The Reformist View of Church Growth
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Source: *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views*, edited by Gary L. McIntosh (Zondervan 2004)

"As we move into a new century, I share the conviction that we need to reposition ourselves and to work once again on the agenda"
Steuernagel (2000, 127)

Personal Church Growth Influences

I am deeply indebted to Donald McGavran and the Church Growth perspective. Donald McGavran was a personal, though distant, mentor. Throughout our years in Africa he read our mission reports and occasionally sent personal replies and suggestions. I have always felt that his affinity stemmed from sharing a common heritage in the Restoration Movement¹ and his intense desire to see churches grow among all peoples of the earth.

As our team saw local church leaders maturing, and therefore, contemplated phasing out of our work, he wrote, "Your ministry has demonstrated such receptivity that it is not time to retreat but to amplify forces. Instead of pulling missionaries out, you should amplify forces to win the winnable while they are winnable" (McGavran 1985). His message not only demonstrated his personal concern for us but also his urgency for growth as the major criterion for missions effectiveness.

As field missionaries, our mission team operated out of the Church Growth paradigm. We chose to minister to the Kipsigis because of their receptivity to the gospel at that particular time. We learned their language and deciphered their culture. We believed in contextualizing God's eternal message in ways that the local people could understand. We sought harvest by planting numerous local churches. We refused to create Western institutions, trusting McGavran’s perception they would likely become Western enclaves of control and that overseeing them would preempt direct evangelism and church planting. We set individual and group goals for planting new churches, nurturing these churches through various stages to maturity, and training leaders to serve in these churches. We were the children of Church Growth and measured ourselves according to growth standards.

A number of factors, however, mitigated an extreme pragmatic Church Growth approach. Our mission team rejected many of the sectarian excesses of the Restoration heritage. We, however, upheld its love for textual studies by focusing our ministry on gospel proclamation and biblical training of new Christians. We believed that God's work in the death, burial, and resurrection of his incarnate Son was the core of the gospel. We further held that, for people to hear the gospel and grow to Christian maturity, this message should be conveyed narratively within the broad context of the biblical story. Once churches were planted through gospel proclamation, Christians were systematically nurtured through stages of maturity, which focused on teaching local leaders how to read
the biblical text and theologically reflect upon their cultural context. This focus on biblical teaching continues when the church gathers for Sunday worship and mid-week meetings, in congregationally-based courses for church leaders, and in a Bible school overseen and managed by local church leaders. Throughout the years Kipsigis Christians were acknowledged as "people of the book" or as "textual teachers."

Our team publication, the *Kipsigis Kommunique*, which engaged the issues of communicating the Gospel in this specific contemporary context, was read by many. As a team, we also began the journal *Missionary Anthropology*, patterned after the old *Practical Anthropology*, and renamed *The Journal of Applied Missiology*, edited by Dr. Ed Mathews, when two of our team taught and ministered at Abilene Christian University.

Over the years, however, I grew increasingly skeptical of Church Growth perspectives. Anthropology was given more consideration than theology. The emphasis was on conversion rather than making disciples. Therefore, missions was primarily evaluated by the number of converts and churches established rather than by the developing maturity of the body of Christ. I have come to agree with Steuernagel's statement at the Iguassu Missiological Consultation that "we need to reposition ourselves and to work once again on the agenda" (2000, 127).

This repositioning, however, must be done with love and respect. In studying manuscripts for this chapter I was surprised and perturbed by the reciprocal mistrust of Church Growth proponents, who tended to be practitioners, and detractors, who typically were theologians. At times the opponents unmercifully indict the proponents' theological naivete without fully understanding the historical contexts in which the movement was conceived. The detractors may not have read the primary sources of Church Growth literature. They may at times drastically overstate the case. For example, one missiologist describes Church Growth as "a conscience-smoothing Jesus, with an unscandalous cross, an other worldly kingdom, a private, inwardly limited spirit, a pocket God, a spiritualized Bible, and an escapist church. Its goal is a happy, comfortable, and successful life, obtainable through the forgiveness of an abstract sinfulness by faith in an unhistorical Christ" (Costas 1982, 80). Too frequently this skepticism toward Church Growth has led to the negation of Missiology as a discipline. Missiology, according to these critics, is merely a study of tactics and strategy, not a discipline rooted in theological reflection.

Church Growth adherents, on the other hand, feel that a traditional seminary education provides foundations for Christian ministry but does not offer "assistance with such daily challenges as winning people to Christ, assimilating newcomers, dealing with power families, initiating change, and a host of other matters. . . ." According to this perspective, "Church growth theory and theology, rightly understood, still provide the best answer to growing a faithful church--even in the twenty-first century" (McIntosh 2002, 59).
Church Growth proponents believe that many opponents have little experience in Christian ministry. Few of the detractors have experienced the feelings of the poor who are intimidated by the rich or ethnic groups who have a heritage of distrust for one another. If they had these experiences, they would understand the need to proclaim the gospel in each specific ethnic group in a way that these particular people might clearly hear its message. As McGavran has said, people do come to Christ, almost without exception, without crossing social or cultural boundaries. Unbelievers cannot fully understand that that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for [we] are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28) before they become Christians but discover this truth in the church as they grow in Christ. Without "people group" thinking there is little evangelism.

Detractors and proponents, however, agree on one thing: Church Growth "both infuriates and inspires," but discussion of it "has never been boring!" (Guder 1994, 147).

This chapter enumerates both strengths and limitations of the Church Growth model and then calls for a new integrated missional model that supercedes the church growth and theological paradigms of the past.

**Strengths of the Church Growth Paradigm**

Although I have some reservations about Church Growth perspectives, I recognize some significant strengths.

**A Focus on Personal Ministry**

McGavran's Church Growth perspectives were formed while ministering from 1923-1955 within the context of India, where colonial missionaries felt the need to not only Christianize but also civilize. Mission compounds were established as enclaves of the new civilization. Replicating the Western culture with which they were familiar and developing Christian ministries in these Western enclaves provided a sense of security for missionaries with little preparation for significant cultural adaptation. The new convert, however, was separated from his family and friends, acculturated within the new "Christian" culture, and Westernized in the process. "The effect of this policy," according to Newbigin, was "two-fold. On the one hand the convert, having been transplanted into an alien culture, [was] no longer in a position to influence non-Christian relatives and neighbors; on the other hand the energies of the mission [were] exhausted in the effort to bring the converts, or more often their children, into conformity with the standards supposed by the missionaries to be required by the gospel." (Newbigin 1978, 122). From McGavran's perspective, both the acculturation of local people in a Western compound and the focus on perfecting rather than discipling "have the effect of stopping the growth of the church. Schools, colleges, hospitals, and programs for social action multiply, but the church does not" (Newbigin 1978, 122).

Within this context McGavran challenged the missions community to shift from maintenance to ministry. He believed that the missions stations should be given to
national church leaders to control and maintain. Missionaries should focus on evangelizing the lost and incorporating them into local churches. These missionaries (and the national leaders they train) should look upon themselves as identificational, incarnational ministers. The end result of this thinking was a massive repositioning of personnel and resources into personalized forms of direct evangelism and church planting.

McGavran's call to change from maintenance to ministry has had a significant impact on both domestic ministers and cross-cultural missionaries. Christian evangelists were challenged to minister personally rather than indirectly through institutions. They were encouraged to humbly follow the example of the divine One of God who became flesh and tabernacled among us (John 1:14)—touching the untouchable, loving the unloved, redirecting stray sheep. McGavran rightly challenged God's servants to empathetically enter into culture and minister directly with the people.

**The Missionary Nature of the Church**

In his distinctively strident way McGavran placed the mission of the church on the theological agenda. Even before the word was coined he spoke against the Christendom model, rooted in a Constantinian heritage, which was not repudiated by early Protestantism. Under Christendom all people were considered Christians from birth, negating missions in the life of the church for many centuries. McGavran has been a catalyst in the Christian movement, helping the church realize that, to be faithful, it must participate in world mission.

McGavran assigned his students in *Theology for Missions Today* the task of analyzing the creedal foundations of their denominations and describing the content according to scripture's missionary mandate. The introduction to the assignment reads as follows:

Let me sum up very briefly what I shall be saying for several days in many different ways and what you will be working on, each in his own way, for several days. I set before you four propositions.

1. Most of the current creeds, both written and unwritten, were framed during the centuries when the Protestant churches were sealed off from the non-Christian world and were almost completely non-missionary.
2. Most doctrines are deficient in the missionary dimension. They were formulated for existing Christians against the errors and mistakes of other Christians. They were not formulated under the impulsion of the Great Commission. This has greatly hindered the spread of the Gospel.
3. Since the Great Commission is an integral part of the Bible and is a central strand in God's revelation and Christ's atoning death, this also means that many doctrines are not as biblical as they might be.
4. Christians (theologians, missionaries, ministers and others) do well when they seek to make each doctrine biblically more true and missionarily more adequate. Each doctrine should drive Christians and churches out to the evangelization of the three billion.
The students were then given the rigorous task of analyzing the particular creeds of their denominations and "make them more biblical and more missionarily adequate" (Glasser 1976, 24). The exercise was quite revealing. His students soon discovered that a missional identity was absent from most of their heritages (Glasser 1976, 25).

McGavran asserted that the priority of the church is not to care for itself but to become God's ministers to the ethne of the world. Churches become selfish and self-satisfied, preoccupied with themselves rather than with reaching the lost with the gospel. This "introverted churchism" (Glasser 1976, 24) was a theme running throughout his writings and lectures.

**Emphasis on Pioneer Evangelism**

As we have already discussed, the Church Growth movement helped the church and the missionary movement focus on pioneer evangelism and prioritize the needs of unreivated sectors of the world. This emphasis was reflected in two movements, one centered around McGavran's perspective of receptivity and the other around Ralph Winter's view on unreached peoples.

To McGavran, the world was not static, but dynamic. He, therefore, perceived that the receptivity of people to the gospel message is always changing. Sometimes the hearing of the gospel creates no response. It appears that people feel no need for the gospel. At other times the message hits home in a society crying over problems and overwhelmed by fears. Within a short time a large number of people joyfully seek the Lord in baptism, organize vibrant fellowships, and revitalize their society around the message of Jesus Christ. McGavran specifically describes examples of varying receptivity, factors causing fluctuation of receptivity, and the practical ramification of this principle for mission policy (McGavan 1970, 216-32). He felt that the ultimate source of receptivity is the mighty acts of God working through the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin. Fields not bearing fruit should be held lightly until signs of a possible harvest are evident. When such signs become evident, workers should be called into the harvest in concentrated numbers to reap the harvest (McGavran 1970, 230).

Ralph Winter, sometimes called the "father of frontier missions," inspired the Evangelical missionary movement to prioritize the unreached people of the world. Unreached people, according to the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, do not have an "indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize this people group without requiring outside assistance" (Efta 1994, 28). In recent years the focus has shifted from receptive to unreached people, especially those of the 10/40 Window, a slice of the world stretching from North Africa through the Middle East to China and Japan.
Although the perspectives of receptivity and unreachedness have been and still are debated, one fact is undeniable: The discussions have led mission leaders, agencies, and local churches to focus on pioneer evangelism.

**Incisive Evaluation**

An important element of Church Growth, borrowed from the Enlightenment, is incisive critique. As William Abraham suggests, within the movement there is an "aggressive, iconoclastic spirit that is determined to get at the facts." He rightly states that "we surely need to know not only where the church is growing and declining but why it is doing so" (1989, 75). Leslie Newbigin, while acknowledging that "the [biblical] emphasis falls upon the faithfulness of the disciples rather than their numbers" (1995, 125), also writes, "McGavran is . . . right to press upon us the question, Why is there not more concern for the multiplication of believers and more evidence of its happening" (Newbigin 1978, 142; cf. Guder, 147).

Those studying the church should not be frightened of by the use of the social sciences but only its misuse. Truth can be discovered in many forms and in many disciplines. In a very real sense missionaries should be primarily practical theologians but also anthropologists. They should exegete not only the text but also the context.

Church Growth analysts, although vastly overstating the value of numbering, have through comparative evaluation led to wide-ranging discussions of modern missionary strategy.

**Limitations of the Church Growth Paradigm**

Church Growth thinking has significant strengths and benefits, but its limitations must also be acknowledged.

In the July 1989 issue of *Missiology* McGavran spoke of a lion that was devouring the evangelical missionary movement. He identified this lion as the social gospel, "the idea that mission (missiology) is primarily helping those great groupings of humankind who are less fortunate than we are" (1989, 339). I would, however, propose that an even greater lion threatens the missionary movement. That lion is pragmatism, segmented from biblical theology, which drives the agenda of the church. This pragmatism is described under the following headings.

**Anthropocentric Focus**

Unintentionally Church Growth practitioners developed a missionary model conducive to the spirit of their age. Assuming that they could chart their way to success by their ingenuity and creativity, they focused on what humans do in missions rather than on what God is doing. Their beginning point was humanity rather than divinity. They saw the
missional task as merely setting goals, developing appropriate methodologies, and evaluating what does or does not work rather than seeking God's will based upon biblical and theological reflection. Although they advocated faithfulness to God, the system they proposed was based on human intelligence and ingenuity with little reference to God and the nature of the gospel. McGavran and his protegees (myself included) are thus children of Modernity.

For example, McGavran's *Understanding Church Growth*, described as Church Growth's statement of "maturity and reflection" (Rainer 1993, 5), is a wonderfully pragmatic book. This epoch treatise, however, does not present an integrative theology to form its beginning presuppositions, except that God desires the church to grow (to be discussed later in this section). Scripture is occasionally used but only to give validity to some methodology or anthropological construct. Harvest theology, for example, illustrates the need to focus on receptive people.

In multi-cultural contexts the competition for members and drive for numerical success has resulted in a consumer mentality. Missionaries and ministers have sought to market the gospel like any other product and present it in a culturally appealing way. In this way a Western consumer mentality, rather than biblical theology, has set the agenda of the missional endeavor.

Analyzing Church Growth in view of epistemological sources, i.e., how knowledge is framed within the human mind, reveals an interesting cognitive mix. Of the two traditional internal sources of knowledge, logic and intuition, Church Growth focuses on human logic. Of the two external sources, observation and authority, Church Growth paradoxically focuses more on observation. Church Growth, like Modernism, is based primarily on the use of human logic and observation. Paradoxically, the Bible, the Christian source of authority, is secondary. How we consciously and unconsciously prioritize and systematize our sources of knowledge at the most basic level will ultimately form our Christian message and the nature of missions and evangelism.

This emphasis on logic and observation can be illustrated by the nature of Church Growth research. The methodology of social research seeks to pattern the observation of respondents and systemize these observations in logically coherent ways. This research helps the Church Growth practitioner to determine what people desire from a church, how people hear the gospel, and who is receptive reflect logic and observation. The research focuses almost exclusively on the social context.

Social research, while beneficial in understanding human culture, is not the foundation of Missiology. All missiological decisions must be rooted, either implicitly or explicitly, in theology so that they mirror the purposes and mind of God. Too frequently missions practitioners take the theological foundation of missions for granted. Paul Hiebert writes:

*Too often we choose a few themes and from there build a simplistic theology rather than look at the profound theological motifs that flow through the whole of Scripture. Equally disturbing to the foundations of mission is the dangerous*
potential of shifting from God and his work to the emphasis of what we can do for
God by our own knowledge and efforts. We become captive to a modern secular
worldview in which human control and technique replace divine leading and
human obedience as the basis of mission (1993, 4).

Hesselgrave's analysis of the thematic content of book reviews and articles published in
major missions journals (Missiology, International Review of Missions, and Evangelical
Missions Quarterly) confirmed this absence of theological foundations in contemporary
missiology. Concluding that missiology gives more attention to the social sciences and
history than to theology (1988, 139-44), he asks, “Of what lasting significance is the
evangelical commitment to the authority of the Bible if biblical teachings do not
explicitly inform our missiology?” (1988, 142). Without theological foundations
missions quickly becomes merely another human endeavor.

The Segmentation of Theology and Praxis

An anthropocentric approach is by its very nature pragmatic. The pragmatist asks
functional questions concerning success or goal fulfillment, like "Does this work?" or
"Will this help the church to grow?" Such questions, void of theological reflection,
create a dichotomy between strategy and theology. The role of theology is to provide the
message of mission; strategy supplies the method by which the message is conveyed to
the people. This pragmatic thinking "de-emphasizes theological problems, takes for
granted the existence of adequate content, and consequently majors in method” (Escobar
2000, 110). Methodologies and strategies, never theologically neutral, are shaped by the
gospel itself. Darrell Guder writes:

Christianity has . . . consistently reduced or distorted the gospel. Many of the
problems with which non-Western churches struggle have to do with the versions
of the gospel that the missionary evangelists brought them, and much of the
spiritual health of those churches may be attributed to their willingness to struggle
afresh with the basic challenge of the gospel. We simply may not assume that our
formulations of the gospel, as familiar and time-tested as they may be, exhaust the
fullness and the scope of God's great good news, culminating in the life, death,
resurrection, and mission of Jesus Christ. Every judgment we will make about the
methodologies of evangelism will depend upon our answer to the questions: What
is the gospel? What is the fullness of the apostolic message? What is salvation?
What does the church's gospel mission intend? What is the missio Dei ("mission
of God") that defines the identity, purpose, and the way of life of the church?
(Guder 1994, 148, Italics mine)

The separation between strategy and theology has become increasingly evident in recent
years. Thom Rainer writes,

"Since 1988 most of the literature identified with church growth has been
concerned with methodology; methodology of worship; methodology of
marketing; methodology of leadership; methodology of evangelism; etc. It is easy
to understand why critics are screaming that a new idolatry is being promoted by
Missions reduced to methodology is as empty as spiritual gifts without love--like a "resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1). Methodologies and strategies must be a servant, never a master, to the mission of God. In every aspect of his ministry, therefore, the practitioner must begin with a study of biblical theology. His strategy formation then will be based on biblical and theological insights.

For example, the church planters' first step should never be conducting a survey to analyze the culture or determine searchers' felt needs. Neither should they develop the organizational structure for the future church by studying the structures of various growing churches. These studies can be beneficial, but without first developing a biblically rooted ecclesiology, the questions asked and the understandings received are superficial. Scripture reflecting on the nature of the church, like those in 1 Peter and Ephesians, should shape a biblical understanding of the church. For example, in Ephesians 2:19-22 Paul uses multiple metaphors to describe the nature of the church. The church is a new nation: Newly converted Christians are "no longer foreigners and aliens" but "fellow citizens" in a community of faith (2:19). The church is a family, "God's household" (2:19). The church is a holy temple, well constructed with each part joined together and built around Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone. These perspectives are based upon God's mighty acts in conversion: Those dead in sin (2:1-3) have been made alive with Christ (2:4-7) by God's grace (2:8-10). Paul stacks metaphors one on another to illustrate a redeemed fellowship "brought together under . . . Christ" (Eph.1:3-11) and existing "for the praise of his glory" (1:12).

Because they provide an inspired picture of God's divine community, these biblical perspectives form the foundation of strategy. They are snapshots of what God expects the newly planted church to be.

Priority must, therefore, be given to theological formation. Cultural analyses and strategy formation should be developed through the grid of these biblical and theological perspectives. Samuel Escobar writes, "Theology, history, and the social sciences are useful as tools for a better understanding of God's Word and of contemporary missionary action, but only the Word is inspired and always fertile to renew the church in mission" (2000, 102). For example, in 2 Corinthians Paul, reflecting on his own missionary practice, points "to the Old Testament teachings as well as the living revelation of God in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. The Spirit-inspired missionary acts of Jesus, Paul, and the apostles, as well as their Spirit-inspired reflection on their practice, are authoritative for us in a way in which no other post-apostolic missionary practice or reflection is authoritative" (Escobar 2000, 102).

Samuel Escobar disparagingly critiques Church Growth as managerial missiology (2000, 109-112). There are both accuracies and distortions in these allegations. On the one hand, Church Growth tends to emphasize evangelistic activities that can be easily tabulated and statistically analyzed: how many people have replied in writing to radio or
television broadcasts, responded to the invitation at a crusade, been baptized during a particular year, or become part of new churches being planted. Meeting these goals demonstrates the effectiveness of marketing the message of Jesus or the church. The problem with these goals is not merely ascribing success to numerical goals but reducing the gospel to what is measurable. Escobar rightly comments that sometimes "the slow process of development of a contextual theology for a young church tends to be considered inefficient and costly, and it is easy to substitute prepackaged theologies translated from English" (2000, 110-111). In addition, the church should never present itself as a vendor of Christian services to fulfill the felt needs of consumers. When "gaining the loyalty of members and retaining that loyalty" (Hunsberger in Guder 1998, 84) becomes the driving force of the church, members have difficulty speaking of the sovereign reign of God, the foolishness of the cross, and holy living. In these ways I concur with Escobar's critique.

On the other hand, Escobar writes that in managerial missiology "missionary action is reduced to a linear task that is translated into logical steps to be followed in a process of management by objectives, in the same way in which the evangelistic task is reduced to a process that can be carried on following marketing principles" (Escobar 2000, 109). This negation of linear processes for sequentially doing missions seems naïve if the processes are developed through the grid of God's kingdom rule. Escobar's sweeping negation seems to exclude processes of teaching new converts the story line of the Bible, of training new Christians to become leaders, and of missionaries who develop from learners to ministers to mentors to guests as they phase out of the work of an established church. Mature Christian churches tend to have mature processes, even linear modules, of understanding Christian growth and development. In this sense I believe that we cannot negate management from missiology.

By way of summary, a pragmatic model of ministry develops form and function of ministry without establishing the theological rationale for Christian living and ministry. The central question "What is the gospel we proclaim?" does not permeate the fabric of missionary life and activity but is merely assumed as its foundation.

The Theological Level of Inquiry

Church Growth did not begin as a theologically integrated discipline. Arthur Glasser admits that "Dr. McGavran's theological method [did] not involve the orderly unfolding of a system based on inner-evolved principles" (Glasser 1977, 26).

The focus of the movement has been primarily methodological, and its theology developed in the heat of controversy when its methodological postulates were disputed (Van Engen 1981, 16, 324). When challenged, Church Growth proponents sought to theologically defend the centrality of evangelism in the life of the church, its rationale for numerical growth, the need for the church to reach receptive peoples, and why missionaries should work to develop homogeneous communities of believers. Church growth methodologies, developed through social understandings, subsequently needed
theological justification. The theological posture, therefore, was apologetic, not formative.

Steuernagal urges us to "reposition ourselves and to work once again on the agenda" (2000, 127). This is best done by laying the broad theological foundations of Missiology then progressing to discussions of methodologies and strategies. With theology at the vortex of Missiology, the church and its missionaries will begin to minister in new and different ways. Stuart Murray in *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* (2001) provides an example of this process. He writes,

All church planters operate within theological frameworks, but often these are assumed rather than articulated and adopted uncritically rather than as the result of reflection. Theological principles may influence strategy and practice less than unexamined tradition or innovative methodology . . . . An inadequate theological basis will not necessarily hinder short-term growth, or result in widespread heresy among newly planted churches. But it will limit the long-term impact of church planting, and may result in dangerous distortions in the way in which the mission of the church is understood.

(Murray 2001, 39).

Murray, then, provides formative theologies to lay the foundations for church planting and describes the nature and character of church planting in terms of these models. A formative theology is the *Missio Dei*, or mission of God, the perspective that mission is not a human invention or a program of human ingenuity but is an extension of the activity of God who sends and saves. This perspective is theocentric, rather than anthropocentric, and by extension Trinitarian: “God is the Missionary, who sent his Son and sends his Spirit into the world . . . . Mission is defined, directed, energized, and accomplished by God” (Murray 2001, 39). The church then is “body of people sent on a mission” rather than a “vendor of religious goods and services” (Hunsberger 1996, 333-46). *Missio Dei* influences one's understanding of the nature of the church: "Participating in the mission will involve shifting the emphasis from a focus on the life of the local church . . . to a concern for the world in its need, joys, and struggles" (Warren in Murray 2001, 40). It will broaden the scope of mission to include not only evangelism and church planting but also other purposes of God, including social justice and environmental concerns. God's concern for the world, then, become the concern of the church involved in God's mission. *Missio Dei* infers spiritual formation: God's attributes and purposes become incarnate in His people. Finally, "church planting presents an opportunity to express something of the nature of our missionary God . . . consciously engag[ing] in church planting as fellow workers with God and with others." God's creativity, community, and teamwork become models for ministry (adapted from Murray 2001, 41-42). Murray also discusses the theological models of incarnation and the kingdom of God and their application to church planting. The practice of church planting is thus placed within theological rather than mere pragmatic frameworks.

Missiology is a multi-faceted discipline. The social sciences (anthropology, sociology, psychology) enable missionaries to exegete another culture, interpret emic (insider) meanings, understand how people live together in groups, compare one culture to
another, and perceive psyches of various people within culture. History of missions reflects upon past paradigms of mission theology and practice. Understandings of contextualized ministry (evangelism, church planting and development, leadership training) help missionaries develop theologically focused, yet contextually appropriate strategies. These strategies guide missionaries to teach unbelievers, incorporate new Christians into communities of faith, nurture them to maturity, and train developing leaders to minister within the maturing movement of God. Other disciplines (linguistics; Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist studies; folk religion, etc.) provide tools for the missionary task and heighten understandings regarding Christian approaches to non-Christian peoples.

What then is the role of theology in Missiology? None of these disciplines of missiology can function individually on its own criteria. Therefore, mission theology functions to prioritize and clarify the functions of these disciplines in relationship to the purposes of God.

The social sciences, for instance, developed during the modern age and are rooted in secular presuppositions. Church Growth practitioners have too frequently felt that anthropology is merely "a toolbox" containing instruments "which are not intrinsically related to one another." The practitioner, oblivious to the "theoretical assumptions on which the tool is based" and the set of presuppositions "which it forms, can merely pick and choose whatever tools work" (Ramseyer 1973, 66). Church Growth has generally opted into a structural-functional model of anthropology, which "is based upon a static view of the world" (Escobar 2000, 111). According to Tabor, "Cultural givens' take on permanence and rigidity; it suggest that whatever is endures. This cannot help but undermine the hope of transformation which is central to the gospel" (1983, 119).

Consequently, missionaries must not view anthropology as a neutral discipline. Rather they must develop a theology of culture through which to evaluate anthropological approaches and their resulting insights. Biblical theology provides foundational presuppositions that guide the Christian anthropologist in cultural analysis.

Focus on Growth

The most perturbing and controversial issue for many theologians is the emphasis on numerical growth. McGavran's writes, "Mission is a divine finding, vast and continuous. The chief and irreplaceable purpose of mission is church growth" (McGavran 1990, 22). He also says, "Winning many to the Christian life must be the dominant concern of all Christians" (McGavran 1989, 340). McGavran's words are not merely passing statements, reflecting one of many emphases. They represent the foundational presupposition of Church Growth. Glasser, in summarizing McGavran's theological position, describes this focus on growth:

God wills the growth of His church. A chief and irreplaceable element in her ministry is the proclamation of the Gospel to all mankind and incorporation of those who believe into her communal life. Only through the deliberate multiplication of vast numbers of new congregations all over the world will the church be able to evangelize this generation. When she ceases to perform this
mission, something fundamental is lost in her very essence as the people of God in the midst of the nations. The church that does not grow is out of the will of God.  


As part of the interaction with this core perspective, I will survey the research of two Restoration scholars.

Carl Holladay writes that people become hostage to the metaphors that they employ. *Church Growth* has become one such metaphor: Thus seeking causes of growth, places where growth is possible, and qualities of church growth leaders becomes the lens through which scripture is interpreted (1983, 89). This metaphor is "both provocative and evocative in the ways it shapes our assessment of ourselves and our mission" (1983, 102). Furthermore, Holladay writes, numerical growth was not a "pervasive concern of Jesus and the New Testament writers" (1983, 89). Only Luke, "with his fondness for statistics, . . . documents the numerical growth of the early Christian Church" (1983, 96). Luke’s primary purpose, however, was not to document church growth and development but to authenticate the Gentile mission (1983, 83-102).

John Mark Hicks, on the other hand, writes that the biblical scholar should not be "disconcerted" about "the issue of numerical growth" (Hicks 2002, 1). Luke's use of statistics is based upon a theology of covenant restoration rooted in the Old Testament. "Just as Israel multiplied and increased in number in the Old Testament, so restored Israel would multiply and increase in the Messianic age. Numerical growth is a covenant blessing" (Hicks 2002, 2). This "restoration-fulfillment" theme is reflected in Luke's writing of Acts (Hicks 2002, 2). The use of words like auxano, an agricultural term meaning "to grow" or "to increase," and pleroo, which means "to multiply," infer numerical growth. The language of Acts is "theologically significant because it is the combination of terms used by the LXX [the Septuagint] in Jeremiah to describe the blessedness of the messianic community, of restored Israel" (Hicks 2002, 5). The prophetic expectation was that Israel and Judah would be reunited, that the nations would gather at Jerusalem to honor God, and that their numbers would greatly increase in the land (Jere. 3:16-18). In other contexts Jeremiah writes about the remnant of Judah, whom God will gather from among the nations and bring back to their land, "where they will be fruitful and increase in number" (Jere. 23:3-5). A descendant of "David, a righteous Branch" will reign as king over this growing community (Jere. 23:5). These same terminologies are used in the creation scene when God tells the people He created to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:22, 28; 8:17; 9:1, 7). This emphasis is also reflected in a few places in Pauline literature. Although Paul’s primary emphasis in the epistles was to equip young missionaries and churches to deal with specific problems, in Colossians 1:6, for example, he "uses auxano to describe the spread of the gospel into the whole world" (Hicks 2002, 11). This growth in the church is a blessing from God in the same way that children are "a blessing from the Lord" (Psalm 127) and "the increase of Abraham's descendants" was a blessing (Hicks 2002, 6).
How then should we understand these differing perspectives of growth in scripture? Surely reading scripture, as Holladay suggests, through the narrow lens of Church Growth accentuates the success and truncates the struggles of the church to become a community reflecting the kingdom of God. Frequently ministry strategies are developed as a type of triumphalism, promoting human egos or agendas. Promotion then guides decision-making rather than the biblical theologies of the mission of God and the inbreaking of God's kingdom. The motivation for use of statistics becomes self-aggrandizing and self-promoting. Christian ministry must not be done out of "selfish ambition or vain conceit" but patterned after the incarnation of Christ, who humbled himself, took the nature of a servant, and became obedient to death (Phil. 2:3-8).

It is also apparent from scripture that God does desire the growth of His church. God, who said "be fruitful and increase in number" at creation, and prophesied through Jeremiah that the remnant would "be fruitful and increase in number," is the God who blessed the early Christian church (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 2 Thess. 3:1). This growth is not rooted in human initiative or ability but in God who causes things to grow (1 Cor. 3:5-9). Evangelism, moreover, is not merely concerned about initial proclamation or baptism, but "that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time" (Abraham 1989, 95).

The use of statistics and numbering of Christians should be motivated by compassion for the flock, finding those who have wondered away (Luke 15:3-5). Caution is necessary that counting to be done specifically and humbly, motivated not by human ego but care for the church. The value of church growth studies is that they typically reveal unperceived weaknesses. This is likely due to the fact that when people come to Christ, there is public celebration, but those who leave go unnoticed.

While ministering in Africa, our missions team did a major church growth study every two years. This study measured not only the number of churches and adult Christians but also levels of literacy and types of leaders officially ordained within local churches. The study in 1982, which reflected a lower growth rate than anticipated, led us to new methodologies of work. First, our team realized that as we frequently took national church leaders to help open other areas to the gospel, their home areas were neglected. We resolved to encourage ministers to develop a vision for their own areas and concentrate their work close to home. Over a period of years clusters of churches developed as churches planted other churches within walking distance of their church. Today these clusters of churches have their own organization of evangelists, elders and servants, and all churches in the cluster meet as one community during the first Sunday of every month. Second, our team decided that revival should be re-defined. Originally, revival meant encouraging unfaithful members to return to the church by ministering in their homes and in meetings within the community of the church. Reflection on the church growth study revealed that churches with a high attrition rate also had theological and spiritual problems. Revival then began to address spiritual issues by helping core members to reflect theologically on these problems. Church growth studies, thus, enable the missionary to theologically and methodologically critique a missions ministry, and out of this reflection new emphases of ministry emerge. An authentic church growth
study will always reveal weaknesses of the church, which will then provide understandings for theological and methodological reflection.

Brazilian missiologist Alex Araujo acknowledges that numbers are useful descriptors for planning certain types of activities. He, however, warns that "number-thinking has become a distorting factor in the way certain people or cultures think about reality. . . ." This "numerological thinking . . . has trouble assessing value without comparing numbers." It "equates quality with larger numbers and lack of quality with lower numbers. . . . The problem is not with the use of numbers where they are helpful, but with a numerological way of interpreting reality" (Araujo 2001).

One continuing paradox is the theologians' aversion to counting of converts while having high sensitivity to the number and quality of new students coming into their seminaries. Requirements from the Association of Theological Schools direct our institutions to develop strategic initiatives with well-defined plans, including numerical goals. Can we develop such strategies and goals for our institutions, while suggesting such practices are wrong in our churches?

The Missional Paradigm

The four limitations of Church Growth that we have discussed--the anthropocentric focus, pragmatics and the segmentation of theology and praxis, the theological level of inquiry, and the focus on growth--suggest the need for a new model of missions. This new paradigm would maintain the strengths of the Church Growth model--a focus on identificational ministry, belief in the missionary nature of the church and incisive evaluation--while broadening its theological horizons. The model, termed missional, is rooted in an understanding that a missionary theology should permeate both theology and missiology. Kirk writes:

All true theology is, by definition, missionary theology, for it has as its object the study of the ways of a God who is by nature missionary and a foundational text written by and for missionaries. Mission as a discipline is not, then, the roof of a building that completes the whole structure, already constructed by blocks that stand on their own, but both the foundation and the mortar in the joints, which cements together everything else. Theology should not be pursued as a set of isolated disciplines. It assumes a model of cross-cultural communication, for its subject matter both stands over against culture and relates closely to it. Therefore, it must be interdisciplinary and interactive.

(Kirk 1997, 50)

The missional helix visualizes such a "interdisciplinary and interactive" approach to the practice of ministry and provides a corrective to traditional Church Growth perspectives.

The Missional Helix
Neither theology nor strategy stands by itself as a self-contained discipline but as an ongoing process involving various elements. Ministry formation can be seen as a spiral. The coils turn round and round, passing the same landmarks, but always at a slightly different level. This spiral, a helix, is descriptive of this process of effective ministry formation.

The spiral begins with **theologies**, such as *Missio Dei*, the kingdom of God, incarnation, and crucifixion, which focus and form our perspectives of culture and the practice of ministry. **Cultural analysis** forms the second element of the helix. Cultural awareness enables missionaries and ministers to define types of peoples within a cultural context, to understand the social construction of their reality, to perceive how they are socially related to one another, and to explain how the Christian message intersects with every aspect of culture (birth rites, coming of age rituals, weddings, funerals, etc). The spiral proceeds to consider what has occurred historically in the missional context. **Historical perspective** narrates how things got to be as they are based upon the interrelated stories of the particular nation, lineage, the church, and God's mission. Finally the spiral considers the **strategy**, or practice of ministry, within the missions environment.

The missional helix is a spiral because the missionary returns time and time again to reflect theologically, culturally, historically, and strategically in order to develop ministry models appropriate to the local context. Theology, social understandings, history of missions, and strategy all work together and interpenetrate each other. Thus praxis impacts theology, which in turn shapes the practice of ministry. In the following diagram the broken line between the four elements of strategy formation demonstrates how each interacts with the others.

![Diagram of the Relationship between the Four Elements of Ministry Formation](image)

**The Relationship between the Four Elements of Ministry Formation**

The diagram is a helix because theology, history, culture, and the practice of ministry **build on one another** as the community of faith collectively develops understandings and a vision of God’s will within their cultural context. Like a spring, the spiral grows to new heights as ministry understandings and experiences develop.
Each of these four elements (theology, history, culture, and strategy) is essential in reflecting on and planning for all types of Christian ministry.

**Functions of the Missional Helix**

The Missional Helix is useful in at least two ways. First and foremost, it provides a model of decision-making for the Christian practitioner that must become both intentional and instinctive. In other words, the missionary or minister should seek theological understandings, cultural analysis, historical perspective, and strategy formation in the process of developing patterns for ministry. Second, the Missional Helix could be used as a model for theological education. Equipping for ministry should not put high emphasis on some elements and give little consideration to others. Rather, it should provide an intentional, integrated model of ministry formation.

**Conclusion**

I embrace Steuernagel’s belief: "As we move into a new century, I share the conviction that we need to reposition ourselves and to work once again on the agenda" (2000, 127). The Church Growth model is inadequate. By beginning with anthropology rather than theology and segmenting theology and practice, it assumes that its model for missions reflects the nature of God. In other words, church growth determines effective practice and then seeks to validate this practice by the use of scripture. The movement emphasizes growth rather than faithful proclamation of the gospel and faithful living of the gospel.
A missional model, on the other hand, begins with theological reflection while taking seriously cultural analysis and strategy formation.

**Sources Used**


The Restoration Movement, frequently called the Stone-Campbell Movement, developed on the American frontier and is inclusive of three different streams, Churches of Christ, Christian Church (Churches of Christ), and the Disciples of Christ. McGavran was an evangelically oriented Disciple of Christ.

This process of church maturation is described in more detail in *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies* (Zondervan, 1996), pages 155-159. Decisions relating to the intersection of Gospel and culture (For example, how do young men and women become adults and marry?) were made by local leaders based upon a process of cultural analysis, biblical reflection, and custom formation. Paul Hiebert’s model of “critical contextualization” was very important to us (references).