EVALUATING THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT: 5 VIEWS (COUNTERPOINTS: CHURCH LIFE) BY GARY MCINTOSH, PAUL ENGLE

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Growth advocate writes, 'The Church Growth Movement emerged in the service of a powerful theological vision: to fulfill the ancient promise to Abraham, and to fulfill Christ's Great Commission, by reaching the lost people, and peoples, of the earth.' He then lists twenty specific contributions from the Church Growth school that have impacted church ministry, particularly evangelism. For example, the first five major contributions can be described as networks, receptivity, indigenous forms, new units, and people groups. Church Growth has taught us: 1. The gospel spreads most contagiously, not between strangers, nor by mass evangelism, nor through mass media, but along the lines of the kinship and friendship networks of credible Christians, especially new Christians. 2. The gospel spreads more easily to persons and peoples who are in a receptive season of their lives, and Church Growth research has discovered many indicators of likely receptive people. 3. The gospel spreads more naturally among a people through their language, and the indigenous forms of their culture, than through alien languages or cultural forms. 4. 'First generation' groups, classes, choirs, congregations, churches, and ministries, and other new units, are more reproductive than old established units. 5. Apostolic ministry is more effective when we target people groups than when we target political units or geographical areas. While critics and adherents will no doubt continue to debate the specific contributions of the Church Growth movement, most would agree that the 'church-growth movement is extraordinarily influential and significant within American churches today. At its best, it should be applauded. Where it is not at its best, it requires criticism so that it might be.' A simple way to summarize the current views on Church Growth is as follows: Some people love it. Others dislike it. Many simply misunderstand it. Understanding Church Growth, of course, is more complex than such a simplistic summary, which is why this book has been written. To make certain we all begin on the same page, it will be helpful to look at a brief historical sketch of the Church Growth movement, particularly as it has developed in North America. BRIEF HISTORY Church growth has occurred throughout the Christian era, of course, and is not really new or modern. Even contemporary Church Growth thought had a precursor, in the thought of the Dutch missiologist Gisbertus Voetius (1589--1676). Voetius believed that the 'first goal of mission is the conversion of the heathen; the second, the planting of churches; and the highest, the glory of God.' These three goals comprise a condensed version of today's Church Growth movement. The particular expression of Church Growth theory and theology under discussion in this book, however, first crystallized in the mind of Donald A. McGavran, during the years 1930 to 1955. EARLY INFLUENCES IN INDIA Donald Anderson McGavran was born in Damoh, India, on December 15, 1897. MacGavran was a third-generation missionary; by 1954, his family had served a total of 279 years in India. He attended Butler University (B.A., 1920), Yale Divinity School (B.D., 1922), the former College of Mission in Indianapolis (M.A., 1923), and following two terms in India, Columbia University (Ph.D., 1936). When Donald McGavran went to India as a missionary in 1923, he worked primarily as an educator under appointment of the United Christian Missionary Society of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In 1929, he became director of religious education for his mission before returning to the United States to work on his Ph.D. at Columbia University. After his return to India, he was elected field secretary in 1932 and was placed in charge of administering the denomination's entire India mission. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the stirrings of what would eventually become Church Growth thought began to develop in McGavran's mind. Several forerunners contributed to McGavran's developing insights, such as William Carey, Roland Allen, and Kenneth Scott Latourette. The most direct influence, however, was J.Waskom Pickett, of whom McGavran was fond of saying, 'I lit my candle at Pickett's fire.' Pickett and McGavran were both influenced by the ministry of John R. Mott and the student volunteer movement. In 1886, Dwight L. Moody led a missionary awakening at Mount Hermon, Massachusetts, which resulted in one hundred students dedicating themselves to missionary service and the founding of the student volunteer movement. The slogan 'The evangelization of the world in this generation' became a watchword for missions during the first two decades of the twentieth century. As a senior at Butler University, McGavran attended the student volunteer convention at Des Moines, Iowa, during the Christmas season of 1919.
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When you hear the term church growth, what words or phrases come to mind? You may think of megachurches, small groups, numbers, contemporary worship, marketing, or a host of other concepts that have occasionally been promoted as popular church-growth theory. In contrast, you may identify the term church growth with effective evangelism, church planting, church extension, making disciples, church multiplication, or other aspects of outreach that seek to win people to Christ and enlist them as responsible members of his church. These differing perceptions of the term church growth, and the emotions that arise from them, clearly point to misunderstanding and disagreement regarding the term, as well as the movement. Church growth is one of those ideas that cause us to draw lines in the sand. We are either for an emphasis on church growth or against it. There seems to be little neutral ground. Donald McGavran, the father of the modern Church Growth movement, recognized early on the divisive nature of Church Growth thought in a letter to his wife, written from Costa Rica on September 8, 1961: 'It is clear that emphasizing the growth of the churches divides the camp. It is really a divisive topic. How strange when all are presumably disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.' Dr. McGavran's words still ring true today. Church Growth continues to divide the camp, as the five viewpoints expressed in this book will demonstrate.

SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS There is agreement, however, among Church Growth critics and adherents alike that the Church Growth movement has made significant contributions to the mission of the church, contributions that cannot be ignored. For instance, one early critic of the movement believes its major contribution is in 'clarifying of the mission of the church and focusing mission activity on the responsive.' Other critics add that the movement has provided a 'strategy and a set of priorities for mission'; 'a militant, optimistic, and forward-looking approach to the missionary enterprise'; and a way to 'make us all aware of peoplehood and its human diversity as a tool in world evangelization.' Another critic suggests two major theological contributions of the Church Growth movement: 'The first contribution is the theological clarification that the growth of the Church is not something that should be simply an overflow of the life of the Church. Rather, growth must be something that is intentional and embraced at the purpose level of the Church. [The] second contribution is the clarification and development of the Church's understanding of the leadership qualities and characteristics necessary to catalyze and mobilize a group of Christians.' Advocates of Church Growth thought suggest that the movement has contributed even more to the advancement of Christ's mission in the world. One Church Growth advocate writes, 'The Church Growth Movement emerged in the service of a powerful theological vision: to fulfill the ancient promise to Abraham, and to fulfill Christ's Great Commission, by reaching the lost people, and peoples, of the earth.' He then lists twenty specific contributions from the Church Growth school that have impacted church ministry, particularly evangelism. For example, the first five major contributions can be described as networks, receptivity, indigenous forms, new units, and people groups.
Church Growth has taught us: 1. The gospel spreads most contagiously, not between strangers, nor by mass evangelism, nor through mass media, but along the lines of the kinship and friendship networks of credible Christians, especially new Christians. 2. The gospel spreads more easily to persons and peoples who are in a receptive season of their lives, and Church Growth research has discovered many indicators of likely receptive people. 3. The gospel spreads more naturally among a people through their language, and the indigenous forms of their culture, than through alien languages or cultural forms. 4. ‘First generation’ groups, classes, choirs, congregations, churches, and ministries, and other new units, are more reproductive than old established units. 5. Apostolic ministry is more effective when we target people groups than when we target political units or geographical areas. While critics and adherents will no doubt continue to debate the specific contributions of the Church Growth movement, most would agree that the ‘church-growth movement is extraordinarily influential and significant within American churches today. At its best, it should be applauded. Where it is not at its best, it requires criticism so that it might be.’ A simple way to summarize the current views on Church Growth is as follows: Some people love it. Others dislike it. Many simply misunderstand it. Understanding Church Growth, of course, is more complex than such a simplistic summary, which is why this book has been written. To make certain we all begin on the same page, it will be helpful to look at a brief historical sketch of the Church Growth movement, particularly as it has developed in North America.

BRIEF HISTORY

Church growth has occurred throughout the Christian era, of course, and is not really new or modern. Even contemporary Church Growth thought had a precursor, in the thought of the Dutch missiologist Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676). Voetius believed that the ‘first goal of mission is the conversion of the heathen; the second, the planting of churches; and the highest, the glory of God.’ These three goals comprise a condensed version of today’s Church Growth movement. The particular expression of Church Growth theory and theology under discussion in this book, however, first crystallized in the mind of Donald A. McGavran, during the years 1930 to 1955. EARLY INFLUENCES IN INDIA

Donald Anderson McGavran was born in Damoh, India, on December 15, 1897. MacGavran was a third-generation missionary; by 1954, his family had served a total of 279 years in India. He attended Butler University (B.A., 1920), Yale Divinity School (B.D., 1922), the former College of Mission in Indianapolis (M.A., 1923), and following two terms in India, Columbia University (Ph.D., 1936). When Donald McGavran went to India as a missionary in 1923, he worked primarily as an educator under appointment of the United Christian Missionary Society of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In 1929, he became director of religious education for his mission before returning to the United States to work on his Ph.D. at Columbia University. After his return to India, he was elected field secretary in 1932 and was placed in charge of administering the denomination’s entire India mission. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the stirrings of what would eventually become Church Growth thought began to develop in McGavran’s mind. Several forerunners contributed to McGavran’s developing insights, such as William Carey, Roland Allen, and Kenneth Scott Latourette. The most direct influence, however, was J.Waskom Pickett, of whom McGavran was fond of saying, ‘I lit my candle at Pickett’s fire.’ Pickett and McGavran were both influenced by the ministry of John R. Mott and the student volunteer movement. In 1886, Dwight L. Moody led a missionary awakening at Mount Hermon, Massachusetts, which resulted in one hundred students dedicating themselves to missionary service and the founding of the student volunteer movement. The slogan ‘The evangelization of the world in this generation’ became a watchword for missions during the first two decades of the twentieth century. As a senior at Butler University, McGavran attended the student volunteer convention at Des Moines, Iowa, during the Christmas season of 1919.
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