenders in order to identify where clusters are beginning to appear, indicating a responsive segment and suggesting the possibility of new home-group developments. We can also ask what characteristics these people have in common. The gaps are as significant as the clusters: these reveal areas of resistance, which raise the question 'why?'. Do the people who live there have characteristics in common? If you are not succeeding in attracting them, is any other Christian group finding a better response?

Lastly, we would emphasize the importance of taking note of the giving per member or attender. This provides a sensitive indicator of the perceived worthwhileness of the local church. People will pay when they know what their money is being used for, and are con-

vinced of the relevance of their church's programme.<sup>31</sup>

*4) The various factors likely to inhibit or facilitate growth in any given situation need to be identified, using the relevant anthropological and sociological tools*

Statistical knowledge in itself is inadequate to give a comprehensive picture. The obstacles preventing individuals and communities turning to Christ and joining the church are not confined to theological considerations—they are also cultural and sociological. The Christian communicator must seek to remove all unnecessary barriers, so that the only stumbling block is the cross itself.

The Christian then turns to anthropology with a good conscience to discover why certain churches have grown and others have not, and to devise customs, institutions and other configurations which will fill the voids created by rapid social change, in a manner acceptable to the society in question.<sup>32</sup>

McGavran has emphasized the corporate dimension of conversion. Missionaries, influenced by the individualism of western culture, have thought too exclusively in terms of individuals coming one by one against the tide. In societies with a strong group consciousness and a complex network of extended family relationships, the response, when it comes, may take a different form. McGavran describes this as 'multi-individual, mutually interdependent conversion.'<sup>33</sup>

This dynamic holds good for areas of society here in the United Kingdom. There are tight-knit communities to be found in some villages or towns which are concentrated on one dominant industry—mining or weaving, for instance—where everyone knows one another and where there is a high incidence of intermarriage. In fairly static artisan communities, there is often an extended network of family relationships, with a tradition of group decision-making which makes it difficult for the individual to step out of line. This also applies to many ethnic groups: e.g. Romanies, or an Asian community which has immigrated from the same few villages in a particular region of Pakistan.

McGavran identifies the elements of social structure which can be ignored if the gospel is to be presented adequately and the church is to take root in local soil. So he speaks of the importance of being aware of the physical, economic, social, political, historical and geographical context; the marriage customs and the sex mores; the power structure; the land rites; the degree of people consciousness (whether people make decisions mainly as individuals or mainly as members of communities); and the language and thought-forms of the group.<sup>34</sup> These factors all contribute to an assessment of the community's openness to change. Generally speaking, the older and more stable the community, the more difficult it is for the church to

make an impact.

In addition to contextual factors, there are also institutional factors which either inhibit or facilitate growth. If the church's worship styles, leadership models, and fellowship activities are culturally removed, then the church is unlikely to grow.

At a recent meeting of twenty-one local church leaders in a new town, all admitted that they were seeing few new converts among the members of the new churches they were pastoring. Growth was largely the result of transfer. The one exception was the Assemblies of God pastor, who estimated that 75 per cent of their growing membership consisted of new converts with no previous church links. His church is carefully structured to make new converts through an ongoing evangelistic programme and to nurture new Christians.

Here in the United Kingdom it is estimated that 60 per cent of people belong to the non-book culture. This description does not imply that they cannot read, but that they do not read a book a year and that the print media does not stimulate their thinking or determine their opinions. However, the majority of churches are geared to a book culture, and, consequently, they attract people who read. In many Anglican churches you need to be able to handle three or four books during the course of one service (hymn book, prayer book, Bible, and possibly a supplementary chorus book). Is it any wonder that those who are unaccustomed to handling books are frightened off?

*5) Due to the preparatory work of the Holy Spirit, certain elements of any population become more winnable than others. We should be alert to such developments and direct the major part of our evangelistic efforts to the most responsive*

'The receptivity or responsiveness of individuals waxes and wanes. No person is equally ready at all times to follow "the way"', writes McGavran.<sup>35</sup> Part of the evangelistic gift is an above-average sensitivity to know to whom and when to speak. This also applies to groups as well as to individuals. After observing where, and among whom, the church is growing at the present time in the United Kingdom, I conclude that there is a responsiveness among young marrieds, especially within the first three months of their moving house; among singles living in flats; and among those widows who have been supported by Christians during a family crisis. If the church can identify such people and develop programmes relevant to their needs, they can be won.

The Church of England has frequently failed to make an impact on the potentially responsive soil when it has relied on the daughter-church approach. For such new churches are often dependent on an old parish church which has static concepts. Most daughter churches are served by a succession of curates who are not there for more than

## CHURCHMAN

three years, thus preventing any sustained policy. Daughter churches which have proved themselves an exception to the rule by demonstrating sustained growth, have done so either because of a strong local lay leadership which has developed its own way of doing things and which is merely serviced by the local clergy, or because they have curates who have stayed for much longer than their allotted time.

The question remains, however, of how to deal with the most resistant areas. McGavran states:

Abandonment is not called for. Fields must be sown. Stony fields must be ploughed. No one should conclude that if receptivity is low, the church should withdraw its mission.<sup>36</sup>

Sometimes a contributory factor to the resistant climate is found in a particular church. While one church fails to make any impression, another group comes along and finds a ready response.

6) *Everyone has the right to hear the gospel within their culture, for Christ did not come to abolish, but to redeem cultures. People should not be expected to cross racial, cultural, class and language barriers in order to come to Christ*

For the past thirty years, McGavran has advocated a people's approach to evangelism. He maintains that Christ's command to disciple the nations (*mathêteusate panta ta ethne*) does not refer to nation states but to the peoples: tribes, castes and the extended families of mankind.<sup>37</sup> Many urban communities are made up of a complex mosaic of 'homogeneous units'. 'The homogeneous unit is simply a section of society in which all the members have some characteristic in common.'<sup>38</sup> As such, McGavran concedes it is an imprecise, elastic concept, its meaning depending on the context in which it is used. The concept alerts us to the fact that the geographical map is inadequate alone, and leads us to enquire about the common characteristics of those who make up the majority of the congregation. It may consist mainly of students, single people living in flats, or families new to the area: or it may be an old-established village community which does not welcome newcomers.

Having identified characteristics common to the congregation, we must then ask, 'Are there common characteristics among the community who do not come to church; either because they have never been approached, or have declined our invitations? Is their lack of response due to their deliberate rejection of the claims of the gospel and the hand of Christian friendship, or is it because our language and life-style seem foreign or because the issues we raise appear irrelevant?'

Charles Kraft argues the need for the church to learn to communicate God's way:

## *The Relevance of Church Growth Principles to Evangelism in England*

For generations, we who seek to communicate God's Word have looked to the Bible for our *message*. I am afraid, though, that we have seldom looked to the Bible for our *method*. I have become personally convinced that the inspiration of the Bible extends both to message and to method.<sup>39</sup>

For Kraft, this method is incarnational and recipient-oriented. God addresses himself to a particular people within their cultural context. He speaks in a language that they can understand; in order to be understood and not simply admired. Furthermore, he seeks a response from his hearers and not merely passive listening. He therefore addresses specific issues so that he communicates 'truth with impact' rather than vague generalizations. He comes close to us, that we may come close to him.

The positive value of the homogeneous-unit concept is to make us sensitive to the various groups to which the gospel needs to be addressed meaningfully. It represents a high view of culture. Wagner reminds us that 'cultural integrity is part and parcel of human identity, and any system of thought or behaviour that denies cultural integrity is dehumanizing.'<sup>40</sup> In the days of the early church, Gentiles were made to believe by many Jewish Christians that coming to Christ involved becoming a Jew. Today the tables are turned. Many Hebrew Christians state that one of the major obstacles to their accepting Christ as the Messiah is the way the gospel has been de Judaized by the Gentile church! Entirely new approaches, languages and structures may have to be found for the gospel to be heard above our cultural 'static' on the council housing estates; among workers in heavy industry; with teenage gangs; and among the ethnic minorities from Asia or the West Indies, etc.

At the same time, the homogeneous-unit concept must not be used as a rationale for creating comfortable, mono-ethnic enclaves. As well as affirming cultures, the gospel also comes to pass judgement on elements in our culture. Therefore, alongside the homogeneous-unit principle, we need to emphasize the cross-cultural dimension of the gospel which breaks down prejudice and creates an openness to outside criticism and positive influence. One of the problems of the Church of England is that it is *too English* and too closely identified with the *status quo*. We have become blind to our areas of weakness and blinkered in our concerns. Some dioceses, which have entered into 'Partnership in Mission' exchanges, have become painfully aware of this in recent months when they have read the reports compiled by perceptive and candid visitors from churches in the Third World and Eastern Europe.

*7) The church requires two interrelated structures to carry out God's redemptive mission, one being the settled community and the other the apostolic band*

This is a distinction expounded by Ralph D. Winter.<sup>41</sup> The settled

community, the 'modality', is people-orientated, diverse in its concerns, with a generalist role. The apostolic band, the 'sodality', on the other hand, operates on the frontiers to break new ground. It is task-oriented, specialist in its concern, emphasizing 'being sent' in addition to 'being called'. In other terminology, the sodality is represented by the Catholic missionary order, or the Protestant Missionary societies. It is the distinction between 'church' and 'para-church'. However, it is questionable whether any local congregation or denominational grouping can claim for itself the title 'church' to the exclusion of the sodalities. Indeed, when the 'church' has abolished the entrepreneurial groups and brought their activities within the denomination's bureaucratic structures, the motivation seems to evaporate. The crucial issue is the interrelationship between the 'modality' and the 'sodality'. Neither must exist independently of the other, or with an attitude of competition. Rather they should interact in a symbiotic relationship, for their mutual enrichment and enabling. In the furtherance of God's mission, there will always be tasks beyond the resources of a local congregation or beyond the horizon of the denomination's vision. Special groupings of those appropriately gifted, trained and committed will be required to explore fresh areas of missionary endeavour.

I believe that there is an urgent need for the establishing of new sodalities to further the evangelistic task in Britain today. We need to identify growing churches in a variety of settings (rural, inner-city, council estates, high-rise flats, multi-racial communities, among shift-workers in heavy industry, and among the social élite) to provide models and become resource centres. We need apostolic teams who are trained and skilled in the planting of new churches and cell groups. We need gifted evangelists: not to run week-long campaigns, but to help parishes identify their potential evangelists, to train them and develop evangelistic programmes tailor-made for local situations. We need centres for training in cross-cultural evangelism, to present the gospel in ways indigenous to the many diverse cultures which are now rooted in these islands. Furthermore, the emergence of the video-tape and disc will soon open up exciting educational possibilities, but will require a technical competence and capital investment beyond the reach of local churches and resource-starved central denominational administration.<sup>42</sup>

*8) To sustain church growth, in addition to expanding existing congregations, new churches should be planted, cell groups multiplied, and local leadership trained on the apprenticeship model*

We have already noted examples in Britain of church growth by transfer and the reactivation of the nominal fringe, rather than through conversions from the world. This should be a matter which

causes us grave concern. At the risk of being controversial, I would hope that if existing churches show no sign of facing their evangelistic responsibility, new churches will be founded alongside them.<sup>43</sup> As Wagner comments facetiously to his church-growth students, 'It is easier to have babies than raise the dead!' Frequently, new churches grow better than old churches, for the simple reason that they contain a high proportion of first generation Christians who are in close contact with their non-Christian friends and who know from recent personal experience what it is like to put their lives unreservedly under the lordship of Christ in the fellowship of his church.

Existing congregations need to train cell groups in outreach evangelism, and to establish home groups for enquirers and new believers. A number of churches are beginning to develop such schemes, and they are yielding encouraging results.

If effective evangelism is to occur, the local church must identify its evangelists. Not everyone is gifted in this way, and it is counter-productive to try and dragoon everyone into an area of front-line activity for which the majority are not gifted.<sup>44</sup> This is not to say that those who are not so gifted can ignore the task, for everyone is called to fulfil the role of witness, and everyone's gift relates in some way to the church's evangelistic programme. The practical implications of this will be worked out in the next section.

At this point we raise the issue in connection with the ordained leadership. The main reason why effective evangelism does not occur in the majority of parishes is that the vicar is not an evangelist. In such cases one of two things happen: either he attempts to fulfil the role himself without much impact; or he contracts out, either ignoring it completely or relying on the periodic visits of an outside evangelist. When a church recognizes that its leader is not gifted as an evangelist, it should look for someone else to lead the church in this vital area. A number of churches, such as St Thomas' Crookes, Sheffield, and St Andrew's, Chorleywood, have evangelists on their staff to train the church in evangelism and to lead lay witness teams wider afield.

It is no good simply exhorting a congregation to evangelism. This merely heightens feelings of guilt and frustration. It will only occur as leadership models are seen at work in the congregation, and as the local church becomes an infectious communicator through its curiosity-rousing quality of life. Training in evangelism must be by the apprenticeship method: learning on the job. Only thereby will people overcome their reticence, learn the necessary skills, and gain confidence through seeing that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation.

*9) The church should aim to motivate all its members to fulfil*



## CHURCHMAN

*their role of witness and activate them to exercise their gifts to enrich the church's worship and extend its witness by incarnating its life in the world*

While the church is not itself the kingdom of God, it exists as a sign and servant of the kingdom, and it is God's principal means of extending his reign on earth. Therefore the church is both message and medium: it must embody in some measure what it proclaims; otherwise its exhortations will fall on deaf ears. This is not to imply that the church must gain full marks before it is spiritually qualified to engage in mission. The cry that 'we are not ready' all too frequently becomes a device for postponing evangelism indefinitely. We do well to remind ourselves that people are looking for reality, not perfection.

The church-growth emphasis in evangelism focuses not simply on output, but on response. The goal is that disciples are made, and this process can only be continued as converts become responsible members of Christ's church. Membership, as much recent literature on the subject has emphasized, means active participation, the term literally referring to a limb or an organism in a body with a specific function and location.<sup>45</sup> While the Reformation gave back to the church the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, we have still to discover the practice within most mainline Protestant denominations. Hendrik Kraemer observes:

... after the consolidation of the Reformation in various countries, the laity receded into the background and the ministry or clergy, although with different motivations and in different forms, was again established as the 'office' and body which represents the church.<sup>46</sup>

It was the emergence of the charismatic movement, with its emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit, which provided a theological base and spiritual dynamic for a layman's liberation movement. But this impetus was deficient in three regards. First, at least in the early days, there was too narrow an appreciation of the number and range of the gifts.<sup>47</sup> Second, their operation was confined in many churches to marginal groups rather than being demonstrated in the life of the full congregation. Third, they were regarded as operative within the church, with scant regard to their significance for the mission of the church in the world.

The emergence of gifts has been likened to the action of a beam of light when it enters a prism. The beam represents the grace of God, and the prism the church. At the point of entry the white light separates out into the colours of the spectrum, and on emerging at the far side of prism refracts still more to scatter the various colours into the world. In this way the Spirit of God equips people to make their particular contribution in the many faceted mission which embraces all that God wants doing through his people in the world.

On the practical level, we must take steps to ascertain what pro-

portion of our congregation have discovered their God-given gifts. How do we encourage individuals to realize that they have a distinctive contribution to make? If people can drift away from our churches without leaving a vacancy, then our ministry has failed to achieve the objective of preparing all God's people for the work of Christian service in order to build up the body of Christ. Church growth means uncovering the gifts that the risen Christ has generously bestowed throughout the congregation. It means helping people to consecrate these resources to Christ, to be used in such a way as to bring him glory and extend his kingdom. It means building programmes around these gifts, and encouraging their application to the situations in which God has placed us in the world. Such developments will help to deliver us from dull predictability.

Wagner provides a most helpful and practical text-book on identifying gifts and developing them to facilitate the growth of the church.<sup>48</sup> Having identified those with the gift of the evangelist, the majority without this specific gift do not simply sit back and let the minority get on with it. They contribute their gifts to provide contexts in which the evangelists can operate to maximum effect. This may be through publicity, music, management, hospitality, etc. The pastor-teacher will also have to take up from where the evangelist leaves off. Furthermore, everyone affirms the message of the evangelist by fulfilling the roll of witness, able to give a reason for the hope that is within him and to declare how it has worked out in his experience. While the evangelist provides the clear explanation and note of challenge, the witness often provides the point of identity for those responding to the gospel presentation.

*10) Churches should concentrate on developing unpaid leaders and workers who devote their energies to reaching those outside the church*

Winfield Arn, of the Institute of American Church Growth, has likened many churches to hospitals which, although they may have excellent medical facilities, are only available to the hospital staff! They do not function for and in the community. McGavran urges churches to concentrate more of their efforts into training members whose energies will be primarily directed to serving and evangelizing non-Christians in an effort to bring them into the body of Christ.<sup>49</sup> Too much of our training resources are funnelled into training leaders to keep the wheels of the church's existing institutions turning:

If a church will devote the same number of hours and people to outreach that it devotes to its members, in one year that church will see significant growth.<sup>50</sup>

I long to see the mushrooming of lay-instituted and parish-based

programmes to make many more effective contacts among the 85 per cent of our population who are beyond our influence at the present time. Many churches would do well to prune their programmes to release their membership to be more active in their communities. Members of larger churches with a non-stop all-star weekly programme need to learn to be very selective, and, instead of running from one meeting to the next, ask what ministry is God giving to them if only they would make the time by reordering their priorities. Many of us would rather entertain ourselves in bonzai gardening than venture into the jungle outside! This leads us directly into our next point.

*11) A church should beware of pursuing personal maturity at the expense of ongoing evangelism; otherwise a communication gap will open up between the church and community through the process of 'redemption and lift'*

McGavran cautions against too much lift with too little redemption! By this he means that churches tend to concentrate on the spiritual development of the existing members, to the neglect of further outreach. In time, such an emphasis opens up a communications gap between the church and the community it is supposed to serve. There is a prevailing tendency to halt an evangelistic programme just as soon as it is producing results, in order to consolidate our gains. Once the momentum is halted, however, it is even more difficult to regain it. As I have expressed elsewhere, the most significant phase of any evangelistic programme is not the first wave of converts, but the second wave which has been generated as a result of the recent converts.<sup>51</sup> The way to prevent a communication gap opening up, and the church becoming encapsulated, is to ensure that the church has many openings into the community and that there is a continuing stream of new converts.

We must beware of the type of Christian nurture which results in spiritual self-preoccupation:

If engagement with ourselves does not push back horizons so that we see neighbours we did not see before, then we need to examine the appointment kept with self.<sup>52</sup>

The last twenty years have witnessed the emergence of tens of thousands of small groups of Christians meeting together for Bible study, discussion, prayer and mutual support. (There may be about 100,000 such groups in England alone.) If just 10 per cent of these groups could be encouraged and trained in neighbourhood evangelism, what a powerful new force would be in existence throughout the land. They represent a vast and largely unrealized potential. Where they are catching the vision, there are early signs of new conversion growth. We need more experienced trainers to help in this most fruitful field.

**12) Growth should be expected and planned for. Therefore we should set ourselves measurable goals in line with our God-given resources, and in response to the call of Christ to specific areas of responsibility**

Much church life is characterized by a roundabout mentality. It maintains weekly, monthly and annual cycles of events without stopping to ask where it is all leading. A frenzy of programme activity camouflages an absence of purpose. In order to counteract the maintenance syndrome, it is helpful to prepare for each new year (planning from September through to the following July) by the pastoral team and the parochial church council seeking the mind of Christ in order to discover where to place the priorities for that period. Then they need to work out the possible alternative routes of achieving those objectives, and what the financial and human resources they will need for each. Of all the possible ways of getting there, which plan should they make their first choice? Furthermore, how can the congregation be involved in the planning, and how can decisions be effectively communicated in order to achieve consensus and goal ownership? These are basic management questions, which they ignore at their peril.

A church appears very different from the point of view of the average church member who is not a PCC member or leader of an organization. Most do not know where their church is going. There may be ideas flying about in the committee meeting, but, because of poor internal communication, the church member may be largely unaware of what is going on. Growing churches are characterized by commitment to agreed goals. They have spelt out the priorities for their ministry, and achieved a large measure of consensus. People know where their church is going, and are enthusiastically going with it. They are consequently prepared to find their niche in the work programme, and pay the bills. By and large we get what we plan for: if this is retrenchment, we decline; if it is survival, we continue to struggle to keep our heads above the waves; if it is to grow, then we grow. This is not intended to imply that there is anything self-assured about church growth. All growth is from God, and we are left in no doubt that he is committed to the growth of the church. This growth should be normative rather than the exception.

After decades of decline we may be on the verge of a fresh ingathering. If, in the providence of God, this proves to be the case, let us ensure that the workers are ready in the field and that the barns are adequate and prepared for the harvest. Otherwise the ripened corn may be left to rot in the field.

**THE REV. EDDIE GIBBS** is Range Development Manager for the Bible Society.

## NOTES

- 1 This definition is given by Dr C. Peter Wagner (associate professor of church growth, Fuller Seminary School of World Mission) in his church-growth course.
- 2 Orlando Costas has pointed out the danger of an ecclesiastical narrowing of the concept of mission. He raises the questions: 'Who is the centre of the kingdom—Christ or the church? Who is the object of the kingdom—the community or the king?' *The Church and Its Mission* (Tyndale House, Wheaton, Ill. 1974) p.135.
- 3 Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (Harper and Row, New York 1977) p.88.
- 4 *ibid.*, pp.15-16.
- 5 See James Scherer's appreciation in *International Review of Mission* 60, 1971, p.127.
- 6 This has been an area of concern expressed by many Latin American, North American and European radical discipleship groups. They emphasize that the growth of the institutional churches is not necessarily kingdom growth. It all depends on the content and quality of the new member's commitment. Church-growth thinking must recognize more fully the problem of nominality and cultural syncretism (i.e. uncritical acceptance of values and attitudes to be found in the cultural context).
- 7 James F. Engel, *Contemporary Christian Communications* (Nelson, Nashville, Tenn. 1979) p.7.
- 8 *ibid.*, p.100.
- 9 Up-to-date information is supplied by the Information Service, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, working in conjunction with the Missions Advanced Research and Communications Centre, a department of World Vision.
- 10 For a detailed examination of church-going in the United Kingdom from 1700 to the present, see Robert Currie, Alan Gilbert and Lee Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers* (Oxford University Press, London 1977).
- 11 C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Regal Books, Glendale, Calif. 1976).
- 12 Celebration refers to the large scale, the-more-the-merrier, inspirational event; congregation is not synonymous with the local church, but refers to the programme-oriented, relational group, while 'cell' designates the intimate spiritual kinship group.
- 13 This is the most controversial of the church-growth principles first expounded by McGavran in *Bridges of God* (World Dominion Books, London 1955). For a recent detailed exposition see C. Peter Wagner, *Our Kind of People* (John Knox Press, Atlanta 1979). See also *The Pasadena Consultation—Homogeneous Unit* (Lausanne Occasional Papers No.1, Wheaton Ill. 1978), and a paper by David Wasdell, 'Homogeneous Unit Principle: A Defense Against Anxiety', *Global Church Growth Bulletin*, 17, 1980, pp.1-2.
- 14 Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, p.147.
- 15 *Home Missions* magazine, December 1977.
- 16 See Dean R. Hodge and David A. Roozen, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950-1978* (The Pilgrim Press, New York 1979), which provides data and commentary on the growth of all the main line denominations until 1965 and describes their varying features since that watershed date.
- 17 Paul Beasley-Murray and Alan Williamson, *Turning The Tide*, to be published later this year by the Bible Society.
- 18 However, George G. Hunter III, in a book co-authored with McGavran, has listed a dozen distinctives of the church-growth approach. *Church Growth—Strategies That Work* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn. 1980).
- 19 In *Body-Building Exercises for the Local Church* (Falcon, London 1979) pp.38-47, I have identified thirteen growth-retarding ailments.

## *The Relevance of Church Growth Principles to Evangelism in England*

- 20 Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich. 1970) p.46.
- 21 The Nationwide Initiative In Evangelism report *Prospects For The Eighties* (Bible Society, London 1980) reveals that in terms of adult church attendance the Anglicans account for less than one third of the total (Anglican 1,256,000; Roman Catholic 1,310,000, and the Free Churches 1,284,000). If present trends continue, by 1984 the attendance figures will be Anglican 1,213,000, RC 1,166,000, and Free Churches 1,359,000.
- 22 Engel, op. cit., p.59.
- 23 In the United States the distance is around twenty-five miles. Steeply rising fuel prices may lead in the near future to a new role for the local community at the expense of the eclectic congregation.
- 24 McGavran and Arn, op. cit., p.88.
- 25 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, p.42.
- 26 *ibid.*, pp.42,43.
- 27 Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King* (IVP, Downes Grove, Ill. 1977).
- 28 James F. Engel and Wilbert Norton, *What's Gone Wrong With The Harvest? and How Can I Get Them to Listen?* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Mich. 1975 and 1977).
- 29 Engel, op. cit., p.196.
- 30 For a sensitive appreciation of the problem in witnessing to one's marriage partner, see Keith Miller, *The Taste of New Wine* (Word Books, London 1965) ch.4.
- 31 For practical help in data collecting: *Church and Neighbourhood Survey Mark III*, from Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism, 146 Queen Victoria Street, London, EC4V 4BX, and *Planning for Mission*, Planning Guide, Dept. of Home Mission, The Church of Scotland, 121 George Street, Edinburgh EH2 4YN.
- 32 McGavran, p.107.
- 33 *ibid.*, p.302.
- 34 *ibid.*, pp.183-94.
- 35 *ibid.*, p.216.
- 36 *ibid.*, p.229.
- 37 This exegesis has been challenged by David Hesselgrave in 'Confusion Concerning The Great Commission', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 15, 1979, pp.197-204.
- 38 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, p.85.
- 39 Charles H. Kraft, *Communicating The Gospel God's Way* (William Carey Library, Pasadena, Calif. 1979).
- 40 Wagner, *Our Kind of People*, p.97.
- 41 Ralph D. Winter, 'The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission', *Missiology*, 2, 1974, pp.121-39.
- 42 For a more comprehensive 'sodality' classification, see *I Believe In Church Growth* (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1981), the concluding section of chapter 8.
- 43 McGavran and Arn (op. cit., p.96) observe that 'Growth in existing churches and growth by planting new churches are both valid forms, but it seems that great growth of a denomination seldom comes by growth in existing churches. It comes by planting new congregations.'
- 44 Wagner, in *Your Church Can Grow*, p.77, argues this hypothesis: 'In the average evangelical church, ten per cent of the members have been given the gift of evangelist.'
- 45 cf. Juan Carlos Ortiz, *Disciple* (Lakeland, London 1975).
- 46 Hendrik Kraemar, *A Theology of the Laity* (Lutterworth, London 1958), p.25.
- 47 Contrast Dennis and Rita Bennett's concentration on the nine gifts in *The Holy Spirit and You* (Logos International, New Jersey 1971) with Arnold Bittlinger's *Gifts and Graces* (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1967), who writes 'The great multiplicity of gifts makes it clear that the activity of Jesus extends to the whole range of human experience' (p.14).

## CHURCHMAN

- 48 C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow* (Regal Books, Glendale, Calif. 1979).  
49 McGavran and Arn, *op. cit.*, p.109.  
50 *ibid.*, p.112.  
51 Eddie Gibbs, *Urban Church Growth* (Grove Books, Nottingham 1977), p.14.  
52 Elizabeth O'Connor, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward* (Harper and Row, New York 1968), p.28.

# Church Society

- encourages** — by visiting parishes, advising individuals and groups, sponsoring the Federation of Diocesan Evangelical Unions
- educates** — through conferences and study programmes, maintaining the biblical foundation of the Church of England
- publishes** — *Churchman* and *Cross + Way*, books, booklets, study guides, cassettes and filmstrips
- appoints** — clergy to over 100 parishes and assists with pastoral reorganisation through its patronage trust

MEMBERSHIP OPEN TO ALL WHO WILL SUPPORT THE SOCIETY,  
PARTNERSHIP FOR PARISHES WHO WISH TO BE ACTIVELY  
CONNECTED WITH THE SOCIETY

**Even if you have already paid your subscription to 'CHURCHMAN',  
you can still take advantage of our new combined scheme which  
includes Church Society membership**

Please write to CHURCH SOCIETY  
WHITEFIELD HOUSE  
186 KENNINGTON PARK ROAD  
LONDON SE11 4BT  
Tel: 01 582 0132