

Unreached

An Evaluation of Church Growth

by Paul G. Hiebert

This short presentation is one of the many unpublished pieces lodged in the archives of Paul Hiebert at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. It is still undetermined just where and when Hiebert made this particular presentation to leadership in his own Mennonite Brethren denomination, but hopefully this printing in the IJFM may help connect us with the precise historical occasion. You are invited to access Hiebert's archives at www.hiebertglobalcenter.org.

Like many other Protestant churches in North America, the Mennonite Brethren Church has been forced to reevaluate itself in the light of the rapid changes occurring in North American society, and its place in that society. Like many, it has become painfully aware that it has not effectively reached out to that society. As long as we were a cultural enclave this question was not so central to our thought—we evangelized at a distance—but as we joined mainstream evangelicalism this did become a problem for us. Its growth has been slow and largely due to biological increase.

In trying to find a solution, we have been tempted to turn to the Church Growth Movement (CGM) as a solution. This movement has influenced us increasingly, both on the surface level of methods for outreach and church growth, but also on the deeper level of presuppositions of what the church is to be in our modern setting.

It is important now, after more than two decades of increasing use of this theory, to evaluate it and its fruit. Others who are more informed than I will examine the specific impact of Church Growth on the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Churches. I will limit myself to some general comments regarding the contributions and weaknesses of the movement as a whole.

Contributions of Church Growth Theory

In our discussions, it is important to look at the contributions of Church Growth to churches that have become involved with it. Many of these have impacted us as MB as well.

Refocusing Our Priorities

In the first place the Church Growth Movement refocused our attention on the priorities of our mission to the world. Over time, it has been easy for us to lose sight of the big picture, and to focus our attention on building and maintaining existing programs.

Paul Gordon Hiebert was born in India to second generation Mennonite Brethren missionaries, where he also served as a missionary. As a mission anthropologist he served on the faculties of Fuller Seminary (1977–1990) and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (1990–2007). A vigorous researcher who authored twelve books and published over 150 articles in various academic journals, his ideas on conversion (contrasting “bounded-set” vs. “centered-set” thinking), critical contextualization, split-level Christianity (the flaw of the excluded middle), and self-theologizing became core concepts in missiology.

It is crucial that we as MB step back periodically and evaluate everything we do in the light of our central vision. It is too easy to be content with the status quo, and with turning our attention upon ourselves as Christians, rather than living—really living—in the light of the fact that we are called to minister in a lost and dying world.

Church Growth constantly asks whether our programs and actions lead to the growth of churches. It will not let us turn away from this central goal.

Focus on the Church

A second contribution of Church Growth is its redefinition of our central goal as planting churches. The major thrust verbalized in missions until this century was evangelism—leading people to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. The result, too often, was rapid growth in Christians, but a lack of strong churches that were able to nurture new believers and continue the outreach of the gospel. By stressing the “Church,” the CGM reminds us that evangelism is not enough. Believers need to be incorporated in worshipping and nurturing communities if they are to stand in a non-Christian world.

Awareness of Social Contexts

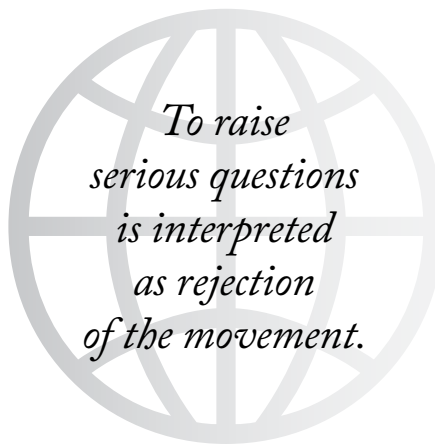
A third contribution of the CGM is its attention to social contexts. Early missionaries were very aware of these contexts in other societies, but tended to equate them with paganism. Christianity was equated with western culture. Wilbert Shenk writes,

The seventeenth-century New England Puritan missionaries largely set the course for modern missions. They defined their task as preaching the gospel so that Native Americans would be converted and receive personal salvation. But early in their missionary experience these New Englanders concluded that Indian converts could only be Christians if they were “civilized.” The model by which they measured their converts was English Puritan civilization. These missionaries felt compassion and responsibility for their

converts. They gathered these new Christians into churches for nurture and discipline and set up programs to transform Christian Indians into English Puritans (1980, 35).

The Church Growth Movement is part of the anti-colonialism that emerged after world war II. It affirms both the reality, and basic utility, if not goodness, of human social systems. They need not be changed in conversion. Rather, the church must work at changing them over time.

Earlier the mission movement focused on geography: on reaching India, Africa and Latin America. The CGM pointed out that the real barriers between people are social, not geographic. We need, therefore, to understand



social structures and social dynamics in order to understand how people respond to the Gospel.

In particular, the CGM makes us aware of social differences. People in an Indian or American village often do not belong to the same social group. We cannot assume that because we have planted a church in one community, that we have evangelized the neighborhood. We have to understand the social context to evangelize a town or city.

The CGM, therefore, led us to think in terms of new concepts. “Homogeneous units,” “people groups,” “multi individual conversions,” “receptivity and resistance,” and “felt needs” became part of our jargon.

Solid Research

In founding the CGM, Dr. McGavran was insistent that our planning and action be based on careful research, not on isolated illustrations and hunches. He wanted hard thinking, and this, in his day meant science. He, therefore, insisted that the CGM was a science. Wishful thinking and pep talks would not do in a hard, real world.

This insistence on scientific research is the major reason for quantification and statistics in studying the growth of the church. One might argue with a particular measure, but one must use some measure to determine what really is going on. In particular, the CGM has provided us with macro-statistics which are useful in planning overall strategies for reaching whole nations and neighborhoods.

Good research is important for good planning. It challenges our unfounded notions about the way things are. It forces us to ask new and difficult questions that need to be raised.

Critique of Church Growth Theory

As with any movement, there are areas of weakness in the Church Growth Movement. These are particularly difficult to deal with because the movement is polemical in its stance, not irenic. Church Growth theories are presented as facts, and not open to debate and revision. One is either “for” or “against” the movement. To raise serious questions about parts of it is interpreted as a rejection of the whole of the movement’s findings.

A second reason it is hard to critique the CGM is that its goals are good. It calls us back to evangelism and church planting. To question its methods is often seen as questioning its goals. For example, when we call for “whole ministries” or for “qualitative growth,” we are charged with not being for quantitative growth in believers and churches.

Recognizing this, there are a number of areas where we must examine the

CGM more closely to understand and evaluate its foundations.

Church Growth and Theology

The first area of concern is the theological foundations of the CGM. Dr. McGavran came from a denomination that had no strong theological commitments. It should not surprise us, therefore, that while he had a deep passion for saving the lost, he did not lay strong theological foundations for the CGM. It was Allan Tippett who provided more lasting theological reflections for the movement.¹

The need for theological reflection is seen in the lack of theological understandings of the Church. Considerable effort is given to defining Growth, little to defining Church. In part this explains the debate between McGavran and his critics such as Rene Padilla. For McGavran, the church is any gathering of the saved. Issues such as the unity of the church are the fruit of the church. They should appear in time. Padilla notes that the unity of the church is itself part of the Gospel (1982).² It is the mystery revealed to us in Christ (Eph. 3:3–9). Without it we do not have the church. We may have a religious club, just as the Pharisees had a religious club. But we do not have the church.

The lack of a theological definition of what constitutes the church reduces the church in the CGM to the simplest common denominator. The pressure, then, is for churches such as ours to give up what we feel are essential parts of the gospel—such as the emphasis on peace—to achieve growth. Doctrinal matters are left to “perfecting,” which someone must do sometime, but is not of real concern in the CGM. Its focus is on “discipling.”

This sharp distinction between “discipling” and “perfecting” leads John Howard Yoder and others to wonder whether anyone will get around to “perfecting,” which obviously is secondary to “discipling.” The distinction

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also led to the debate between McGavran and Edwin Orr over the relationship of revivals and church growth. Orr held that true revivals generally lead to rapid church growth. McGavran denied this, and assigned revivals to the “perfecting” of the saints. Growth, he argued, cannot await times of spiritual revival. It is achieved by systematic planning and effort aimed at the growth of the church.

Before we embrace CG theory, we need to define theologically what we mean by the church, justification and sanctification, and the relationships between these three.

Church Growth and Science

The second area of concern is “science.” McGavran is clear, Church Growth is a science. Specifically it is sociology. More specifically, it is structuralist sociology of the 1930–1960s. This examined the structural units that make up a society, and the relationship between them.

The value of CG is that it makes us aware of social structures and their importance in the lives of people. Social walls can be as hard to cross as geographic distances which shaped early mission strategies. Now we speak not of going to “Nigeria” but to a “people-group” such as the Ibo, Yoruba or Hausa. We don’t talk of Mahbubnagar District, but of the Merchants, Washermen and Gypsies.

CG has also helped us understand group dynamics, such as group conversions, “mass movements” or “people movements,” and the importance of the church as a community that provides a social haven for new converts.

There are problems here, however. In the first place, there is a problem with the social theories of CG. The

structuralist sociology of the 1960s fits best with tribal and peasant societies. It does not help us much in understanding modern urban settings. In any city there are pockets of rural peoples such as Korean immigrants in L. A. Most fully urban people, however, do not belong to one homogeneous unit. Rather they participate in many “social frames” and interact with many different “peoples” in networks, institutions and associations. This, in part, is the reason we do not see “people movements” in cities. A structuralist sociology is not adequate for analyzing modern urban settings.

Structuralist sociology also has a static view of the social order. Societies are seen as made up of homogeneous units related to each other in formal ways. The fact is that most of the modern world is in rapid flux, and today’s homogenous units are fragmented tomorrow. One case illustrates the point. There is a massive migration of Koreans to L. A. and Korean pastors are rapidly starting Korean churches (more than 600 at the last count). These churches are running into deep trouble (Hiebert and Hertig 1991). The children of the immigrants (1.5 and 2 generation) want to be Americans, not Koreans. The Korean churches, however, are seeking to preserve the Korean culture. Consequently, in their rebellion against being “Korean,” an estimated 40% of the young American-Koreans raised in the churches are leaving Christianity. To them it has become identified with Koreanness. Studies of immigrants show that HU churches must break their homogeneity in three generations or they will die as the older immigrants pass away. Our own experience as MB immigrants is another illustration of the case.

If we want to make church planting a science (I will raise this issue later), we need to move beyond the structuralist sociology of the past. We need sociological models that include more sophisticated understandings of complexity and change. We also need to include the insights of anthropology and psychology which are largely absent in current CG theory.

The second problem with the current CGT from a scientific point of view is its scope. Sociology, particularly as used in CGT, provides us with a macro-analysis of a society. It is a “balcony” view that enables us to see the bigger picture of how a society is put together. This is why the CGT is particularly helpful for planners and top executives in charge of church planting.

CGT, however, provides us little insight into the “street level” view of society. This is why pastors and missionaries who are sent out to reach the “Drag strip” society, or the Baluch of Pakistan find themselves largely at a loss of what to do when they get there. It does not provide the field practitioners with methods for studying the local culture and social structure of the people to whom they have come, how to identify with them, or how to evangelize them and plant strong churches. These questions require other methods and principles for answers.

The third problem has to do with the social science methodologies used in the CGM. McGavran insisted on research and hard facts. In the CGM this has come to be equated with quantitative studies of churches such as membership growth/loss and number of churches planted. Over time there was a growing awareness of the need to measure the spiritual life of churches, and attempts were made to measure this. We cannot, however, directly measure qualitative characteristics. We need other methods to evaluate them. The CGM has largely overlooked the explosion of qualitative methods of analysis now emerging in the social sciences.

Even in quantitative analyses, however, the CGM has used a very weak methodological approach. It has tended to look at specific successful churches and sought to discover why they grow. This “case study” approach is the weakest level of scientific analysis. Its findings are illustrations at best. They cannot be used in this way to develop and test broad theories. A more rigorous scientific methodology would be to select twenty comparable churches, use ten as a control group and apply Church Growth Principles to the other ten, and measure the results in five or ten years. The tendency to look only at a few successful churches over simplifies social realities. It also looks at short range growth. It does not examine the big picture of twenty, fifty or a hundred years.



If we want to use CGT in our conference, we must move on to more sophisticated types of church analysis.

A fourth problem with the CGT has to do with its instrumentalist view of science. Science is seen as a “means” to achieve theological ends. The result is scientific “pragmatism.” It is not important to us that most scientists today reject this view of science. What is important is the place pragmatism plays in CGT. This will be discussed later.

Science and Theology

Our most fundamental concern must be with the foundations of Church Growth. It claims to be a science. But how does science relate to missions, the church, and to the way God works in

the world? A corollary question is, what should the relationship be between the church and the cultures around it?

God's Action and Human Control

Fundamental to science is the belief in human control. Science, as McGavran sees it, seeks to discover the laws that underlie reality. The social sciences search for the order underlying human behavior. If we know that order, we can get the desired results through human planning and effort.

The question arises: Is church planting the result of human effort or of God's divine activity? Obviously we must speak of both. The question here is one of priority and balance. Is church planting based primarily on human effort, or are we to wait upon God and seek his leading? To be sure, the Church Growth Movement calls for prayer and listening to God. But the real emphasis is on working in scientifically prescribed ways.

In recent years the CGM has emphasized prayer as one of its chief methods. But this only shows the tension I refer to. In Church Growth theory, the more we pray, the greater the results. Prayer, therefore, is not seen as primarily a relationship to God, but as a technique we use to plant churches. As Ellul points out (1963), a technological approach (the basis for science) in the end reduces everything to technique. Being is lost in doing. Relationships are lost in programs. And, if we are not careful, God is replaced by our activities.

Scientific Pragmatism and Theological Absolutes

Key to the CGT approach to the relationship of science and theology is its view of science. McGavran wrote,

We teach men to be ruthless in regard to method. If it does not work to the glory of God and the extension of Christ's church, throw it away and get something which does. As to methods, we are fiercely pragmatic—a doctrine is something entirely different (1970, 3).

On the surface of it, this approach seems right. In fact, one might argue that McGavran did not understand the technical meaning of the word “pragmatism,” and the epistemological foundations (instrumentalism and relativism) that underlie it. If so, we need to re-word the approach we take towards the methods we use in church planting.

In fact, too often we have become “pragmatic” in the way we plant churches. This is reflected, on the surface, by our lack of theological discussions about the methods we use. At a deeper level, it is reflected in the uneasy alliance we have between “methods” and “goals” in our outreach program. At the deepest level it is seen in the fact that God is not an essential part of our methods as well as our goals. As one critique pointed out, we can use Church Growth methods to start Muslim mosques and Hindu temples as well as Christian churches.

An example of this pragmatic approach to church planting is the current discussion of which leadership style “works” to produce Church Growth. There is little discussion of the leadership styles of Jesus or of the early church. The style chosen is the one that “works.” This shows how deeply we have bought into pragmatism and American instrumentalism.

We need to rethink methodological “pragmatism” and seek to understand how God is working in the world. We need, also, to make sure that the methods we use are compatible with the message we bear, namely the Gospel. If methods and message are divorced, in the end the message itself is subverted.

Science and Western Culture

A final area of caution must be noted: namely, is CG in danger of over contextualizing the gospel in a modern cultural setting? The gospel must be contextualized—in other words, it must be understood clearly in each cultural setting. But, we as Anabaptists believe, it must also be prophetic—seeking to

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transform that culture in line with the standards set by the Kingdom of God. The church is always in danger of letting the context set the agenda rather than of calling that context to change.

One of the hallmarks of modernity is a mechanistic, technological approach to reality (Berger 1974, Ellul 1964). In the natural sciences this has led to factories and an engineering mentality that seeks to control nature. In the social sciences this same technological approach has led to bureaucracies and an engineering approach to human beings. This is seen, for example, in the M.B.O. (Management By Objective) style of management found in modern businesses. Goal setting, progress reports and amoral methods are characteristics of this culture.

To what extent can the church buy into this culture and still remain the church? At what point, in seeking to contextualize our church planting, have we lost the heart of our message and become a Christian club? This question must be on our agenda for discussion.

Conclusions

It is not my purpose to reject the contributions CGT has made to the church and to our thinking. There is much we can learn. My concern, rather, is with the dogmatic stance we often find among Church Growth practitioners who appear to be unwilling to reexamine the foundations of CGT in the light of Scripture, and in the light of recent scientific developments.

We do, indeed, need better theories to inform our actions. We all have such theories, whether they are implicit or explicit in our thinking.

We also need more and better research to better understand the Gospel and the human contexts in which it must become incarnate.

Above all, we must turn again to God, to seek his guidance in our planning and acting. Human efforts can produce short-term successes, but in the long run, if God is not at the center both of our message and our methods, the churches we build, we build in vain. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ The vital role of Alan Tippett is clear in Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 153.

² Rene Padilla, “The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle,” *The International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January (1982).

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