

Church Growth Theology

By Ernst H. Wendland

A pastor of our Synod recently requested a bibliography on “church growth theology.” A cursory inquiry into this matter revealed no less than 30 books which have appeared within the past decade dealing exclusively with this subject. Dozens of other books concerned with present-day mission strategy also refer to it, some in considerable detail. Current seminars offering consultations on the theology or practice of mission work almost invariably include a discussion of it. In his recent study entitled “Contemporary Missiology,” Johannes Verkuyl, head of the Department of Missiology and Evangelism at the Free University of Amsterdam, writes: “We ought not to overlook the powerful influence which church growth theory has had on the contemporary mission scene, especially among that group in the United States known as the conservative evangelicals.”ⁱ

Church Growth in the U.S.A.

“What does the decade of the eighties have in store for the church in America?” asks C. Peter Wagner in a recent article in *Christianity Today*.ⁱⁱ “It will present unprecedented opportunities for growth,” is his reply. Wagner, a missionary to Bolivia for 16 years, is presently teaching Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, and has authored several books on the subject.ⁱⁱⁱ While the fifties, according to Wagner, saw “a decade of church growth,” the sixties experienced church growth “taking a back seat to an enthusiasm for social service.” The seventies witnessed “mainstream churches declining in membership and conservative denominations not growing as fast as they should.” The eighties, Wagner concludes, will have “great potential for evangelism, church planting, and church growth.”^{iv}

If the number of church growth programs are any indication of what to expect, there is certainly no reason to disagree with Wagner’s observations. Southern Baptists under the motto “Bold Mission Thrust” are determined to confront every unbeliever at home and abroad with the gospel by the year 2000. The Assemblies of God have introduced vigorous programs for expansion. In the Church of the Nazarene Prof. Paul Orjalas’ study “Get Ready to Grow” has already sold 50,000 copies. The Christian and Missionary Alliance wants to double its membership in seven years, completing this undertaking in 1987, its one-hundredth anniversary. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has mounted a massive “Discipling” campaign, designed to provide church growth training programs in all of its 38 districts. An interdenominational society called the Academy of American Church Growth is producing films, books, home study programs, materials for seminars, Sunday-school curricula, computerized surveys, and many other aids geared toward helping local churches organize church growth programs in their own communities. The American Festival of Evangelism is scheduled for Kansas City in the summer of 1981, anticipating a gathering of 20,000 clergy and lay leaders from many denominations which are to meet for the purpose of encouraging greater efforts toward evangelizing our nation in the eighties.

Church Growth in the WELS

Our own Synod, never inclined to become greatly involved in giant rallies or massive promotional schemes, has characteristically taken a more sober approach toward programs dealing with evangelism and church growth. Constitutionally our Synod has the stated purpose “to serve all people in God’s world with the gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures.”^v Its first objective is “to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with all people.”^{vi} Its first policy is “to promote personal Christian witnessing to the gospel by each member of the Synod.”^{vii} In keeping with these statements the Synod in 1957 established a Commission on Evangelism, charged “to plan, prepare and publish evangelism materials consistent with the doctrine and practice of the Synod,” and also “to assist the congregations of the Synod in establishing and maintaining active

evangelism programs.”^{viii} Evangelism manuals entitled “Talk about the Savior” (TAS) and pamphlets such as “Your Lutheran Church Invites You” were subsequently prepared and distributed.

The publication TELL (“The Evangelism Life Line”) has been inaugurated to promote the cause of church growth. “Evangelism Weekends” are being conducted by several district commissions on evangelism to assist congregations in carrying out evangelism programs on a local level. In the summer of 1978 a three-day convocation on evangelism was held in Milwaukee, with 90 participants representing all administrative divisions of the Synod, synodical schools, circuit pastors from all districts and district evangelism commissions.

In spite of these efforts the annual growth rate in our Synod has been less than one percent and has not kept pace with the growth of our nation. This has caused many in our Synod to press for synodical action which is intended to help the Synod’s church growth performance become a better reflection of its stated objectives. A resolution sponsored by the Synod’s Commission on Evangelism calls for the position of a full-time Executive Secretary on Evangelism. Although action on this resolution was deferred by the 1979 Convention of our Synod, it will no doubt receive considerable support when it again comes up for consideration in 1981.^{ix}

Church Growth in the World in General

On the world mission scene the subject of church growth began to enjoy renewed interest as a special strategy ever since the appearance of Donald Anderson McGavran’s “Bridges of God” in 1955.^x Born to American missionaries in India, McGavran labored for 31 years in that country as a missionary of the United Christian Missionary Society, the missionary arm of the Disciples of Christ. Returning to America in 1954 McGavran set his mind to developing a strategy for promoting growth in world mission fields. To encourage research in this area he founded the School of World Mission and the Institute of Church Growth, which has its present headquarters at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. The faculty at this school includes recognized missiological authorities such as Arthur F. Glasser, C. Peter Wagner, Charles H. Kraft and Paul Hiebert. All of these men contribute regularly to *Missiology*, a quarterly publication of the American Society of *Missiology* under the editorship of Glasser.

McGavran firmly believes that by a studied, scientific approach to growth methods there is no reason why the world’s need for “fantastically multiplying churches” cannot be met.^{xi} His primary concern is for the millions who have not heard the gospel. With a passionate emphasis upon soul-saving McGavran has taken sharp issue with the humanistic tendencies and the social-gospel approach of the Commission of World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches.^{xii}

McGavran’s appeals to reach out to the unchurched millions have certainly had their influence on the resurgent movements toward church planting among the evangelicals, as witnessed by the Wheaton Declaration of the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association in 1966, the Berlin Congress on Evangelism in the same year, and the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in 1974.

Other significant efforts toward church growth among the evangelicals have been the Evangelism Crusades associated with Billy Graham and the Saturation Evangelism Programs carried out in Latin America as the “Evangelism-in-Depth” crusade under the direction of Dr. Kenneth Strachan. The latter effort involved “the total mobilization of all church members” and had as its goal “to reach every family in a given country with an oral or written presentation of the gospel.”^{xiii} Other research institutions are Missions Advanced Research and Communication Center (MARC), located in Monrovia, California and headed by Edward R. Dayton, and the ULSL Center for World Mission, established in 1976 at Pasadena, California under the leadership of Ralph D. Winter. These agencies “offer information systems and computer technology for developing information on world Christianity and “coordinate studies and strategies for reaching unreached people with the gospel.”^{xiv}

These are some of the leading U.S. efforts in the field of church growth in a worldwide context, indicating that the whole matter has been developing into a science among the evangelicals. According to this science church growth is to be thoroughly studied according to all the modern techniques available and aggressively pursued and strategically promoted in order to confront the non-Christian world with the challenge

of the gospel of Christ. This is in sharp contrast to the leading spirit prevailing in the World Council of Churches, which tends more toward promoting “dialogue” with other world religions in an effort to find common ground with “God’s self-revelation through history” and in fostering ideas of socialism and humanism which at times bears a strong resemblance to Marxism. Needless to say, the proponents of this kind of theology have little use for church growth principles as promoted by the evangelicals.

Worldwide Church Growth in the WELS

While our own Synod has seen a remarkable expansion into many world mission fields within the past several decades, the potential growth of soul membership in these fields has obviously not been a primary factor in deciding where this work should be done. One would rather say that we have succeeded in establishing a number of strategic beachheads for the building up of national churches. Our primary objective has been to do this upon a sound scriptural and confessionally Lutheran basis.

Our statistics cannot be called impressive; this has not been our chief concern. The report of the Board for World Missions to the Districts states that “in addition to Spanish and Apache work in southwestern United States” the Synod “has active mission programs in Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Cameroon, Zambia, and Malawi...serving more than 14,000 souls. Congregations number some 6,500 communicants.”^{xv} Other reports show that three-fifths of these totals are the result of work in Africa. Adding the Apache figures to those from Africa reveals totals comprising nine-tenths of all the communicants served in our world mission operation. These comparisons are not meant to show the relative importance of one field over against the other. They do bear out that we are not working in certain areas merely to make an impressive numerical showing.

In the light of church growth principles as they are promulgated in many mission schools these days, the question naturally arises as to whether or not our approach to world mission work is in need of reassessment or improvement. Are there certain techniques we need to learn in order to be more effective? More importantly, are we doing the Lord’s work as he would have us do it? A closer examination of church growth principles as they are being generally promoted elsewhere is certainly indicated.

“Understanding Church Growth”

Since church growth theology came into prominence largely through the efforts of one man, Dr. Donald McGavran, and since he is still today its leading exponent, one must look to his writings in order to get an idea of what church growth principles are all about. While McGavran originally developed his ideas in a book entitled *The Bridges of God*, published in 1955, he has refined his basic thoughts in later writings, the most comprehensive of which is his book entitled *Understanding Church Growth*, published in 1970.^{xvi} It is from this later work that we have outlined a resumé of his chief theories, using as many of his own terms and expressions as possible:

—Church growth is primarily faithfulness to God, who commands us to find the lost. Quantitative expansion is the top priority item of “church business.” However successful and valuable educational activities and social programs may be, they are of secondary importance in world mission work. *God wants his sheep found.* Our chief purpose is to find. The multiplication of churches nourished on the Bible is a *sine qua non* in carrying out the purposes of God.

—Mission (in a narrow sense) is an enterprise devoted to proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and to persuading men to become his disciples. Some churches wish to do mission work by means of “*search theology*,” proclaiming the Word everywhere by word and deed, without regard for results. This, however, is not what God wants. The Lord wants his followers to have a “*harvest theology*.” The number of found people are important to him. We must search, find, persuade and harvest!

—In 1964 there were 42,000 Protestant missionaries serving the cause of missions. But there was little growth in world mission fields. Too little attention was given to growth results. Too much energy was spent in social activity, denominationalism and faulty approaches to evangelism.

—We must wake up to the fact that the church grows most effectively through “*people movements*.” Mission agencies should be careful in noting existing patterns of social relationships, choosing to work among people who can be classified as “*homogeneous units*.” Such a unit can take various forms: as a tribe in Africa, a middle-class group in Japan, a caste in India. Mission strategists will be ever on the alert for such units which give promise of being “*winnable people*.” this is in keeping with Christ’s command in Matthew 28:19, where he instructs Christians to “*disciple all nations*.”

—In order to achieve maximum success we should concentrate upon people as “*homogeneous units*” by a process of “*multi-individual conversion*.” Winning groups rather than individuals is how two-thirds of all converts in “Africasia” and “Oceania” have been won!

—For effective work we must aim for *measurable growth*. A numerical approach is essential, since the church is made up of countable people. Such an approach requires a careful study of all the circumstances involved: membership statistics; results of other churches working in a given area; manner of growth over a period of years (whether by birth, transfer, or conversion); causes of growth (radio, literature, revival, political climate, use of national workers, etc.). *Study with graphs in hand!*

—We hinder an understanding of church growth by confusing “*perfecting*” with “*discipling*.” The Great Commission makes a distinction here. First disciple by an initial thrust, aimed to achieve rapid quantitative growth. Then perfect, that is, nurture in the faith to achieve qualitative growth. While both areas are important for the growth of the church, each requires its own kind of strategy in order to achieve maximum results. All too often too much effort has been expended in concentrating on the few who have been won rather than on the many who still need to be won.

—We should use the hundreds of different mission undertakings as a vast laboratory, to see which factors play a part in growth or a lack of it. A thorough knowledge of social conditions, geography, political inclinations, language peculiarities etc.. helps to ascertain where we can expect to work with success. *We should occupy fields of low receptivity “lightly” as far as expending mission effort is concerned!*

—*The masses are dear to God!* Missions from the West often overlook this. Begin with the *proletariat*. These people are proving to be increasingly responsive today. Educated Christians often become a separate, ostracized ghetto in a mission field.

—In the final analysis one must use every available resource in order to answer two questions: what factors and methods yield successful growth and which ones retard such growth? Missionary organizations will constantly review their priorities in the light of church growth principles in order to ascertain which programs are to be given maximum support.

—Through thorough research and by means of programmed data we can learn to organize mission work most effectively throughout the world.

Some General Impressions

In an era when many churches have become thoroughly shot through with humanistic propaganda and anti-supernaturalistic philosophy, McGavran comes upon the scene as a welcome change. He at least professes to take the Bible seriously. His use of scriptural terminology such as sin, repentance, conversion and salvation wants to be understood in its originally intended sense. He is straightforward and uncomplicated to a degree

where some accuse him of being “simplistic.” This does not seem to faze him in the least. At any rate one does not have to read a paragraph of his six times in order to ascertain what he is trying to say.

McGavran also takes mission work seriously. We need to appreciate this in times when Law and Gospel have been emptied by sophisticated theological theorists of all real God-intended meaning. To McGavran mission work is a life-and-death matter. He most urgently wants to extend every effort toward making the most efficient use of time, talent and money to carry out what he earnestly believes to be the greatest task in the world. The 2.7 billion “unsaved” are of real concern to him. He is utterly fearless in his attacks upon theological liberals such as J. C. Hoekendijk, W. J. Hollenweger, J. C. Davies, Hans J. Margull and Philip Potter, today’s leading voices within the World Council of Churches, who no longer regard aggressive church planting as essential to the wellbeing of God’s kingdom on earth. In one of his books, *Eye of the Storm*, published in 1972, McGavran takes issue with the humanistic, socialistic, and unbiblical tendencies which have gained control of the Commission of World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches.^{xvii} At a time when many seemed to hesitate wanting to ruffle feathers within the WCC, McGavran rushed in without fear or favor.

McGavran has a very positive approach to mission work. He regards the world as potentially ripe for the gospel as never before. He is eager to develop “bold plans” for maximum efficiency in gathering in a great harvest. Many of his assessments are based upon a first-hand knowledge of mission problems, offering many practical suggestions for evaluating and dealing with these problems in an effective way.

It needs to be said in all this, of course, that McGavran speaks as a true disciple of Reformed theology. Arthur Glasser, one of McGavran’s co-workers at Fuller, frankly states: “Church growth theology has a distinctly Reformed hermeneutic.”^{xviii} One becomes immediately aware of this when noting McGavran’s references to church revivals, decision-theology, methods of persuasion, use of the call into the ministry, inter-denominational tendencies, and his lack of emphasis upon the use of the sacraments. It is not our purpose here to discuss in depth all these differences between McGavran’s Reformed theology and confessional Lutheran doctrine other than to note that they are there, even as one would expect this to be the case. Certainly they do, of course, bear a relationship to one’s general outlook over against church growth principles. Our chief interest here, however, is to focus attention on specific peculiarities set forth especially by McGavran and his followers in their efforts to promulgate church growth.

Criticism from Other Churches

One does not get too far into McGavran’s writings without coming to an uneasy feeling that one is dealing with a supersalesman who in his enthusiasm is becoming guilty of overselling his product. One is left with the impression that the name of the game is numbers. Success is what counts. Even Scripture, presumed to be sacred, is being bent to fit the argument of “growth at all costs.”

This is unfortunate, since much of what McGavran has to say needs to be said. Overselling a product, however, adds force to the arguments of those who stand for something less. Liberals within the WCC mentioned above dismiss McGavran as a fundamentalist throwback, whose simplistic pronouncements cannot be taken seriously. Those who often show little regard for Scripture’s clearly intended meaning with some justification accuse McGavran of “using” Scripture rather than “interpreting it properly.”

Although McGavran’s church growth movement has attained great popularity in evangelical circles throughout the world, there have been those even among the evangelicals who have seriously questioned some of its principles. At a Missionary Study Fellowship convened by the Institute of Mennonite Studies in February, 1973, a number of critical observations were expressed and published. It was pointed out that church leaders from a number of Third World countries have reacted negatively to McGavran’s strongly pragmatic methods as “a projection of the American ego and style.”^{xix} John H. Yoder, president of Goshen Biblical Seminary, also comments on the Third World’s negative reaction to McGavran’s “success orientation” and “computerization,” suggesting that “church growth people assume you can make Christians the way you make cars and sausages.”^{xx}

More significantly, Yoder questions McGavran's theological terminology, especially his distinction between "discipling" and "perfecting" people in the evangelizing process. By referring to "discipling" as a matter of gaining a minimal commitment to Christianity and "perfecting" as the continuing process of education which follows, Yoder suggests that McGavran is encouraging a sort of "two-level membership," which to Yoder is "an anomalous situation." Moreover, Yoder maintains, McGavran's "people movement" ideas encourage this "superficial kind of believer" who becomes more or less "psychologically vaccinated" rather than becoming a committed Christian.^{xxi}

Yoder raises another point. McGavran's "system" seems to favor the missionary as a professional agent, deployed to plant churches wherever success can best be achieved. If this isn't achieved, it follows that the agent is simply moved elsewhere. But what happens to those who have been brought to faith in places where the "project hasn't been successful"? The New Testament contains success stories. But there are also places recorded in James, Peter and Revelation where we are told of people consisting of scattered little groups who are called upon to face the hostility of the world without losing hope. Success or a lack of it, Yoder points out, is not recorded as "self-conscious strategy-making on the basis of concern for growth."^{xxii}

The points raised at this Mennonite Symposium are certainly perceptive.

At a Consultation on Theology and Mission held at the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School of Mission and Evangelism in 1976 church growth theology also came in for scrutiny by a panel of professors, pastors and missionaries. Walter L. Liefield cites McGavran's tendencies to "use" Scripture rather than to "study" it. As an example Liefield calls attention to McGavran's unique use of Matthew 28:19 in support of his "people movement" approach. McGavran's interpretation of "all nations" as referring to separate races, tribes, or castes claims support for a theory from the Lord himself which is out of keeping with proper Greek usage.^{xxiii}

McGavran, Liefield also points out, uses Matthew 10:14 in support of his theory to work where one can be assured of success, claiming that even the Lord advised his followers to "shake off the dust" where they found no response. Liefield argues convincingly that the Lord here was referring to the response of the Jews who already had the Old Testament and who still stubbornly hardened themselves against the good news that their promised Messiah had come. He was not referring here to people who were hearing the gospel for the first time.^{xxiv}

At the same consultation Walter Frank comments that according to McGavran "growth" is seen as "a normal function of Christ's church. Non-growth represents a denial of her nature." But what about places like North Africa and Japan, Frank queries. Are missionaries there to be filled with unwarranted doubts as to whether or not their work is truly fulfilling Christ's real purpose for his church?^{xxv}

David J. Hesselgrave raises the same question in his recent book *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally*. Hesselgrave, director of the School of World Mission and Evangelism at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School writes: "Understandably those who work among difficult populations...are disturbed about this ordering of priorities. Years of patient preevangelistic endeavor may be the price of responsiveness."^{xxvi} Hesselgrave also disagrees with the contention that quantitative growth is the *sine qua non* of true church growth. "Numerical growth," he maintains, "can actually be deceptive as a measurement of qualitative growth." "Sometimes it occurs," he continues, "in Christian churches when they employ Madison Avenue techniques at the expense of scriptural standards."^{xxvii}

Even the otherwise sympathetic Eugene Nida warns against putting too much emphasis on the numerical aspect of church growth. He points out in several of his writings that a rapid growthcurve can in due time fall just as rapidly, and that this happens when too much stress is placed upon quantity rather than the quality of growth in discipling the nations.

Reactions to Church Growth Theology within WELS

Recently a study-paper on church growth principles was circulated among missionaries, mission executives and theological professors within our own Synod. Reactions were solicited.

All reactors agree, of course, that many of McGavran's statements are obviously the product of Reformed theology and are to be regarded with caution. We cannot go along with McGavran and his followers in their fellowship principles. Campaigns promoting "decision theology" run counter to our teachings concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in the conversion of the sinner. Millennial tendencies which look for a conversion of the Jews on a large scale and a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth before the final judgment are not a part of our theology.

In the answers received there was also a general consensus that in a number of areas McGavran unfortunately uses Scripture to fit his theories. His interpretation of the Greek *panta ta ethne* in Matthew 28:19 as referring to "tribes" or "castes" rather than "all nations" or "all peoples" in this world in a general sense was faulted as going contrary both to Greek usage as well as to Christ's intended meaning. Had the Great Commission been intended to convey the meaning which McGavran assigns to it, some other Greek word such as *genos* or *phyle* would certainly have been used. "The Lord's own commentary is found in Mark 16:15," namely the command to preach the gospel to "every creature," as Pastor Richard E. Lauersdorf points out in his study paper "Developing Indigenous Churches—the Scriptural Principles Involved," delivered before our Leland World Mission Conference in 1978.^{xxviii}

McGavran's distinction between "discipling" and "perfecting" as two separate stages or levels in church growth experience was also seriously questioned by a number of reactors. Professor W. Gawrisch of our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary summarizes this viewpoint as follows: "In treating the Great Commission in my classes I am accustomed to emphasize that in Matthew 28:19 two participles are used with the imperative: 'Make disciples (of all nations)'... 'baptizing'... 'teaching.' We ought not to pit one against the other, emphasizing missions at the expense of Christian education or Christian education at the expense of missions." Pastor Lauersdorf in the study paper mentioned above has this to add: "What is involved in being a disciple? To be a disciple means to follow Jesus, to learn from and to live for that Savior. To be a disciple means also to be a learner in the school of Christ, where the textbook is 'all things whatsoever he has commanded.' A disciple, then, is not just one who hears God's Word and seems to accept it initially, but one who lives steadfastly in that Word, all of it."^{xxix}

One might also add that Paul, the greatest missionary of all to the nations, did not "shun to declare ... all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). His constant prayer for his people was that they "might be filled with all the fulness of God" (Ephesians 3:19), and that they should "grow up into him in all things which is the head, even Christ" (Ephesians 4:15).

Several reactors agreed that McGavran's use of parables pointed tendentiously to quantitative rather than to qualitative values, and were also bent to support his "multi-individual" conversion theories. In support of his contention that "God wants people to be found" he cites the parables found in Luke 15, failing to mention in these parables the clear emphasis of Christ on the importance of one sinner who repents. In support of his "people-movement" approach he refers to Christ's parables of the kingdom of heaven as a net, since this presumably implies a "large ingathering." While large numbers do not happen to be the point of this parable, one can mention other parables and scriptural comparisons which emphasize quality rather than quantity when it comes to the fruit of the Spirit working through the Word. "We need always to remember that growth in the church is something which God himself supplies," comments Professor H. Vogel of our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. "We are to sow the seed, that is, to preach the gospel, and to water the plants, that is, to nourish the faith of believers with the means of grace to keep them in the faith. But it is God alone who gives the increase."

Missionary Harold Johnne, writing from a country which McGavran would regard as a field of "low receptivity," also stresses the importance of the Holy Spirit both in his own work as well as in the call which he received over a decade ago, factors which McGavran's theories seem to overlook. Johnne writes: "The Lord permitted me to preach to a little over 20 people last Sunday. Perhaps he has great plans for the grandchild of one of these people. Perhaps it will take that long before one gets the kind of success that humans can measure. I don't know. All I know is that the Lord put me into this pulpit to preach to these people this past Sunday. The Lord's plan for his mission in Japan may involve far more than I ever dreamed possible."

Missionary John's words remind us of something expressed by Pastor Edgar Hoenecke, former executive secretary of our Synod's Board for World Missions: "The Rheinische Mission waited for 16 interminable years to make one convert, a young housemaid, in Suedwest Afrika, where today they have over 100,000 members!"

Pastor Hoenecke, on the other hand, points out that aside from McGavran's faulty hermeneutics there are some positive and practical suggestions in his community approach to certain African cultures as well as in his family-type contacts in places like Latin America. He also cites McGavran's aggressive urging of churchplanting "while there is still time" as something we in our own Synod could take more to heart.

This is where all those who favor a more positive and aggressive stance over against worldwide mission work find themselves to be faced with a problem when evaluating the pronouncements of a McGavran. We *should*, of course be concerned about growth. We *should* be imbued with a positive attitude toward mission work. We *should* keep accurate records of our work, using these to evaluate our progress or our possible mistakes. We *should* deploy our manpower wisely, not supporting costly social and institutional programs at the expense of the ministry of the Word itself. We *should* use every possible legitimate strategy within our means to communicate the precious gospel of Christ. These are all principles which McGavran espouses. Undoubtedly there are any number of dedicated people within our own synodical circles who are wondering to what extent McGavran's principles should be syncretized into our own program.

Should we, in other words, condemn an entire movement because of certain exaggerated claims and some misapplications of Scripture? Can we not make use of some of McGavran's practical suggestions while remaining aloof from whatever theories do not agree with our own confessional principles? There are other church growth programs which have been developed along more conservative lines. Here we are thinking of adaptations of McGavran's principles such as developed by Waldo J. Werning of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. In his study entitled "Vision and Strategy for Church Growth" Werning has modified some of McGavran's extreme positions.^{xxx} Using some of his own adaptations Werning has conducted many seminars and workshops in applying church growth principles to a local congregational setting in America.

Concluding Reflections

Whatever our own personal inclinations toward the church growth principles of McGavran and other evangelicals may be, the subject of church growth itself is not one that we in our Synod will want to ignore. As the world's population continues to multiply dramatically, as the costs of doing worldwide mission work are growing also by leaps and bounds, and as increased restrictions abroad make it more difficult to reach out to the world's unsaved millions, the need for well-planned goals and strategies becomes more urgent. This is true both here at home as well as in our overseas work.

Our Synod's Commission on Evangelism states in its 1980 *Report to the Ten Districts*: "Our Synod's efforts and performance in personal evangelism, not only by pastors and teachers, but especially by our lay witnesses has not come close to our potential."^{xxxi} In his report to the Synod Theodore Sauer, executive secretary of our Synod's Board for World Missions, calls attention to "double digit inflation," "international strife," and "tighter government regulations and restrictions" in countries we might wish to enter with the gospel. These problems, he points out, present us with obstacles which make "the carrying out of a full mission program more difficult" in our day, yet which "are at the same time a very present reminder of the need to enter doors while they are still open with all deliberate haste and diligence in those places which the Lord still makes it possible for us to enter."^{xxxii}

The present economic crisis here in the United States has added to the need for carefully planned mission programs. When it becomes increasingly difficult to make ends meet here at home, how are we going to carry on mission programs overseas where costs today are all out of proportion to what they were just a few years ago? The temptation, of course, is to give up thoughts of an aggressive program of mission outreach, to declare a moratorium on all further expansion, and even to retrench in the mission activities which were once begun, simply because we can't seem to afford them anymore. And that would be tragic, indeed. As we recall

having read somewhere recently: “A church without a viable mission program is not a living body. It is a corpse.”

Rather than to let ourselves become overly discouraged by changing world conditions with their increasingly complex problems, we should want to give more thought to readjusting to whatever methods or strategies may be required to cope more effectively with these new situations. Mission strategies, along with changing world conditions, have always been subject to change. We should not be ashamed to admit that there is still much we can learn about more effective mission methods. This applies to the field of communications, patterns of linguistics, living in transcultural situations, coping with complex government regulations, world economics, and all sorts of skills and techniques which come into consideration when carrying out the practical aspects of world mission work. If in the process there are certain things to be learned from the knowledge and experiences of others, we should not hesitate to investigate their skills. The day seems to be at hand when even computers can serve the glory of God.

At the same time we need to always remember that our methods of church growth, from wherever they are derived, must be a true reflection of our Lutheran theology. Our methodology must be in line with Scripture, expressing hermeneutical principles which will not in any way compromise or distort the truth which the Lord has entrusted to us. A Scripture-based methodology will set forth an unconditioned gospel, one which above all emphasizes the objective declaration of God’s grace to all mankind. It will also, we firmly believe, emphasize a *qualitative* approach to the work of saving souls for all eternity rather than a quantitative one. This kind of approach also places the chief emphasis of church growth upon the faithful use of the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacraments, trusting that through these Means alone the Lord will build his Church so that the gates of hell cannot prevail against it.

If anything at all, this places greater responsibilities upon us in the conduct of our work, realizing that there are no short-cuts which will make the task any less burdensome or the costs any less demanding. There are no easy answers to the many practical problems which seem to be getting more complex all the time. When all is said and done, we suppose, we dare not forget that what is needed above all today—even as yesterday—is a corps of ministers of Christ who, constrained by a Spirit-wrought devotion to their Lord and an intense love for the souls purchased with his blood, are willing to beat the bushes and scour the byways faithfully, heralding his precious gospel of salvation with all zeal, not worried too much about spectacular results, but trusting that the Lord’s Spirit of truth will surely accomplish his eternal purposes far beyond what we can ever ask or think! We have the command; we have the means; we have the assurance that his blessing is abundant and his almighty presence never-ending.

ⁱ Johannes Verkuyll, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) p 190.

ⁱⁱ Peter C. Wagner, “Aiming at Church Growth in the Eighties,” in *Christianity Today*, Nov. 21, 1980, pp 24–27.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter C. Wagner, *Frontiers in Missionary Strategy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971) and by the same author, *Your Church Can Grow* (Glendale: Regal Books, 1976).

^{iv} Peter C. Wagner, *op. cit.*, pp 24–27.

^v *Proceedings of the Forty-Fifth Biennial Convention, WELS, Aug. 1–8, 1979*, p 105.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p 105.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p 105.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p 105.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, pp 105–107.

^x Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God* (New York: Friendship, 1955).

^{xi} Donald A. McGavran, *International Review of Missions*, 1965, p 459.

^{xii} Cf. *The Eye of the Storm* (Waco: Word Books, 1972).

^{xiii} J. Herbert Kane, *Life and Work on the Mission Field* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) p 252.

^{xiv} Johannes Verkuyll, *op. cit.*, pp 16–17.

^{xv} *Report to the Ten Districts, WELS, May 1980*, p 83.

^{xvi} Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

^{xvii} Cf. *The Eye of the Storm* (Waco: Word Books, 1972).

^{xviii} Arthur F. Glasser, *Church Growth Theology*, ms. p 1.

^{xix} John H. Yoder, “Church Growth Issues in Theological Perspective,” in *The Challenge of Church Growth, a Symposium*, Wilbert R. Shenk, ed., 1973, p 29.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, p 29.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p 33.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, pp 44–45.

^{xxiii} Walter L. Liefeld, “Theology of Church Growth,” in *Theology and Mission*, David J. Hesselgrave, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) p 173.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, p 178.

^{xxv} Walter Frank, “Response, Theology of Church Growth,” in *Theology and Mission*, David J. Hesselgrave, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) p 208.

^{xxvi} David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) p 95.

^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, p 118.

^{xxviii} Richard E. Lauersdorf, “Developing Indigenous Churches—The Scriptural Principles Involved,” in *Report of the Leland Worm Mission Conference*, 1978.

^{xxix} *Ibid.*

^{xxx} Waldo J. Werning, *Vision and Strategy for Church Growth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977).

^{xxxi} *Report to the Ten Districts, WELS, May 1980*, p 109.

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