

**The Evolution of Church Growth, Church Health, and the Missional Church:
An Overview of the Church Growth Movement from, and back to,
Its Missional Roots**

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Why did God create and choose this institution called “Church?” What is this gift that God has given us and how does it impact the world? The Church exists because God, in His infinite wisdom and infinite mercy, chose the Church as His instrument to make known His manifold wisdom in the world. The Church Growth Movement asked how we might best lead that church to accomplish His mission.

When I was asked to speak at the 50th anniversary celebration of the McGavran’s *Bridges of God*, I felt humbled and challenged. I felt humbled because the

publication of *Bridges* and its subsequent application in many international contexts has done more to reach the world than any other publication in the last century.

I felt challenged because the American application of the Church Growth Movement has, in my estimation, moved away from McGavran's original emphasis of mission. While still valuing the approach and learning much from it, I desire to honor the request of those who invited me by sharing a personal journey out of mainstream Church Growth into a more missional approach.

Two agendas always recur in these environments. First, most presenters (including me) point to a visionary founding leader and seek to prove that their agenda was his or her agenda. Thus, John Kennedy is a tax-cutting conservative to Ronald Reagan, but also a social liberal to Bill Clinton. Both are true... and I imagine that Donald McGavran is more than one thing to those meeting here today. Second, all those who are leaders in Church Growth also want to create the next "Engel" scale, thus the preponderance of helices, matrices, paradigms, and other graphics that point to a new future (and hopefully a new term tied to the presenter). My presentation will be no different in that respect.

Regarding this paper, my work is not intended to be exhaustive. Instead, it is intentionally personal and narrative. For a more thorough treatment of the subject, see McIntosh's book, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views*.¹ Although McIntosh places me in category two (Effective Evangelism), perhaps reflecting my role as the Research Team Director at the North American Mission Board, I place myself in

¹ Gary McIntosh, gen. ed., *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

category four (Reformist), perhaps because of my other title, Missiologist at the North American Mission Board.

My own journey may be illustrative of my own biases. In 1994, I graduated with my M.Div. from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary with no practical training to grow a church. I chose to go to Liberty University and study under my (now) friend and mentor, Elmer Towns, where I earned an M.A. in Religious Studies with a concentration in Church Growth and Evangelism.

I found I then had the tools, but lacked solid understanding of the theological foundation of the Church. To remedy that, I studied with Timothy George at Beeson Divinity School and earned a D.Min from a school with a solid theological focus. When I assumed the role of professor at Southern Seminary, I found that I could tell my students how to plant and grow churches as I did (or how I learned from Elmer Towns), but I was ill equipped to tell them how to plant and grow churches in the diverse communities where they served.

While there, I decided I needed more than just Church Growth tools, I needed missiological discernment. I completed a Ph.D. in Missiology with a minor in Evangelism. Thus, my own journey in and through the Church Growth Movement might be best described by the dedication of my first book, to my missions mentor Mark Terry. I wrote, "I knew the 'hows' of church planting, but you taught me the 'whys' of missions."

When discussing church growth, I must always focus on the Church. Ephesians 3:10 tells us that God has chosen the Church as His instrument. If the Church is so central to God's redemptive purpose, then we should passionately desire to know how to make it more effective in its mission. The Church Growth Movement (CGM) was

birthed with such a passion. The CGM asked questions not asked before: how can churches be more effective in reaching their communities?

Yet, the popular proponents of the Church Growth Movement provided an incomplete answer. In my own case, my Church Growth world began to unravel nine years ago while still serving as a pastor.² Many of the sure-fire, guaranteed new programs weren't working in my church, or in the churches we were starting. For years, I had waited eagerly to receive and apply my tape-of-the-month from the Fuller Institute, new books from thinkers represented in the American Society of Church Growth, and conferences on the latest and best strategies—but soon they were not working.

They were supposed to work; they worked in other places; they worked for my friends, but they did not work for us. We kept trying them, but my community just did not respond as the Church Growth experts promised. When I became a seminary professor, my students told me the same thing—the-sure fire methods were just not that sure-fire.

These sure-fire methods of church growth took on many forms. For example, Neil Jackson compiled a book in which he describes 100 ideas to grow a church and implies that the use of these ideas will grow the church because “all contributors have used the ideas successfully in their own churches.”³ Another example would be C. Peter Wagner’s books. For instance, Wagner’s *Strategies for Church Growth* postulates that “God is genuinely concerned with the practical implementation of His great commission.”⁴

² Parts of this paper are adapted and excerpted with permission from *On Mission* magazine, North American Mission Board, SBC.

³ Neil Jackson, *100 Great Growth Ideas*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), preface.

⁴ C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth: Tools for Effective Mission and Evangelism* (Ventura, CA: Regal Publishing, 1987), 29.

While this is definitely true, Wagner presents this as a means to use power evangelism and spiritual gifts for church growth. Also, Kennon Callahan reveals a church administration guide to church growth. In his book, he claims that “twelve characteristics can be identified that contribute to a church’s being effective and successful.”⁵

The reality was that what worked in one place was not equally effective everywhere else. The cultural code in my community of Erie, Pennsylvania, differed from the cultural code where the experts lived. We were living on different mission fields. Church Growth proponents gave me reliable tools to reach certain people, but these people did not live where I served.

Today, we live on a mission field made up of all kinds of people—and they do not respond to the same approach. Some books and speakers in the Church Growth Movement made blanket statements like “small groups are the only way,” “Sunday school is the most effective method,” or “you must use contemporary worship.” Today we realize that such statements are no longer appropriate—if they ever were.

I am not saying that the Church Growth Movement, rightly discerned, taught these things. (See *Biblical Church Growth* for an excellent description of what the Church Growth Movement should be.) However, McIntosh never wrote what I think we all know—that the CGM often *did* become about methods applied uncritically in context. Persons identified with the Church Growth Movement became enamored with methodological mania. Publishers rushed to publish books on the latest program or fad.

Since I agree with *McGavran’s* ideas, I do not present these examples as a straw man to knock down Church Growth as a movement. Rather, it is the practice of

⁵ Kennon Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1983), xi.

popular “church growth” that was a divergence from McGavran’s emphases. Elmer Towns noted, “Each local church must take the eternal principles of Church Growth and work them out in application to its context and within its resources,” but later stated that “the annual meeting of the American Society of Church Growth did not apply the direction needed to keep all factors focused on the original tenets of Church Growth.”⁶ This allowed the Church Growth Movement to move away from its missional and biblical roots.

Today, a shift in emphasis has occurred. None of us can deny that books on Church Growth do not sell as they once did. Yet at the same time, more pastors today seek to lead churches as missionaries, returning to the roots of the Church Growth Movement without knowing its source.

Pastors and church leaders ask, “How can I take the unchanging ‘faith delivered to the saints’ (Jude 3) and present it effectively in a retirement community in Plantation, Florida; in an artists’ commune in San Francisco; in a rural county seat town like Op, Alabama; or on the Lower East Side of Manhattan?” By necessity, these churches look different because they are in different settings, but they also face a common challenge—they must engage their communities as missional churches.

Many emerging movements look to missiology as the foundation for their practice. They explain that the methods they are choosing are birthed from a desire to engage people in culture with the truth claims of the gospel. And, because they see the Church Growth Movement as one driven by methods to reach the Baby Boomers, for example, they quote Newbigin, Allen, Bosch, and Guder much more frequently than the

⁶ Elmer Towns, “Effective Evangelism View: Church Growth effectively confronts and penetrates the culture,” in Gary McIntosh, gen. ed., *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), page 50.

early and current church growth authors. Rather than seeing Church Growth as a mission's movement, they see it as a movement that was too closely tied to methods in one unique culture. As a member of and believer in Church Growth, I believe we can either be angry at those who see us this way, or change the things that cause their misperceptions in the first place. I choose the latter.

Church Growth

The Church Growth Movement surfaced in the 1960s from Donald McGavran as a philosophy of foreign missions. Peter Wagner popularized the movement in the United States through his work at Fuller Seminary in the 1970s. The movement exploded onto the evangelical scene in the 1980s.

The Church Growth Movement had its excesses and, rightfully in some cases, its critics. However, its fundamental premise was, "How can we be more effective in reaching people?" Many are surprised to discover that before the Church Growth Movement very little was written on organizing churches for growth, welcoming guests, or planning an outreach campaign. The Church Growth Movement provided great new insights.

Wilbert Shenk praised the Church Growth Movement for these innovations:

In the first place, it has offered a new way of understanding the missionary tasks and encouraged a rereading of the history of Christian missions to highlight the 'growth' theme. Second, Church Growth has readily appropriated the tools of cognate disciplines—particularly the social sciences and statistics—in doing its work. A third contribution has been the insistence on ruthless honesty in understanding and evaluating the record in a given country or region. Church Growth has given short shrift to easy rationalizations or woolly reasoning used in

defense of time-honored but unproductive methods. Fourth, Church Growth has pioneered a new theoretical construct for the study of church growth worldwide.⁷

The movement thrived amidst these contributions. However, it also suffered the relentless attack of criticisms of perceived mistakes which could not be overcome.⁸

One of the most pervasive of these criticisms focused on the alleged emphasis of numerical growth over spiritual growth. Karl Barth noted, “A growth which is merely abstractly extensive is not [the community’s] growth as the *communio sanctorum*. Thus it can never be healthy if the Church seeks to grow only or predominantly in this horizontal sense, with a view to the greatest number of adherents.”⁹

Critics also leveled criticism that the Church Growth Movement was overly filled with methodological tricks and techniques. Many books promised if you did what they said, your church would grow. Unfortunately, they told you to do different things. This phenomenon could be attributed to the diversification of the Church Growth Movement into a number of different fields, each claiming that it had the answer if just applied appropriately.

A third criticism arose from terminology. McGavran used terms to distinguish his proposals from those of his context. In his day the term “evangelism” had become corrupted. The Madras (1938) International Missionary Council’s (IMC) use of “larger evangelism,” striking a middle ground between the conservative evangelistic emphasis of

⁷ Wilbert Shenk, quoted in Chris R. de Wet, “The Church Growth Movement—Does it Foster Churches that Challenge the World?” *Missionalia* 14 no 2 Aug 1986, p. 85-99.

⁸ McGavran himself changed his verbiage from church growth (meaning evangelism) to effective evangelism. Many of the perceived criticisms of the Church Growth Movement have been criticisms from the beginning. Regardless of whether the criticisms were true or not, they were a hindrance to the movement.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1957).

the Edinburgh Missionary Conference (1910) and the social gospel of the Jerusalem IMC (1928) changed the meaning of the word.

Evangelism had come to mean social action in the mainline world where McGavran lived. Because McGavran wanted to emphasize conversion growth, he used a term to describe adding converts to a church that causes it to grow (Church Growth). For McGavran, "Church Growth" meant "evangelism" as we understand it today, but evangelism that was birthed in a missiological setting.

However, the "Church Growth" term tended to define the movement for both its critics and its proponents. The focus became "growing a church" rather than theological, missional, or evangelistic concerns. This has led some to suggest that the greatest indicator of the inadequacy of our current church growth approach is its lack of theological depth.¹⁰ Even Aubrey Malphurs, a friend of the movement, explains that one of the "accurate criticisms of (the church growth) movement" is its overemphasis on the practical.¹¹

Van Gelder speaks prophetically to some outcomes of the CGM:

(T)he continued drift toward the development of large, independent community churches, with their focus on user-friendly, needs-oriented, market-driven models described by George Barna in *User Friendly Churches*, is in need of careful critique. While celebrating their contextual relevance, we need to be careful that we are committed in using these approaches to maintaining the integrity of both the gospel and the Christian community. These churches may just be the last version of the

¹⁰ Hunsberger, "The Newbigin Gauntlet: Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America," in *Missiology* 19, (1991) 5.

¹¹ Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker books, 1992), 27.

Christian success story within the collapsing paradigm of modernity and Christian-shaped culture.¹²

Yet, this expression of Church Growth did increase in prominence.

Denominations and churches are attracted to such methodologies. Roozen and Hadaway noted the efforts of the United Church of Christ, hardly a bastion of evangelical theological reflection, to reverse the membership decline. The UCC “enlisted the services of Lyle Schaller, the most widely read church growth consultant in North America.”¹³ These techniques have proven to produce results, so they are often seen as the solution to decline, even those without a particularly strong theological foundation.

Thus, denominations and churches flounder under the influence of “false myths” related to church growth and are unable to think missiologically in their setting.¹⁴ Roozen and Hadaway further noted that “the UCC’s continuing membership decline and the increased interest in church growth, pushed the denomination toward more conventional ‘evangelism’ programs (read membership growth).”¹⁵

Overemphasis on Church Growth “technique” does undermine solid missiological thinking. There is a great lack of theological depth in much of the contemporary Church Growth Movement because much of these are movements of technique, paradigms, and methodologies without genuine biblical and missiological

¹² Craig Van Gelder, “Defining the Center—Finding the Boundaries,” in *The Church Between Gospel & Culture*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 45.

¹³ David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway, *Church & Denominational Growth: What does (and does not) cause growth or decline* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), pages 96-97.

¹⁴ Hunsberger, “The Newbiggin Gauntlet,” 5. Also, Roozen and Hadaway illustrated other denominations’ drive for church growth methods. See their book, *Church & Denominational Growth*.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 97.

convictions. Van Gelder adeptly points out that this contemporary Church Growth “illustrates a lack of integration and coherence within the core theology and theory that is at the heart of the movement.”¹⁶ If we do not have a missional strategy driven by solid theological and ecclesiological principles, we simply perpetuate culture-driven models of church and mission.¹⁷

Though not initially evident, focus on “techniques” may be more dangerous than bondage to “tradition,” often a foil to which new techniques are compared. The church bound by tradition often recognizes and may even bemoan its condition. However, it is often powerless to change it. On the other hand, the church absorbed in applying techniques is convinced that it is missional—that its techniques are actually expressions of mission, while they are, in reality, methods that *replace* missional thinking.

Overcoming obstacles to missional thinking—such as tradition and technique—requires a teachability that is frequently absent among believers who are mired in cultural expressions of Christianity and strategies they have been convinced will “work.” Thus, the Church Growth Movement can hinder its actual goal—helping churches become more effective at reaching peoples in community. The missional church rejects the hubris of both tradition and technique, and repositions itself as people sent on mission—a people responding to the sending nature of God as expressed in Christ. That requires a new thinking. Shenk explains, “Christians living in modern culture face a fundamental

¹⁶ Craig Van Gelder, “A Gospel and Our Culture Response” in Gary McIntosh, gen. ed., *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 67.

¹⁷ Paul McKaughan, Dellana O'Brien, and William O'Brien, *Choosing a Future for U.S. Missions* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1998), 22.

challenge...to learn to think about their culture in missional terms”¹⁸ and not to imprison themselves to technique in the process.

McGavran’s original intent was to apply the principles of mission to the context of evangelistic growth. After five decades, it is remarkable how little international missionary methodology (from McGavran and others) has permeated the approaches of North American churches. They are recognized to be applicable worldwide. Why, then, have these same principles of indigenous and contextual ministry not been largely applied in North America? Perhaps the Americanization of the Church Growth Movement took the forms of church growth, but not the philosophy. It focused on method instead of missiology, thus leading to an application of a mission rather than a philosophy of mission.

Church Health.

Despite all the good the Church Growth Movement provided, its influence waned in the 1990s.¹⁹ Church leaders stopped looking to professors (most of the early writers were seminary professors) and started looking to successful pastors who had grown large churches. Soon, most pastors knew names like Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, and Steve Sjogren, and flocked to their churches for conferences. These mega-church pastors did not emphasize “church growth” but rather “church health.” They explained that healthy churches which were built around certain key values and a passion for the

¹⁸ Shenk, Wilbert R. *Write the Vision* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1995), 43.

¹⁹ McIntosh noted that the Church Growth Movement was in a transition in “Thoughts On A Movement,” *Journal of The American Society of Church Growth*, Volume 8, Winter 1997, pages 11-52.

lost would grow. Rick Warren prophesied that “the key issue for churches in the Twenty-first Century will be church health, not church growth.”²⁰ He recently spoke more approvingly, “church health is the key to church growth.”²¹

Many pastors heard these insightful mega-church leaders and simply copied their methods without reflecting on the principles behind the methods. Soon pastors across the continent were wearing Hawaiian shirts, saying “lost people matter to God,” and doing servant evangelism projects. Yet, many of the approaches used by these remarkable pastors did not work in other places.

When the approaches did work well, they usually were in communities similar to the communities of Hybels, Warren, Sjogren, et al. Many pastors have tried to grow a church similar to Saddleback Valley Community Church, and it has worked. But for many others, it has not. To be fair to our friend Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* is more a description of Saddleback than it is a study of Warren’s church health ideas. Those thoughts, including a list of what does not make a healthy purpose-driven church, appear more fully developed on his web site.²² Warren explains that it has nothing to do with being contemporary, seeker sensitive, etc. It is just that those methods, combined with some Willow Creek emphases, demonstrated a certain style (sometimes called “WillowBack”) that many pastors tried to copy in their community ... and it worked in some places but not in others.

²⁰ Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Church* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 1995), 17.

²¹ Rick Warren, www.purposedriven.com/en-US/AboutUs/WhatIsPD/PD_Articles/Church_Health.htm

²² <http://www.purposedriven.com/en-US/AboutUs/WhatIsPD/12+PD+Characteristics.htm>

Others found their influence in the most significant of all Church Health tools, Natural Church Development (NCD). Clearly, those in the Church Growth Movement were not excited about NCD, but churches were.²³ John Ellas and Flavil Yeakley wrote a strong review criticizing NCD in the *Journal of the American Society of Church Growth*, spring 1999 edition. In this review, they stated that Schwarz's writings were "fatally flawed, pseudo-scientific, and that he did not follow scientific methods."²⁴ W. M. Carroll delineated both methodological and theological concerns in his Ph.D. dissertation.²⁵

NCD is Christian Schwarz's approach to church health which he explained was based on research from over 1,000 churches in 32 countries on 5 continents. According to NCD, there is a difference between "technocratic" thinking which relies on human effort and a "biotic" or natural approach, which rediscovers God-given principles of growth and life.

Schwarz recognized that there are different models of church and these models are effective, but the models do not fit all churches. Instead, Schwarz advocated the use of eight principles for natural growth and development. These principles, or quality characteristics, are 1) Empowering leadership, 2) Gift-oriented ministry, 3) Passionate spirituality, 4) Functional structures, 5) Inspiring worship service, 6) Holistic small groups, 7) Need-oriented evangelism, and 8) Loving relationships.²⁶ Schwarz

²³ See Lois Y. Barrett, "Marks of the Faithful Church—Marks of the Successful Church: A Response to Natural Church Development from a Missiological and Ecclesiological Perspective" in *An Anabaptist Look at Natural Church Development* (Fort Wayne, IN: New Life Ministries, 1999).

²⁴ John Ellas and Flavil Yeakley, "A Review of Natural Church Development," in *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, volume 9, Spring 1999, 81-90, page 83.

²⁵ See W. M. Carroll, *A Theological and Methodological Analysis of Natural Church Development* (Louisville: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999).

observed that not all growing churches were healthy, but those churches which focused on the eight quality characteristics were healthy growing churches.²⁷

Charles Van Engen noted that “a quick glance at the ‘eight essential qualities’ that are the heart of Christian Schwarz’s Natural Church Development approach demonstrates that matters of culture and context are totally absent in this approach... with the possible exception of the seventh characteristic, these eight quality characteristics appear to be concerned almost exclusively with the internal life of a congregation.”²⁸ This criticism can be leveled at the Church Health Movement as a whole. Often by focusing on the body, they were blind to people with whom the body could not relate.

NCD, successful pastors, and the Church Health Movement in general, focus largely on ecclesiology in order to grow. By emphasizing ecclesiology, with a limited Christology and an absent missiology, the Church Health Movement stepped outside of the scriptural and theological foundation leading to blindness to the world outside the church walls. Churches which focused on church health were struggling with how they ought to “do church” in order to be healthy, not by whom and to whom they were sent.

So, while many pastors have struggled with “doing church” in their contexts, other pastors have discovered God’s unique vision for their local churches. They became missional churches where God had placed them. They broke the missional code in their

²⁶ Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996).

²⁷ Schwarz, p. 12.

²⁸ Charles Van Engen, “Centrist View: Church Growth is based on an evangelistically focused and a missiologically applied theology,” in Gary McIntosh, gen. ed., *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), page 139.

own neighborhood instead of applying proven strategies of innovative pastors around the country, instead of focusing on church growth or church health gurus.

Church Growth → Church Health → Missional Church

Pastors and other church leaders are recognizing they are each on a unique mission field—right in their own neighborhoods. They are beginning to see themselves as catalysts for the advancement of the kingdom—taking the unchanging message to their “changing context.” More leaders are embracing the idea of the missional church.

The Missional Church

The Church Growth Movement started as a missions movement. Donald McGavran was a missionary to India and learned his mission principles there, building on the missiology of Waskom Pickett and Roland Allen. McGavran summarized the foundational concepts of church growth in the language of mission:

Church growth... delves into how persons and people become genuinely Christian and revolutionize and bless the cultures and populations in the midst of which God has placed them. Church growth arises in theology and biblical faithfulness. It draws heavily on the social sciences because it always occurs in societies. It continually seeks for instances in which God has granted growth and then asks what are the real factors he has blessed to such increase.²⁹

It is remarkable how similar this definition is to the definition of missiology from Gailyn Van Rheenen at Abilene Christian University (and reformist critic of CGM) in *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies*. Van Rheenen explains,

²⁹ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), reprinted 3rd ed., revised and ed. by C. Peter Wagner, 1991, xiv.

"Missiology is made up of three interdependent disciplines: theology, the social sciences, and strategy."³⁰

Van Rheenen

"Theology"

"Social Science"

"Strategy"

McGavran

"theology and biblical faithfulness"

"social sciences"

"how persons...become genuinely Christian"

"what real factors"

Van Rheenen today explains that the "missional approach to ministry stands in obvious contrast to the traditional Church Growth perspective."³¹ If the definitions from both men are so similar, how then did this come to be? Simply put, over time, and because of our burning desire to reach the lost, we sometimes focused too much on the programs, models, and plans, and too little on missions. We created evangelism strategies based on church growth principles, but failed in engagement as missional churches. Tim Keller explained:

Some churches certainly did 'evangelism' as one ministry among many. But the church in the West had not become completely '*missional*'—adapting and reformulating absolutely everything it did in worship, discipleship, community, and service—so as to be engaged with the non-Christian society around it. It had not developed a 'missiology of western culture' the way it had done so for other non-believing cultures.³²

Our churches struggle with being evangelistically effective because they are locked into a self-affirming subculture while the larger culture continues to move in other directions. The cultural distance between our churches and the culture continues to widen. This chasm of cultural understanding makes it increasingly difficult for our "church

³⁰ Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 137.

³¹ <http://www.missiology.org/mmr/mmr34.htm>

³² Tim Keller, "The Missional Church," Article online, June 2001, 1.

culture” to relate to “prevailing culture” even with the techniques of the Church Growth Movement. Without intentionality, churches become less contextual, less indigenous, and less evangelistically effective over time.³³ Thus, more methods and strategies that churches “must” do to “grow,” become less helpful over time.

The Church Growth Movement served the church for several decades, and we should be grateful. But, in this new millennium, we need a reemphasis on the missional beginning of the CGM. McGavran was right, but for many we have lost the fullness of what participating in God’s mission would involve.

To be fair, it seems to be a reality of life that every few decades, church leaders find it necessary to disavow tools of the past as irrelevant to today. Perhaps the Church Growth Movement has suffered the fate of age—new generations think they cannot learn from those that come before. That may be part of the story, but it is not the whole story. Church Growth and Church Health were incomplete expressions of the church and mission.

The missional church, or whatever term eventually emerges, is not just another phase of church life but a full expression of *who* the church is and *what* it is called to be and do. The missional church builds upon the ideas of Church Growth and Church Health but brings the lessons learned from each into a full-blown missions focus—within their local mission field as well as the ends of the earth. To be missional means to move beyond our church preferences and make missional decisions locally as well as globally.

³³ Stetzer, “The Missional Nature of the Church and the Future of Southern Baptist Convention Churches” Presented to the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry conference, “The Mission of Today’s Church,” New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, February 12, 2005.

Today we desperately need persons, churches, and denominations to apply the lens of missiology to the North American context, not just to international fields.

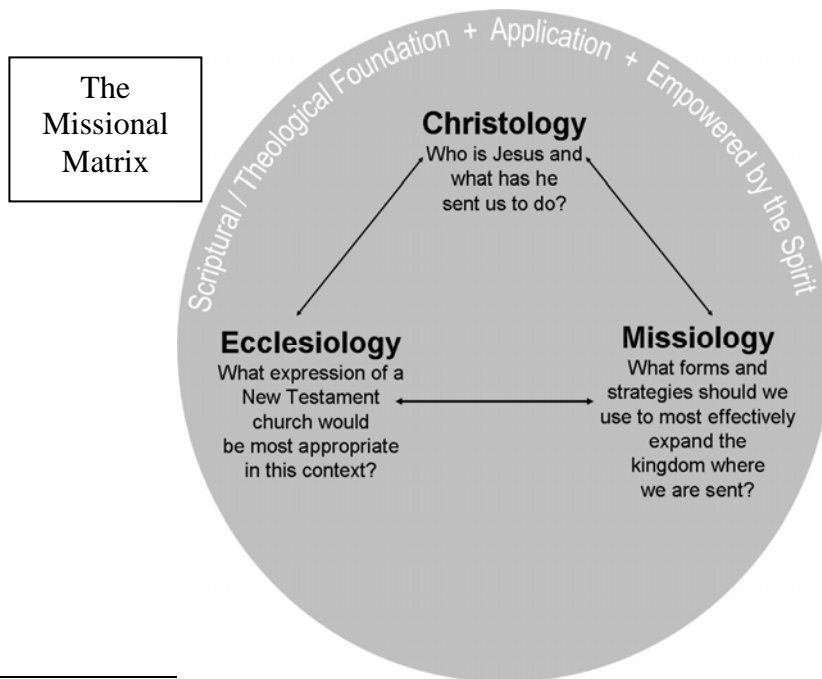
There are many leaders who call themselves missional whose focus is on condemning Church Growth and Church Health. Such an attitude is hardly kingdom mentality. The reality is that each of these movements was blessed by God to help the church care about reaching the lost (Church Growth) and become a holistic body (Church Health). The Missional Church builds on these things; it does not need to tear them down. Instead, a missiological, discerning application of the eternal principles from each movement can and does help the missional church.

Missiology is the discipline that founded the Church Growth Movement. Yet, missiology is birthed from our understanding about who Jesus is and what he sends us to do. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so send I you” (John 20:21). Thus, who Christ is and how he is sent matters. How we do mission flows from our understanding of the mission of God and thus directs our missiology. Finally, how we do church is grounded in scripture but applied in culture. Thus, we have the intersection of Christology, Missiology, and Ecclesiology. All of these flow from and must be based on scripture—and scripture has much to say on each topic. For us to think we can make up new paradigms without consulting the scripture would be odd indeed.

There are some obvious teachings about who Christ is and about the mission that he gives us. Both of these are most clearly birthed from the scriptures. However, ecclesiology and ministry are not simply a result of missional thinking. The Bible has much to say (and mandate) about church and ministry (see *Perimeters of Light: Biblical Boundaries for the Emerging Church*). Missiology impacts how these things are

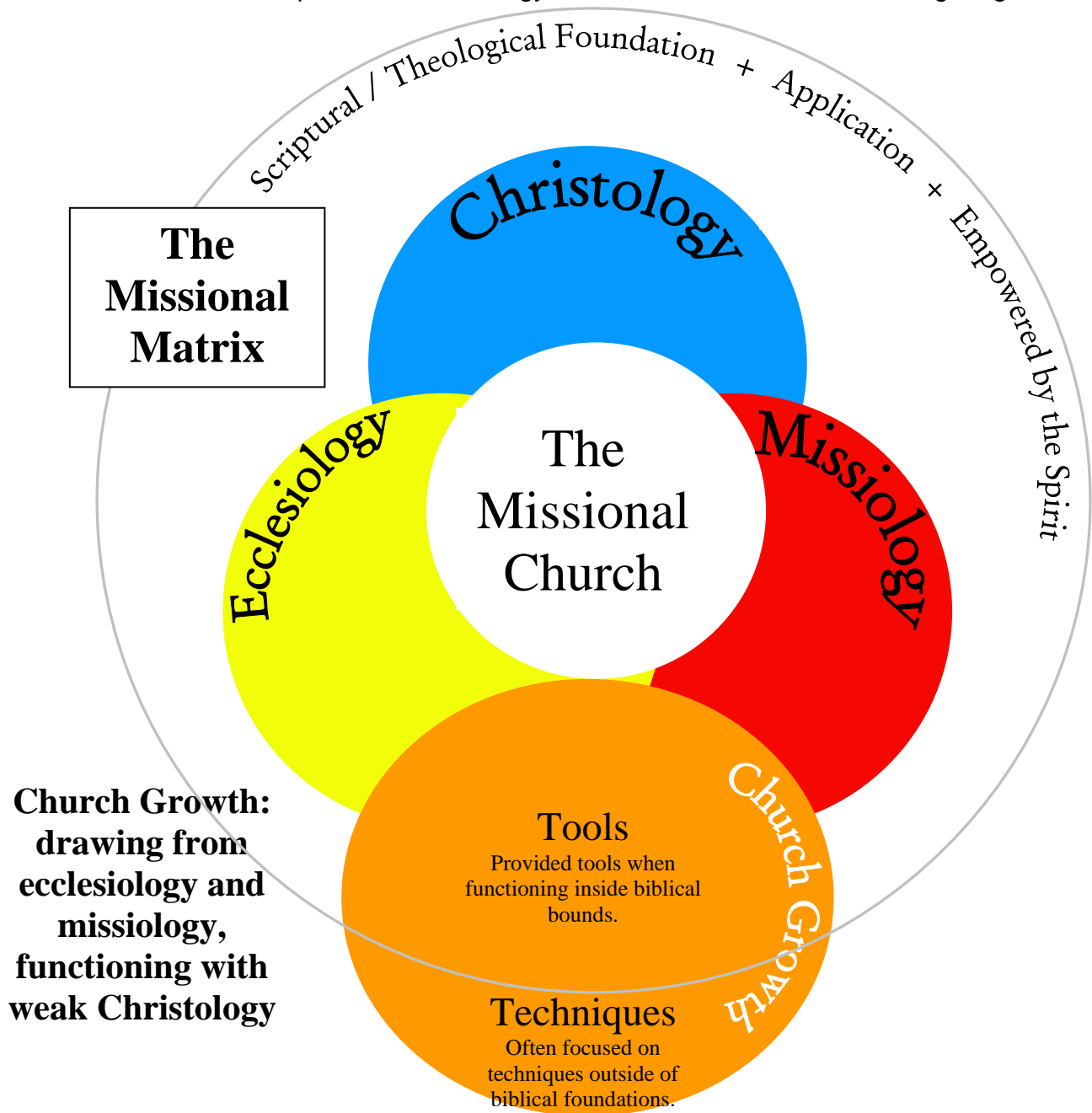
done, but the Bible requires that certain things should be done. Ecclesiology (and thus Church Growth) is not a blank slate to draw out of the cultural situation. The Bible tells us that certain things need to exist for a biblical church to exist. Certainly, *how* we do some of those things is determined by the context, but *that* we do is determined by the scriptures.

The following diagram entitled “The Missional Matrix” may help explain the interaction of Christology, missiology, ecclesiology.³⁴ The shaded circle illustrates the necessity of the scriptural and theological foundation and its Holy Spirit enabled application. Missional churches must begin and end with a solid foundation of rightly understood biblical theology. Only within this circle should Christology, ecclesiology and missiology interact. Otherwise the church would be unbalanced and outside the bounds of scripture.



³⁴ My thinking here is influenced by Frost and Hirsch's *The Shaping of Things to Come*, an excellent book seeking to apply missiological principles in a western context. Although I see the process as more of an interaction than a progression, they challenged us to think missionally with a theological foundation of Christology, missiology, and ecclesiology. Van Rhee's "Missional Helix" (<http://missiology.org/mmr/mmr25.htm>) helped us to see the process as an ongoing conversation and interaction of theological disciplines. Hence, the idea is a Missional Matrix: engaging all three theological disciplines in conversation and interaction. Alan tells me he has moved in a similar direction himself

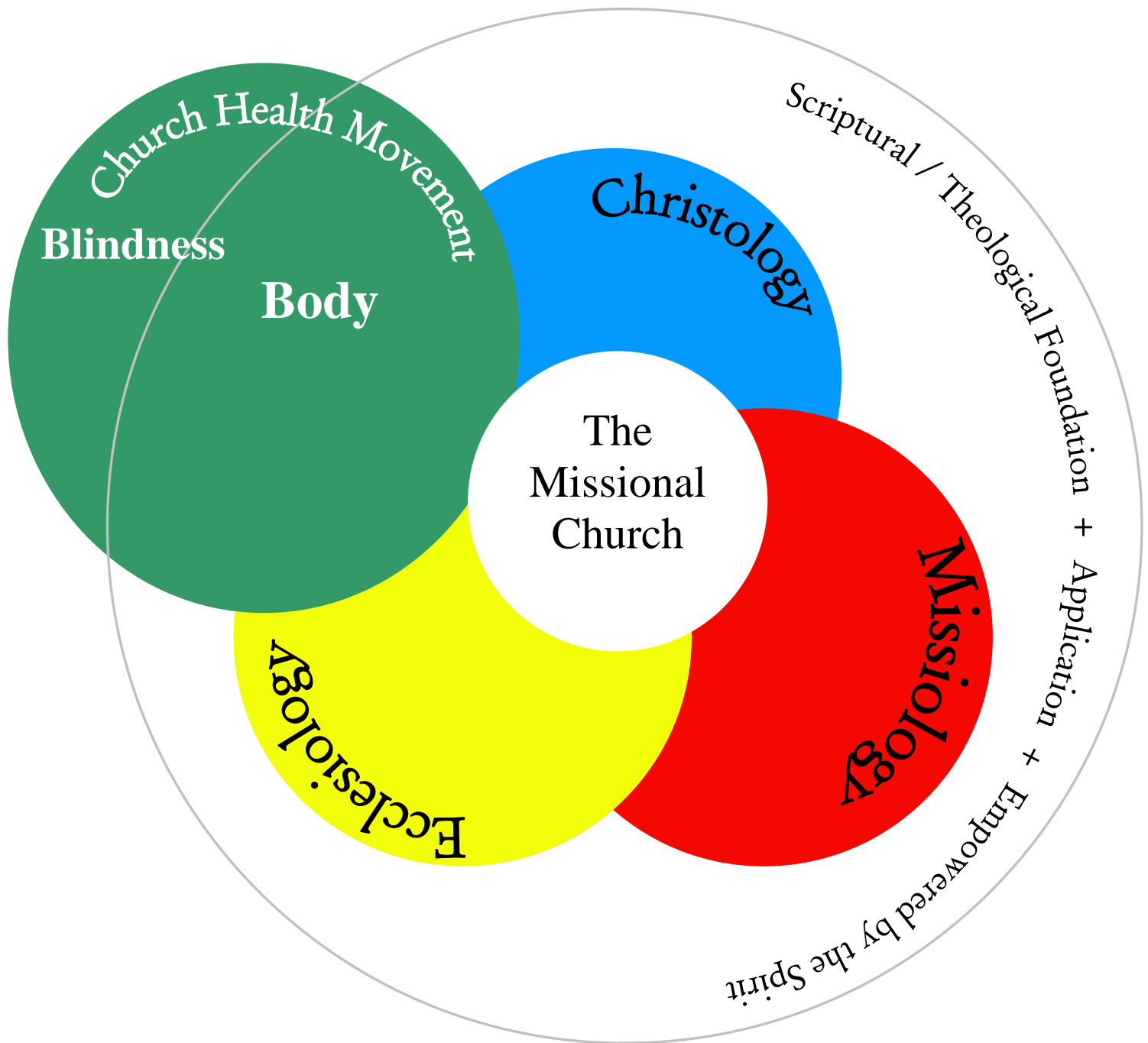
The Church Growth Movement, most critics and friends would agree, de-evolved into a church methods focus, many times without a foundation in scriptural truth. Thus, it strayed slightly outside of scriptural foundation and application. It touched on missiology, but often uncritically, without a proper understanding of anthropology, history, and mission dependency issues. Finally, it was weakest in understanding the nature of the Church as an extension of Christology. The result was an anthropocentric emphasis on tools and techniques, or methodology. This is illustrated in the following diagram.



Thus, when the Church Growth Movement returns to its missional roots, it leads to a different approach. The Church Growth Movement moves from primarily focusing on ecclesiological/missiological evangelistic methods, and provides a theological and missional balance, all derived from the teaching of scripture and empowered by the Spirit.

Rather than providing methods to grow a church, it helps the church leader to wrestle through who God has called him or her to reach. Missional leaders bring the gospel into a context by asking the question, “What cultural containers—church, worship style, small group ministry—will be most effective in this context?” That is a missional appropriate strategy that would be well received by McGavran. When taking such an approach, the Church Growth Movement returns to a better foundation and is provider of principles and “applications of principles” in individual context. It is a more humble movement, but also a more biblical one.

As much as the Church Growth Movement was anthropocentrically focused, the Church Health Movement was church/body focused. This movement centered on how the church body was related to Christ, and what was the best form of ecclesiology in order for the church to be healthy. As mentioned before, this inward focus resulted in blindness to the community, blindness to other races, and blindness to other approaches. This approach is illustrated in the diagram below.



Of course, an emphasis on missiology and Christology without a proper emphasis on ecclesiology leads to a focus on being sent to the culture without an understanding of

biblical foundations and ecclesiological structures. When the church steps out of the scriptural and theological bounds in this situation, the result is syncretism.

This new approach has not yet been noticed by many in the evangelical church, but George Barna will heighten awareness with the publication of his recent book, *Revolution*. In one chart, he describes the transition to churchless Christianity, much like that we have already seen in some international fields. Barna reports and predicts:

Primary Means of Spiritual Experience and Expression

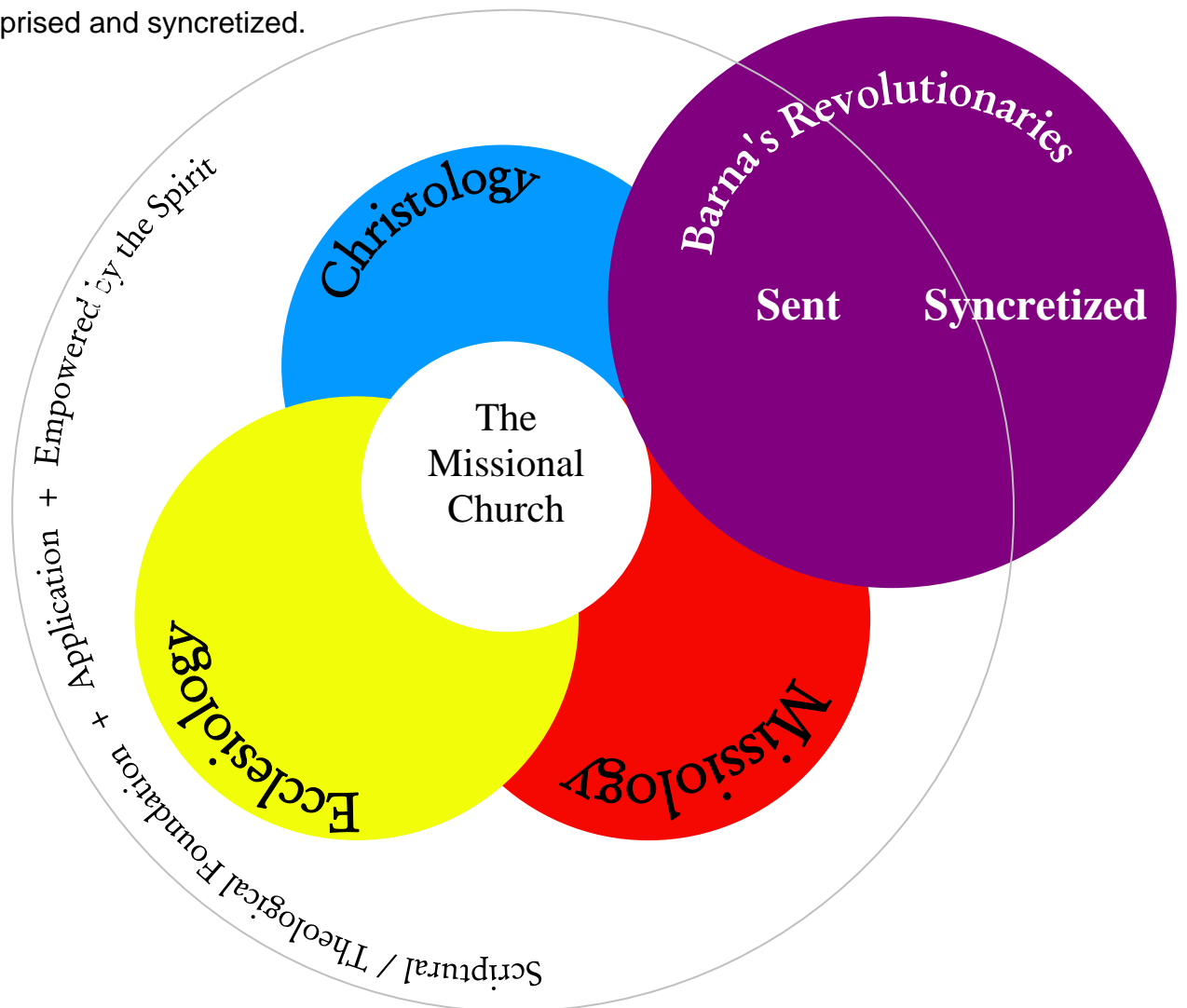
	<u>Local Church</u>	<u>Alternative Faith Based Community</u>	<u>Family</u>	<u>Media/Arts/Culture</u>
2000	70%	5%	5%	20%
2025	30-35%	5%	30-35%	30-35%

Barna did not interact with the existing literature of the movement, including significant works like *The Shaping of Things to Come* and *The Way of Jesus*, among many others. This “missional / incarnational” approach embraces strong Christology and (at times) thoughtful missiology. However, Barna (at least in the book), his revolutionaries, and the missional / incarnational movement frequently express an undeveloped (or perhaps more accurately, reactionary) ecclesiology. Barna is not advocating everything that every revolutionary does, but he is reporting an important trend. When I asked him more specifically about his understanding of church, he emailed me:

Am I defining mere relationships as “church”? No. As you know, the Greek word *ecclesia*, from which we derive the English term church, is not clear to scholars but most of them agree that it generally has to do with the gathering of called out people. So my notion of “being the church” requires that you be not only engaged in such passionate endeavors but that you also be connected to other believers

in some type of faith-oriented, regular meeting for the purposes of emulating and honoring Christ-like. Christianity is not an isolationist experience; it is covenantal and communal.³⁵

Barna indicates a clearer understanding of what a church *is* in this email than he does in the book. He indicated to me that the purpose of the book was not to define a church but to celebrate a revolution. However, it appears to me that Barna's revolutionaries are often so focused on being sent to people in culture, that they have forgotten the church. In the process, they get too connect to culture and are soon comprised and syncretized.



³⁵ Email from George Barna to Ed Stetzer, December 19, 2005.

To successfully navigate the changing of our culture, address the decline of the North American church, and provide for more theologically grounded practice, a new course is needed. I believe that new course was well expressed in McGavran's original vision, but has often been lost in the CGM. Thus, my modest proposal is a return to the missiological approaches of McGavran, what is often called the "missional" approach today.

Transitions to Missional Ministry

The crux of the problem now facing North America is this:

In more homogeneous, traditional societies a message can be conveyed using concepts and language that are relevant to everybody. This is not the case in multiethnic and socially stratified urban societies impacted by modernity and postmodernity, where there is increasing differentiation and fragmentation. Society is splintered into a complex range of groups that collide with one another and reconfigure like the colored glass shapes in a kaleidoscope.³⁶

Church Growth, as it evolved in North America, more suitably provides models for homogenous societies. Such was not the vision of McGavran. The future will look a lot like today—only more so. Thus, if the Church Growth Movement does not return to its missional roots, it will be less effective over time. Several shifts are beginning to take place in the lives and practices of missional churches that the Church Growth Movement can and should embrace.³⁷

³⁶ Gibbs, Eddie, *ChurchNext* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), page 39.

³⁷ These are four of ten shifts from my forthcoming book, *Breaking the Missional Code*.

From programs to processes

Books in the 1980s and 1990s explained that growing churches used telemarketing, revivals, direct mail, and Friend Days as their means of strategic outreach. Examples of this would be George Barna's (now, I assume, recanted) belief that "developing a marketing orientation is precisely what the Church needs to do if we are to make a difference in the spiritual health of this nation for the remainder of this century."³⁸

Yet, many leaders found that the most important task for growth was not to present the newest program or idea but seek to understand the people they were called to reach and develop processes to reach them. Some of these tools were helpful, but only tools *that would work among the people God had called us to reach*. (Unfortunately, very few writers said this—they usually said, "This is based on research, and if you do it, your church will grow." But, they had not been to every community.)

For example, most church leaders have heard on many occasions the promise that, "If you do this, X percent of the people will come to your church." Win Arn wrote, "when the intuition ratios are applied, churches consistently experience increased effectiveness and growth."³⁹ The reality is after consulting and working with hundreds of churches, church growth seems to never work the same in two places. Instead, churches are recognizing that they need certain processes to help them

³⁸ George Barna, *Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You About Church Growth* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988), page 12.

³⁹ Win Arn, *The Church Growth Ratio Book: How to have a Revitalized, Healthy, Growing, Loving Church* (Monrovia, CA: Church Growth, Inc., 1990), page 6.

accomplish their purposes. Those processes are universal, the purposes are universal, but the plan to accomplish them varies from place to place.

A church that implements processes recognizes that the local congregation should function just like a human body (1 Cor. 12:12-20). Every part is influenced by every other part. The “body” of Christ is one unit that operates through a series of systems. Program orientation assumes the health of the overall system and does not see the various programs as interactive and interdependent.

From demographics to discernment

In the 1980s, Elmer Towns launched one of the most popular church focused seminars to date. “How to Reach the Baby Boomer” was one of the most influential seminars in the history of Church Growth. He was on to something—most Baby Boomers had similar values and could be reached by similar strategies.

Today, the generational demographic approach is no longer helpful. Few writers are publishing on GenX, Millennial, or netGen. The common characteristics of white, middle-class Baby Boomers are quaint memories in the new millennium. Some have tried to create the next “How To Reach the Baby Boomer,” but it will not work—the growing diversity of our society is resistant to demographic stereotyping. Labels like GenX and Millennial have fallen into disfavor because they have lost their meaning. Demographics are not the answer. Instead, we need to decipher the individual communities to which God has sent us.

People are not asking, “How can I reach the typical GenXer?” Pastors are spending less time reading about the unchurched in North America as a way to find

generic solutions to reach people in their context. *They are spending more time asking why the people in their community have not yet responded.* Like Jesus, they are spending time getting to know and evangelizing lost people, not just looking for the next anointed style, program or method. They are deciphering their communities and bringing the unchanging gospel to each community. Church growth tools of the future will be less focused on methods to reach people and more focused on tools to understand a community in order to develop strategies to reach people in culture.

From models to missions

Every time I read a book or heard a message from a “church health” pastor (particularly those mentioned earlier), he would warn—“Don’t copy me. You are not in [my community].” I did not listen very well. As I look around me, I see that lots of other pastors did not listen very well either. As clones of successful mega-churches popped up across the continent, the temptation was too great. Just as pastors uncritically applied the tools of the Church Growth Movement, they unthinkingly applied the strategies of the Church Health Movement. Unfortunately, it did not work in most places.

Now, instead of importing one-size-fits-all styles and models, more pastors are genuinely asking the same questions raised by international missionaries:

- What style of worship/music will best help this group to worship in spirit and truth?
- What evangelism methods should I use here to reach the most people without compromising the gospel?

- What structure of church will best connect with this community?
- How can *this* church be God's missionary to *this* community?

If we simply replace the Church Growth Movement with a rush to copy innovative pastors, we will fail to engage effectively with the lost in our community. God did not call your church to reach Southern California, so it should not look like Saddleback or Mosaic. Instead, every church needs to ask what God is calling them to be and do.

From uniformity to diversity

If you wanted to grow your church fifteen years ago, you had to be seeker-sensitive. Other pastors might look down on you—you must not love the lost if you were not seeker driven. Kimon Sargeant recently wrote that “Willow Creek’s format is a model for evangelical churches both across the country and internationally.”⁴⁰ Sargeant’s book basically suggested that the Willow Creek, seeker-driven approach was a new reformation.⁴¹ Now, as the seeker phase is passing, it seems that if you are not an emerging church, you must not be serious about reaching the lost or engaging in culture. Fifty years ago, it was Sunday School. In the 1970s, it was bus ministry. It’s hard to keep up.

Today, people are realizing that God is using many different kinds of methods and models to reach different kinds of people. Yes, it is even OK to be traditional—as long as God is using your church to reach its community effectively.

⁴⁰ Kimon H. Sargeant, *Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), Page 20.

⁴¹ Sargeant, pages 15-35.

Every one of the models listed above is just a model. Models are tools, and too often tools became rules—rules for success.

Missional churches look different from community to community. If churches are faithfully proclaiming the word and reaching their communities, we should celebrate them, whatever they look like. The answer is not to make all churches look alike and to use the same techniques. The answer is to have everyone seeking the same thing: to glorify God by being an indigenous expression of church life where they are.

Conclusion

Though the term is new in evangelical circles (though not conciliar), the “missional church” is not a new concept. It is the contemporary expression of Christ’s original concept of the Great Commission. Furthermore, the Missional Church is not a replacement of McGavran’s Church Growth principles. As we continue to strive toward McGavran’s goal of “discipling of *panta ta ethne* (all peoples) to the end that rivers of water of eternal and abundant life flow fast and free, to every tongue and tribe and people in all the earth,”⁴² we must blend the lessons from Church Growth and Church Health into a full-blown missiology for North America. We must be missional and move beyond our church preferences and make missional decisions locally as well as globally. That is a return to the original emphasis of McGavran.

This will require Christians, churches, and denominations to examine their theology, ecclesiology, and motives for ministry. Upon examination, transitions must

⁴² Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, xv.

be made in order to align ourselves with God's will. Only then, as missional churches, will we see healthy church growth. The future of the Church Growth Movement can and should look more like its past.

In *Bridges of God*, McGavran explained, "a new age is upon us. A new pattern is demanded. A new pattern is at hand, which, while new, is as old as the Church itself. It is a God-designed pattern by which not ones but thousands will acknowledge Christ as Lord, and grow into full discipleship as people after people, clan after clan, tribe after tribe and community after community are claimed for and nurtured in the Christian faith."⁴³

The future of the Church Growth Movement will not be decided solely by those who gather in a meeting such as the ASCG annual meeting. Church Growth as a "movement" is much larger than the member of the ASCG and those that attend her meetings. However, the organization can and should make intentional effort to identify more fully with the Christological, Missional, and Ecclesiological elements of its vision, leading to a clearer embrace of the missional mandate handed down from Donald McGavran in the *Bridges of God*.

⁴³ Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955, revised ed. 1981), 68.

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