

A Second And Third Look At Church Growth Principles

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by Pastor Curtis A. Peterson

Introduction

Our purpose at this conference is to examine the Church Growth Movement and assess both its contributions and its dangers in the context of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and our confessional Lutheran theological stance. Some call this movement the most serious present danger to the theological integrity of the WELS and Confessional Lutheranism generally, even predicting that the next major schism in our body will be over it.

Is the Church Growth movement so encumbered with the errors of Arminianism and Reformed Evangelicalism that it is impossible for us to drink from its fountains without being infected by the pollution of errors which infect so many of its leaders? The Movement's founder, Dr Donald McGavran, was a member of the Disciples of Christ, a church body with its roots in the 19th Century Restoration movement. Dr. Arthur Glasser, Fuller School of World Mission resident theologian, asserts "Church Growth Theology has a somewhat modified Reformed hermeneutic."¹ "We do not," he writes, "follow Luther's hermeneutic that makes Jesus Christ the *rule of faith*." Many Lutherans credit Church Growth principles with an evangelistic synergism and other errors incompatible with Lutheran theology.²

Others in our Synod borrow generously from the Movement and incorporate its principles into their own thinking and ministries. I suspect we in the WELS use more of the themes, techniques and principles of the movement than we even realize. For some, the implications of church growth principles are nothing less than revolutionary in their [positive] implications for the church.

PART I. It Does Make a Difference: The Theological Basis for Evangelism.

In this second and third look at the Church Growth Movement, I will note some of its weaknesses and errors, while showing where we do and can benefit from its insights and research. Lutheranism with its theology of the cross is particularly equipped to correct weaknesses in the movement's theology and practice. Our message centers on the cross and the good news of God justifying the sinner for Christ's sake by grace alone through faith. Lutheranism, at its best, is evangelistic and knows at the very core of its being that God wants everybody to be saved and come to Christ and eternal life. In contrast, Reformed theology orients itself around the sovereignty of God, while Arminian/Wesleyan theology is controlled by the freedom of the will. How tragic, therefore, that churches of these tradition shame us by their

¹ Arthur Glasser, "Church Growth Theology." *Church Growth Movement, Proceedings, Eleventh Annual Biennial Meeting*, Association of Professors of Missions, 1972.

² Interestingly, however, the first criticisms of the Church Growth movement came not from confessional Lutherans but rather first from liberal Protestant (Cf. Carl S. Dudley, "Measuring Church Growth" *Christian Century*, June 6-13, 1979; or Robert K. Hudnut, *Church Growth is Not the Point*, Harper and Rob, 1975); or from conservative Reformed sources, such as Orland E. Costas, *The Church and its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World*, Wheaton, Tyndale, 1974; or Harvie M. Conn, Editor, *Theological Perspectives on Church Growth*, Nutley, N. J., Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976. Serious Lutheran critiques began in force in the mid 1980s.

dedication to the principles and practice of evangelism and missions, as well as in its creativity and research on how to carry out God's will to reach the lost more effectively.

After following this movement for 20 years, reading a fair number of books and attending an occasional seminar, it is also time for me to take a personal second and third look at church growth principles. Do they have valid application to our ministries or does their use per se involve a compromise of our theological integrity? Does "avoid them" [Romans 16:17] mean avoiding whatever is produced by this movement?

In answering these concerns, I will first note positive contributions of this movement and then examine some dangers which it presents for the unwary or uncritical. Then I will suggest an alternative, using our distinctive evangelical Lutheran emphases to improve on "the Fuller Franchise." But first, let's examine the theological underpinnings of evangelism, in order to understand how important our subject is.

Sadly for both theology and evangelism, concern for theological integrity and evangelistic zeal are sometimes placed in antithesis to one another. Scripturally, however, evangelism is proclaimed doctrine and doctrine is meant to be proclaimed. Without a solid Biblical grounding, evangelism will be shallow at best and heretical at worst. We therefore welcome examination of our methods and theology to make sure that we, in our zeal to proclaim the gospel, do not fall into error ourselves. As Arthur P. Johnston wrote:

Evangelicals must learn to look beneath the exposed iceberg tip of missiology and recognize the theological foundations that sustain or stifle mission. Good missiology grows out of good, biblical theology; bad missiology grows out of bad, extrabiblical theology. Sound and deep theology is essential for the true growth of the church.³

Confessional Lutherans will echo a hearty Amen to this.

In his review-article "Keeping Up With the Evangelicals" in the December 5, 1975 issue of *Christianity Today*. Historian Mark A. Noll underscores this thought: "The twentieth-century heirs of nineteenth century revivalism need very much to put evangelism back under the control of a full-orbed biblical theology rather than letting evangelistic practice dictate the shape of Christian doctrine."

As a matter of fact, it is precisely the evangelism texts of the Bible that exhort us to sound doctrine. The Bible forever joins the concern for sound doctrine with the mission mandate of our Lord. The Great Commission itself, (Matt. 28:18-20) commits us to teach "everything I have commanded you." In Acts 20:18-35, Paul reminded the Ephesian elders of "how I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance, and have faith in the Lord Jesus." Later he says, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock." Even as an evangelist and missionary, Paul was concerned about false doctrine and especially on the mission fields!

³ Arthur P. Johnston, "Reply" [to a critique of his earlier essay "Church Growth and World Evangelization"] in *Theology and Mission: Papers given at Trinity Consultation No. 1*, Edited by David J. Hesselgrave, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978 p. 221.

Another, example of the marriage of evangelistic zeal with sound doctrine is seen in 2 Timothy 4:5, where the great apostle urges Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist” in a context [3:14-4:4] that is concerned about maintaining sound doctrine based on the Scriptures in the face of false teachers. When dealing with its theological underpinnings, Church Growth proponents are prone to put the cart before the horse. Experience and observation too often determine their conclusions rather than Scriptural exegesis. Reformed missiologist Roger Greenway complains: “Most of church growth missiology’s theological bases have been worked out after the methodological insights and mission principles were arrived at through field observation and experience.”⁴

It’s a bit like writing a sermon and then looking for a text. With these caveats, let’s examine some of the

PART II. Contributions of Church Growth Principles: How Church Growth thinking has changed.

Christianity Today recently published a revealing article on changes in the thinking of church growth theorists.⁵ They no longer say that every church must grow, and have even raised doubts about the effectiveness of their own principles. McGavran himself apparently did not even use the term “Church Growth” in the last two years of his life, preferring instead the expression “effective evangelism.” C. Peter Wagner is quoted as saying, “Somehow, they [the Church Growth principles], don’t seem to work.” In spite of everything they have taught and advocated, he sees the percentage of American adults attending church remaining almost the same, while Protestant church membership has actually declined.

On the other hand, the rapid growth of several mainly independent megachurches is one of the most important developments in modern church history. Lyle Schaller has pointed out that only about one half of one percent of all Christian congregations in the USA were independent of denominational affiliation in 1906 while perhaps 20% are today.⁶ By no means a uniquely American phenomenon, some of the largest churches in the world are in third world nations such as in Brazil or Korea. Recently, some of America’s fastest growing churches are in the black community. The question raised by Sidey and others, however, is whether in America, they are growing by the conversion of adults or by people moving from one Christian church to another.

To be fair, one might ask the same question of much of the growth in our own churches—how many of our “adult confirmation” statistics are of true unbelievers and how many are really being received from other Christian churches who have decided that they prefer our position or what we offer enough to take an adult instruction series? Our “Statistical Reports” do not make this distinction.

Glenn Huebel, an LCMS pastor in Texas, argues that both the goal and the standards of measurement of this movement are sociological, with its “practical focus” on “the outward incorporation of a person into a congregational institution and the production of a Christian lifestyle.”⁷ Since these are the only forms of growth measurable under any circumstances, this

⁴ Roger S. Greenway, “Winnable People,” in *Theological Perspectives On Church Growth*, Harvie M. Conn, Editor, Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976, p. 46.

⁵ Ken Sidey, “Church Growth Fine Tunes Its Formulas,” *Christianity Today*, June 24, 1991, p. 44-47.

⁶ Lyle E. Schaller, “Three Passing Parades,” *Church Management - The Clergy Journal*, August 1991, p. 41.

⁷ Glenn Huebel, “The Church Growth Movement: A word of Caution,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, July-Oct. 1986, pp. 166-168.

criticism is not entirely fair. Certainly, both McGavran and C. Peter Wagner are interested in seeing the lost found and people won for eternal life.

More on target is Huebel's observation that many Church Growth principles may be used by the cults, which, by CG criteria, "are vital healthy growing religious bodies, but are not 'making disciples' because they lack the Gospel."⁸ "Friendship evangelism" techniques, for example, along with programs for assimilating of new members, are very effectively used by both Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. But, according to the Augsburg Confession, "the Church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly" [AC VII, Tappert, p. 32]. Common sense techniques of applied group dynamics are in place as tools of Christian witness and fellowship and as vehicles for "folding" people into our flocks; but these same techniques can and are used by the cults and the Christ-denying lodges.

One factor neglected in Church Growth literature is the phenomenon of the gospel as a passing rain, as Luther noted, with the gospel moving from one place to another. If one people or nation reject the gospel, God will take it to another people who will accept it.⁹ The Bible also notes periods wherein entire populations become hardened and reject the gospel. The early period of the Judges was such an age.

After that whole generation [the generation of Joshua which subdued the Holy Land] had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals [Judges 2:10-11].

We have no promise that we may not see this wholesale rejection of the gospel in America as we see in Europe and Australia today. Church Growth theorists sometimes imply that the right technique used with the right motivation will make growth inevitable. In this sense, they share an error of revivalists of the Charles Finney variety. There seems, however, to be a modifying of such extreme statements in their more recent literature.

We applaud the Church Growth emphasis on evangelism and missions as "the greatest and holiest work of the Church."¹⁰ From the beginning, McGavran and his disciples have emphasized the lostness of the lost, and have taught that salvation is only through Christ. John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 are part of their vocabulary and theology.¹¹ Outreach to the lost is an irreplaceable function of the church. Since so many are satisfied when the church looks nice and the bills are paid, we need this continual reminder.

Since human nature tends to be self-centered, congregations tend to become preoccupied in their own efforts and concerns to the expense of missions at home and abroad. Therefore, this emphasis on the central importance of missions and evangelism is always in order. We still contend with the unfortunate heritage of J. P. Koehler:

There was something not entirely sound about Synod's heathen-mission endeavor, the idea that a church is not living up to its mission unless it engages in

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁹ *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, compiled by Ewald M. Plass, Vol. II, #1742, p. 573.

¹⁰ Donald McGavran so autographed my copy of the 1970 edition of his magnum opus, *Understanding Church Growth*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

¹¹ See, for example, Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1977, pp. 26-28.

heathen-mission work, according to the Lord's great commission ... That idea is dogmatism, with a streak of pietism....¹²

He believed that a concern for world missions actually detracted from our mission to preserve confessional Lutheranism.¹³

The emphasis on the importance of the laity to the growth of the church is something for which we can be thankful. The priesthood of all believers is a crucial contribution of the Reformation to the modern church. When laymen suggest that the solution to every problem is "Pastor, work harder!" we could surely use renewal here.

Already in 1916, August Pieper spoke to our situation also when he wrote:

Why do not we Lutherans learn something in this matter of spiritual freedom from the Reformed churches round about us? They know how to draw the laity into the service of the church also in the individual congregations and how to make them coworkers of the pastor. It's remarkable! No church has set forth the doctrine of the spiritual priesthood of all Christians more clearly and emphasized it more strongly than the Lutheran church, and especially the Lutheran church in America. And no church put this doctrine less into practice. Among us the laity is largely consigned to listening and doing nothing in their congregation, and the pastor wants to do everything by himself.¹⁴

"The Principles of Church Renewal in the Theology of August Pieper and the Wauwatosa Theology" would make a great doctoral thesis for some budding theologian with a facility for German. Pieper's views still raise eyebrows in some circles today, but I believe he was right. A theologian of our sister synod, the ELS, considers this to be an "ominous" suggestion.¹⁵ What is really "ominous" is the implications an attack on the Schaller-Koehler-A. Pieper doctrine of church and ministry from a ELS theologian has for our relationship with our sister synod.

One possible reason for the rapid growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches is that they use the means of grace—the gospel—more than we do. Since they have no clear doctrine of the means of grace, how can this be? By stressing adult Bible study more than our members do, and by being less afflicted by the "confirmation-graduation syndrome" than we are. The multiplication of small group Bible studies in many of these churches, often criticized by us because of memories of the Pietistic movement, serve both as means for people to get into the Word of God, and as a means of assimilation and accountability (delinquent prevention). The Holy Spirit, after all, works when they study the Bible just as when we do!

Besides, they tend to staff for growth while we staff largely for childhood education. We add additional staff when we need an additional teacher, while they add staff for outreach and assimilation. You get what you pay and staff for! (I do not mean to imply that elementary and preschool educators cannot be used for outreach and assimilation, for obviously they are, but merely to make an observation of the staff goals.) David Luecke has put his finger on a

¹² J. P. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, in *Faith, Life*, The Protestant Conference, 1981, Second Edition, p. 198.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. vii., with Leigh D. Jordahl's approving comments.

¹⁴ August Pieper, "Are There Legal Regulations in the New Testament?" *Theologische Quartalschrift*, July 1916, translated by Carl Lawrenz in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Winter 1989, p. 49.

¹⁵ See Erling Teigen, "The Universal Priesthood in the Lutheran Confessions" in *Logia*, Reformation/October 1992, pp. 9-15.

distinction between Evangelicals and Lutherans in his observation that Lutherans tend to see the orientation of their ministry as the *preservation* of Christian community, while Evangelicals focus their ministry on the initiation of fellowship with one another.¹⁶

Elmer Matthias remarked in his course on “Principles of Church Growth,” taken by this writer in St. Louis during the summer of 1979, that Lutherans would be unlikely to produce megachurches because no Lutheran pastor could stand not being the shepherd of his flock, which is impossible for the senior pastor, or any one pastor in the 300 superchurches in the USA. Why could not our WELS doctrine of the ministry allow for this, at least in theory? Will we ever be able to translate this into practice? Yet such superchurches are able to minister to larger numbers of people and plug into needs which small churches cannot ordinarily do.

We in the WELS should be careful in adopting uncritically LCMS arguments against the Church Growth Movement. Their doctrine of church and ministry does not allow the flexibility which should be the hallmark of our practice since we understand that God has given us the ministry of word and sacrament, but has not determined its form. Frequently, Missourian critiques attack CG principles because they fear it subverts a certain form of the church and the office of the pastoral ministry.¹⁷

Incidentally, since Church Growth principles are used on a much wider scale and often much more uncritically in the LCMS than among us, it is not surprising that criticisms from conservative Missourians have been more strident than among us. In late 1976, 80 district mission and evangelism executives and board members attended special Fuller Seminary sessions and by the late 1970s courses on Church Growth principles were taught at both LCMS seminaries.¹⁸

One major contribution of the Church Growth movement and church growth principles is the multiplication of diagnostic tools which help the pastor and others to examine the health of the congregation or church body and to be able to direct attention to strengths and weaknesses within the congregation. WELS consultants have used some of these techniques in their consultations with local congregations. Some have objected to this use of consultants on the grounds that it is not sanctioned by Scripture and that it detracts from the word and sacrament ministry of the parish pastor.¹⁹

¹⁶ David Luecke, *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance: Facing America's Mission Challenge*, St. Louis, Concordia, 1988, p. 52 [his italics]. Last May I was privileged to hear a debate in St. Louis on Dr. Luecke's controversial book between the author and Dr. Andrew Bartelt of Concordia Seminary. Since then they have taken this debate “on the road” and presented it before several LCMS pastoral conferences.

¹⁷ This is certainly the concern of Steve O. Scheiderer in his wide-ranging critique of the Church Growth Movement and its principles in his STM dissertation at Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne entitled, *The Church Growth Movement: A Lutheran Analysis*. January 1985, printed by the Concordia Theological Seminary Print Shop and available through their Book Store. In this observer's judgment, Scheiderer's study is flawed by a false doctrine of church and ministry (the extreme LCMS view), and a rather uncharitable putting of the worst possible construction on anything which comes out of Church Growth writers whether Reformed or Lutheran. I doubt that his approach will convince any proponent of church growth of the error of his position because of this judgmental reading of theology and motivations into those who support it.

Scheiderer rightly rejects any kind of fellowship with heterodox evangelists (p. 131), when on this same basis, fellowship with the heterodox within Missouri should also be rejected. Since Scheiderer is now on the roster of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, it is likely he has come to the same conclusion.

¹⁸ *Toward a Theological Basis, Understanding and Use of Church Growth Principles in the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod*. Prepared by “The Church Growth Task Force” of the Standing Committee for Pastoral Ministry, June 17, 1991, p. 1.

¹⁹ Steve O. Scheiderer, *Ibid.* See especially his section on “Church Growth Consultants” pp. 123-131.

Full or part time consultants, either as separate offices or in the role of Mission Counselor, or even circuit pastors or district presidents, fill a very useful role in the work of the ministry by providing objective guides in helping to see strengths and weaknesses which the local pastor, either because of ego involvement, or because he can't see the forest for the trees all around him might not catch. We would agree, however, that their having a call to do this work would make their work much more legitimate, although this observer has no objection in principle to contracting outside consultants if this can be done without unionism or compromise of our Scriptural position.

Church Growth literature is useful in trying to analyze what is going on in churches and to diagnosis what they call church disease²⁰ as long as one realizes that he is essentially analyzing sociological factors and not spiritual conditions, which can only be remedied by the gospel. George W. Peters helps us to reach a proper perspective when he asserts: "The behavioral sciences can render great help in development of relevant methods and procedures, and can point ways to more effective communication and more efficient structures. However *they cannot glue scriptural principles.*"²¹

Lyle Schaller can be very helpful here although he also is fundamentally a sociologist, and not a theologian. (He is not technically part of the Church Growth Fuller franchise either, so we are largely ignoring his work.) But, the church is also outwardly a sociological institution. Church Growth people often overemphasize this, but we ask for serious and unnecessary problems if we ignore the sociological side of the church. It helps to know that sometimes things happen because, to use a Lyle Schaller phrase, "That is normal and predictable behavior." My own training in religious sociology and church growth helped me to weather a tough time in my own congregation by helping me put things in perspective. Those of us who are not shakers and have church councils who are not movers can learn from such diagnostic analysis, if only to preserve our own sanity!

Evidence that churches often grow because of sociological factors is seen in the observation that congregations go through patterns of growth, plateau and decline in their life cycles; often even during long tenure of the same pastor. And how else do we explain that a pastor may be outwardly successful in one place and run into a stone wall in another? It also is the reason why we see great growth in our Malawi missions but very few converts in Japan. It is certainly not due to differences in either the sinfulness of the people or the faithfulness of the missionaries. All alike reject the gospel because they are dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1-3) and only the Holy Spirit through the gospel can bring anyone to faith (John 6:44, 1 Cor. 12:3; Acts 13:48), but outward situations do make some more ready to hear than others.

In my opinion, therefore, Church Growth receptivity and "soil testing" techniques are often unfairly criticized as if they were by definition synergistic. It is a fact that some fields are, for various historical and sociological reasons, more receptive to the preaching of the gospel and church planting than others. Our home and world mission boards make these judgments, all the time in deciding where to begin churches or send missionaries. The same is true when a pastor makes a decision on who to visit on a given evening—a first time visitor or a long time delinquent. These are simple matters of applying good stewardship of time, money and

²⁰ See C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Be Healthy*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1979.

²¹ George W. Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth*, Zondervan, 1981, p.255.

manpower. The Holy Spirit will call whom he wants according to his will, as the gospel is proclaimed²² but we ought not stand in his way either.

Elmer Matthias reminds us of how freely we use secular wisdom to help future pastors preach good, persuasive sermons with logical outlines and good illustrations without anyone “suggesting that by doing this they are invading the turf of the Holy Spirit.”²³ The same should be said of using the social sciences in talking to a prospect in someone’s living room, the diagnosis of churches or the examination of mission fields. Our professors who teach counseling and WLC&FS counselors are trained extensively in the social sciences and apply them every day.

Sociology has been called “organized common sense.” Thus even, the most outspoken critics of Church Growth theory and practice recognize common sense suggestions in their literature.

Exegetes and preachers work hard to understand what the original text says in its cultural and historical setting. Why is it wrong to study the cultural and sociological setting of our hearers? Communication works best when we understand both settings.

Since Church Growth first developed on the mission field, perhaps this would be a good place to talk about *Missiology*. This summer the WELS is going to have its first School of Missiology. Evangelicals have been teaching and thinking about missiological theory and practice long before we have and we rightly follow in their footsteps. I suspect we became interested because our missionaries out of necessity began to study Evangelical and Reformed sources. To cite one example, when our missionaries talk about “people groups,” they use a McGavranism.

It is ironic that some have criticized McGavran, the founder of the Church Growth Movement, on a kind of guilty by association level, because he was a member of a denomination (Disciples of Christ) which belongs to the World Council of Churches. In fact, however, McGavran’s works provide some of the most powerful arguments against WCC-style missiology ever marshaled.²⁴ His May 1968 article in the Church Growth Bulletin, “Will Uppsala Betray the Two Billion” fired the first shot in an important debate over the “Conciliar Theology of Mission” which raged for several issues in the *International Review of Missions* and elsewhere.

The Homogeneous Unit principle is undoubtedly the most controversial principle of the Church Growth movement. It seems to me that this principle is misunderstood, and in fact is one of the easiest principles to demonstrate.²⁵ One must remember that this principle, developed on the world mission fields to recognize that missions generally flourish best in single “people groups.” It is a great oversimplification to say we have missions in Colombia or Taiwan or

²² “Conversion to God is solely of God the Holy Spirit, who is the true craftsman who alone works these things, for which he uses the preaching and the hearing of his holy Word as his ordinary means and instrument.” (F.C. II, S.D., 90, Tappert edition, p. 539.)

²³ Elmer W. Matthias, “This Lutheran Sees Value in Church Growth,” *Concordia Journal*, March 1984, p. 61.

²⁴ Donald McGavran has edited several books on this topic:

Crucial Issues in Missions Tomorrow, Chicago, Moody Press, 1972.

The Eve of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission. Waco, Texas, Word Book Publishers, 1972.

The Conciliar-Evangelical Debate: The Crucial Documents. 1964-1976, Pasadena, Wm. Carey Library, 1977, and

with Arthur F. Glasser, *Contemporary Theologies of Mission*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1983.

²⁵ C. Peter Wagner’s *Our Kind of People : The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth in America*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979) is actually a useful volume and defends the homogeneous unit principle. Wagner’s relativism is present here also; but is actually one of Wagner’s best researched and scholarly books.

Malawi. Which identifiable groups are we reaching? Which are being neglected? How can we reach beyond our base in the area in which we work?

Paul Kelm observed that the WELS grew among one large homogeneous group in Wisconsin—German immigrants—even German immigrants from Prussia.²⁶ It is often charged that this principle is racist and violates the doctrine of the catholicity of the church. Rightly understood, it is designed to do the very opposite—to make sure that certain groups are not overlooked in our mission and evangelistic strategies. For example, just because we have a church in a certain community does not mean that it is reaching everyone in that community, even if it is not official discriminating. We have learned that we are most likely to reach blacks, Hispanics, or Hmongs by targeting them especially in our work.

The January 1993 edition of the “WELS Connection” Video speaks of the successful ministry to the Hmongs and other oriental peoples by Emanuel in St. Paul, Mn. This is the homogeneous unit in action! Pastor Steele pointed out that they must be specially sought out—as a special group, rather than expecting them to come to us. Once one family was reached, another was easier to reach. This is all the HU principle is saying. It is not enough to assume they will come to us! To assume they will cross cultural, color and other barriers to come to Christ is to assume that the unregenerate will act like the regenerate. Cultural barriers in themselves can constitute a barrier for the gospel’s free course. Friendship evangelism works because people are reached through friendship and association webs. This is a descriptive observation of a social fact, not a prescriptive Biblical principle. It does not necessarily reflect bigotry or segregation, but is merely a recognition that society is comprised of a mosaic (a favorite McGavran term) of peoples and we want to do all we can to reach as many segments as possible. Current Church Growth literature defines this as a “people group” approach to evangelization.²⁷

When I began my ministry in a North Carolina textile town, we began to be successful when we were no longer exclusively a congregation of Yankee transplants. Many of our missions in the Southland, in my experience, give the impression of existing largely to gather WELS people from the upper Midwest who, happen to live there (get stuck down there?) and success will much more likely come when this impression—on the part of member and visitor alike—is overcome. This is the proper way to apply and understand the homogeneous unit principle. Church growth thinking and research actually buttresses our theological understanding about the error of certain kinds of evangelistic methods. This is particularly true in the church growth criticism of crusade evangelism, certain forms of confrontational evangelism and of “saturation evangelism” techniques both at home and abroad.

Friendship evangelism is very popular in our circles. It is both more effective and is less open to synergism than, say, confrontational evangelism of the Kennedy type. A key text for this form of evangelism is 1 Thessalonians 2:8, “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.” We must make sure that we actually share the gospel with people as a result of our natural contacts, of course, but, as it has been said, “People don’t care how much we know unless they know how much we care.” Although Paul Kelm²⁸ warned of the tendency of Win Arn and others

²⁶ Paul Kelm, “The Church Growth Movement: An Explanation and Evaluation.” Unpublished paper presented on January 24, 1986 at a Metro South Pastors’ Conference, p: 8-9. He rightly notes that this principle is “an evangelistic strategy, not a membership policy.”

²⁷ *Toward a Theological Basis*, p. 16.

²⁸ Paul Kelm, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

to make the Great Commandment (John 13:34-35) a means of grace, in this “high-tech,” busy world, the love of Christ must be seen in us, as well as heard if the truth is going to get a hearing.

Friendship evangelism developed as church growth thinkers found other methods ineffective.²⁹ Wagner, Arn and others provide some of the best practical critiques of crusade³⁰ and “saturation evangelism” approaches such as Key 73 and Here’s Life America available.³¹

In this connection, my STM Thesis at St. Louis, “Key 73, a Case Study in the Doctrine of Church Fellowship,” was suggested by a comment by C. Peter Wagner in *Your Church Can Grow*.³² Wagner asserted:

Key 73 was ... adopted as a program which could serve as an instrument for evangelicals “somehow getting together.” So without anyone’s intending it at all, evangelism was used as a means to the end of cooperation. The effort was referred to as *cooperation for evangelism*, but deep down it was more realistically *evangelism for cooperation* [his italics].

Much of this critique, of course, is pragmatic, rather than theological, and there is no doubt that Wagner and company would adopt revivalistic and unionistic approaches in a minute if it could be demonstrated that they work.³³

Dr. William Kessel of Bethany Seminary in Mankato, Mn. reminds us not to overreact against Church Growth thinking. Kessel describes³⁴ two overreactions:

1. To Deny the Possibility of Significant Church Growth in the Present Era.
2. To Deny the role of the Pastor and Congregation in Evangelism.

Under the second, Kessel contends that pastors who believe their calling is only to preach to his own members, and wait for the unchurched person to take the initiative to attend his church “may secretly be harboring a synergistic view of conversion.” “A ‘here we are, come and get it if you like’ spirit invites a pastoral and congregational lethargy and a subtle theological synergism.” It assumes that the unregenerate will act as if they are already regenerate.

PART III. Dangers from the Church Growth Movement

It is my contention that most of the errors of the Church Growth movement are results of the Evangelical-Arminian orientation of its founders and are not distinctive to Church Growth per se. Since Prof. Valleskey, Paul Kelm, Robert Koester, and others have warned us of the

²⁹ As far as I can tell, friendship evangelism has its modern roots in McGavran’s *The Bridges of God*, New York, Friendship Press, 1955, where the principle of the gospel moving through natural “webs” is expounded.

³⁰ Glenn Firebaugh, “How Effective Are City-Wide Crusades?,” in *Christianity Today*, March 27, 1981, pp. 14-29.

³¹ On Saturation evangelism, (of which “Go 87” was a non-unionistic example) see C. Peter Wagner, *Frontiers in Missionary Strategy*, Moody Press, 1971, chapters 7 and 8, pp. 122-160, and for “Here’s Life America, consult Win Arn, “A Church Growth Look at ... Here’s Life America!” in *Church Growth: America*, January-February 1977, pp. 4-7 and passim. See also Wagner, *Your Church Can Be Healthy*, pp. 70-73.

³² C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, Glendale, CA, Regal Books, 1976, p. 143.

³³ Still, Wagner’s discussion of “Hyper-Cooperativism: Can Christian Unity Hinder Evangelism?” in his *Your Church Can Be Healthy*, pp. 64-76, contains interesting insights on why unionistic evangelism doesn’t work, including comments on the ineffectiveness of the military chaplaincy as an evangelistic institution, (pp. 71-72) which should raise eyebrows for WELSMen!

³⁴ William B. Kessel, “The Theology of Church Growth,” in *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, June 1992, p. 41-42.

synergism, failure to give place to the means of grace, and a general denigration of the gospel, unionism, anti-credalism, misunderstanding of law and gospel, confusion on the nature of the church, especially on the difference between the visible and invisible church, legalism, and other manifest and easily documented errors in Church Growth literature, I will try not to duplicate their valuable work in these areas. Rather, I will focus on some other areas not so often-noted.

One area of concern on the Church Growth movement that is often neglected in critiques is the guilt which may result from comparing our own congregation with others after studying growing churches or attending church growth seminars. This is often a direct result of another Church Growth flaw: *a theology of glory* which often equates growth with God's blessings and lack of growth or decline with unfaithfulness. Noah was a faithful "preacher of righteousness" but after 120 years he had only his own family to report in his official statistics.

We can often learn from studying what others are doing in their books or seminars on "How We Did It" but we need to recognize that their circumstances may be entirely different from ours. We must also trust that God has placed us in exactly the call he wants us to have at this time.³⁵ Remember that wherever we have the gospel a church can be healthy, and God's people will be edified. We dare not be seduced into discontent- and depression because opportunities for dramatic growth are not evident in our community.

Often in CG thinking, pragmatism supplants theology: Truth takes second place to growth. C. Peter Wagner's "fierce pragmatism" has led him to endorse some of the most dangerous errors of the Charismatic/Pentecostal movement. Since Pentecostal churches are often among the fastest growing churches in an area, Wagner concludes they have the blessing of God.³⁶ John MacArthur charges

The church growth movement studies *all* growing churches, doctrinally sound or otherwise, and tends to embrace whatever characteristics seem to contribute to growth often, without regard to whether the methodology being advocated is biblical. That is utilitarianism, the philosophy that actions are right because they are useful.³⁷

In a devastating style, MacArthur further points out how Wagner's "runaway pragmatism" causes him to attribute more conversions to miracles than to the Word and even to the preacher's charismatic presence rather than to the preaching of the gospel.³⁸ MacArthur specifically focuses on John Wimber, known for his "power evangelism" approach and the course on "Signs and Wonders" once taught at Fuller Seminary. Jack Deere, one of John Wimber's assistants, and a former Evangelical Old Testament professor, adopts an extreme enthusiasm, explicitly denying the sufficiency of Scripture and calling on us to be ready to hear the voice of God not only in the Bible, but "in the Word freshly spoken from heaven."³⁹ Thus

³⁵ Carl H. Mischke, "How Beautiful the Feet: The Dignity of the Public Gospel Ministry," p. 12 (p. 834 in *WELS MINISTRY COMPENDIUM: Study Papers on the Doctrine of Church and Ministry, Vol. II*, compiled 1992 by WELS Parish Services.)

³⁶ For a powerful indictment of C.P. Wagner's defense of Pentecostalism, especially John Wimber's "power evangelism," consult John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Charismatic Chaos*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1992, especially Chapter 6, "What is Behind the 'Third Wave' and Where is it Going?" pp. 128-151.

³⁷ MacArthur, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 137-139.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140, citing Mark Thompson, "Spiritual warfare: What Happens When I Contradict Myself," in *The Briefing*, (April 24, 1990), p. 11.

Luther rightly calls enthusiasm “the source, strength, and power of all heresy.”⁴⁰ When I first began reading CG literature in the ‘70s, one did not see such extremes. Thus, our “second look!”

Charles Colson puts his finger on the danger of **Consumerism** in the CG movement.⁴¹ The marketing of the church may involve listening to itching ears (2 Tim. 4). Noting polls which report that 45% of those who attend church do so because “its good for you,” while 26% cite “peace of mind and spiritual well being,” Colson warns that the church may become just another retail outlet, filling needs of the market. We may be tempted to “airbrush sin” out of the church’s vocabulary. “Heaven by this creed is never saying no to yourself, and God is never having to say you’re sorry.”

Colson goes on to show how consumerism “strips the church of its authority” “to proclaim truth and its ability to call its members to account.” It even opens the door to the New Age movement: “Seeking to provide inner peace instead, of pointing individuals to an ethical ideal of which they now fall short, this approach perilously parallels and makes credible the New Age movement.”⁴²

In a series of articles in *Tabletalk*,⁴³ a little magazine published by R. C. Sproul, an unabashed Calvinist, Os Guinness identifies a seduction which can easily overcome anyone wishing to proclaim a relevant message to the world. Pointing out that “Christian history is a two thousand-year conversation between the church and the world,” Guinness notes that traditionally “cultural conservatives would stress the ideal of resistance to the world and cultural liberals would stress relevance in it.” Evangelicals have stressed “cognitive defiance” while liberals have emphasized “bargaining with the cultured despisers of the gospel.”

But now the tables have turned. Guinness asserts: “Evangelicals are now outdoing liberals as the supreme religious modernizers—and compromisers—of today.” The World Council of Churches affirmed in 1966, “The world must set the agenda for the church.” Today, however, it is the Evangelicals who are enthused with “marketing the church.” He quotes one proponent of this science who declared: “It is critical that we keep in mind a fundamental principle of Christian communication: the audience, not the message, is sovereign.”

Such a philosophy can be subvert the gospel, transforming the word of God into a speaking of pleasant things, a prophesying of illusions, rather than confronting people with the Holy One of Israel (Isa. 30:10-11). Jeremiah and the other prophets warned against false prophets and priests who would not call people to repentance but rather led the people astray with less than the full message of law and gospel. Elmer Matthias, who once served a church near Robert Schuler of California’s Crystal Cathedral, called him a “Home on the range” preacher, “where seldom is heard a discouraging word.”

In a *Christianity Today* editorial, Craig Parro warned that the word could be packaged in such a way as to miss people’s greatest need, forgiveness and a relationship with God.

Marketing solicits, woos and entertains. But the [Word of God] confronts; it calls to repentance and commitment. There is a judgment to be avoided, a hell to be

⁴⁰ The Smalcald Articles, III, VIII: 9, Tappert edition, p. 313.

⁴¹ Charles Colson with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, “Welcome to McChurch,” in *Christianity Today*, Nov. 23, 1992, pp. 28-32.

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 31.

⁴³ See *Tabletalk*, January – August 1992, especially “Recycling the Compromise of Liberalism,” May 1992, p. 50-51.

fled, and thoughts to be taken captive. In the words of Lesslie Newbigin, “We must not leave our hearer’s worldview intact.”⁴⁴

Are “felt needs” ever a legitimate concern for the church? We have already documented the danger of cutting the heart out of the message of Christ by allowing the audience to determine our message.⁴⁵ Rightly used, however, these needs help us scratch people where they itch. To insist non-members first see the need for the forgiveness of sins as the primary need when approaching the church may well be another case of expecting the unregenerate to act like the regenerate.

Who knows how many have been open to the message of our churches and schools because of marriage problems, parenting needs, the desire to have a good school with solid values for their children, loneliness or fear of death or disease. These needs were less than pure or gospel-focused, but through them they were helped to find Christ as the answer not only to these needs, but their ultimate problem and the gospel answer to it.

At a crowded seminar I once heard C. Peter Wagner confess that he was not a theologian, adding, only half in jest, “That is a Church Growth principle!” How sad it is that his lack of theology leads people away from the very gospel which alone can feed the multitudes. Glenn Huebel is right in his warning us to avoid the pitfall of considering the truth of God’s Word or the controversy that is often needed to maintain it as obstacles to effective evangelism.⁴⁶ Kent: Hunter, a Lutheran proponent of Church Growth, writes: “Correct doctrine is essential. *But it is never to be a priority at the expense of the mission.* In fact, when the quest for proper doctrine intensifies to the point of neglecting mission and ministry, then it is no longer proper doctrine!”⁴⁷

All this can be properly understood, of course. Yet, sound doctrine is a *sine qua non* for health in the church. Indeed, the last sentence is really a redundancy. When Paul exhorts Timothy to “teach what is in accord with sound doctrine,” in Titus 2:1, he is really telling him to teach in accord with healthy or health-giving doctrine. The word translated “sound,” *ὑγιαίνουσα* is from the root of a word meaning “to be well” or “to be healthy.” Error is the fatal disease in the church and is countered by the health of the teachings of God’s Word. In an early European Lutheran study of the CG movement, Hans Lutz Poetsch observed, “Growth is made the exclusive indicator of a congregation’s ‘health’; here nothing is said of the significance of the proclamation’s content.... [or] asking in detail whether the Biblical gospel of Jesus Christ is actually being offered.”⁴⁸

PART IV. Biblical and Lutheran Corrections for Church Growth Principles / Movement

It is sad that the Lutheran Church has not been more creative in developing its ministry. This is particularly tragic for us in the WELS, with our theoretical freedom from legalism expressed in our doctrine of church and ministry, which insists that God has not mandated the

⁴⁴ Craig Parro, “Church Growth’s Two Faces,” *Christianity Today*, June 24, 1991, p. 19.

⁴⁵ David J. Valleskey cites Robert J. Koester’s Fuller Seminary D. Min. thesis, *Law and Gospel: The Foundation of Lutheran ministry with Reference to the Church Growth Movement*, 1989 in his “The Church Growth Movement: An Evaluation” cited earlier as being especially helpful here.

⁴⁶ Huebner, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁴⁷ Kent R. Hunter, *Foundations for Church Growth*, New Haven: Leader Publishing Company, 1983, pp 152-153.

⁴⁸ Hans-Lutz Poetsch, “Thoughts on Church Growth Theory” *Evangelium*, August 1978, p. 77.

form of either the church or its ministry. Too often, if one is to look for true creativity in Protestantism, one must look at the Evangelicals.⁴⁹

We need to more consistently apply our Wisconsin Synod's Scriptural doctrine to our practice. Perhaps the essays collected by our WELS Board of Parish Services⁵⁰ will help provide the intellectual, theological, and philosophical basis for renewed creativity among us in these areas.

Although I do not agree with all of his analysis, Pastor Robert Koester is right when he calls us to "a concerted effort to work towards a theology of missions that expresses itself in the language of Scripture and in the language of the Lutheran Church and defines itself carefully over against other theologies especially Church Growth."⁵¹

Too often we react to others, including the CG people, instead of pioneering in the theory and practice of missions and evangelism. We need to spend time studying the theology of missions and evangelism, as found in God's Word.⁵² God will not allow the world to go without witness, even if he must make the stones cry out, but why are not others adapting what we do, rather than the other way around? We hope this conference is a step in this direction. We are called to proclaim God's word both faithfully and effectively. The Lord wants all to be saved, and thus numbers are important. God is never pleased with a "glorification of littleness."⁵³

But God also said, "Let the one who has my word speak it faithfully (Jer. 23:28). Almost two decades ago, Rene' Padilla warned

quality is at least as important as quantity, if not more, and that, therefore, faithfulness to the Gospel should never be sacrificed for the sake of quantity. When the Gospel is truncated in order to make it easy for all men to become Christians, from the very outset the basis is laid for an unfaithful church. As the seed, so the tree, and as the tree, so its fruit.⁵⁴

Thank God he does not force us to chose between maintaining the truth of the gospel and effectively reaching the lost. He wishes both—that we use the truth of the Word to reach all people that we might by all means save some. May the Holy Spirit help and encourage us in this holy work.

⁴⁹ For example of originality in forms of the church see the examples in Don Bauman, *All Originality Makes A Dull Church*, Santa Ana, CA: Vision House Publishers, 1976, or Gene Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of The Church*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1974. This later volume in effect applies our Wisconsin doctrine of the church and ministry, although he would never call it that, because Getz understands the difference between what God commands as universal principles and functions and cultural and historical forms and applications.

⁵⁰ *WELS MINISTRY COMPENDIUM: Study Papers on The Doctrine of Church and Ministry*, 2 Volumes, compiled 1992 by WELS PARISH SERVICES.

⁵¹ Robert Koester, "Law and Gospel in the Church Growth Movement," Dakota-Montana Pastoral Conference, September 18-19, 1984, p. 27.

⁵² David Valleskey's forthcoming book on the theology and practice of evangelism should be a much needed corrective here.

⁵³ Commission on Theology and Church Relations, LCMS, *Evangelism and Church Growth with Special Reference to the Church Growth Movement*. September, 1987. This is a helpful and generally balanced Scriptural evaluation of this movement.

⁵⁴ Rene' Padilla, "Evangelism and the World" in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice, International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland*, edited by J.D. Douglas, Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975, p. 138.