

# CHURCH GROWTH UPDATE

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Last year, I reported that churches of Christ in the United States are growing once again. I really do not have much to report this year that adds significantly to the report I gave last year. Because of funding problems, we were not able to do as large a survey this year as we needed to do. Having a smaller sample size means that our margin of error is larger. Within that margin of error, however, the mean 1987 growth rate in the sample was approximately 1 per cent. If that is an accurate representation of congregations generally, it means that the turn-around in the growth rate that started in 1984 is continuing.

For the past two decades, I have been conducting nationwide random samples of congregations in a study of growth rates in churches of Christ. These surveys indicate that the growth rate in 1965 was around 5 per cent. The rate of growth declined by about 0.33 per cent per year from 1965 through 1980. Growth stopped in that year. For the next three years, the amount of change in the rate of growth (or decline) continued the trend that had started as early as 1965. There were net membership losses of around 0.33 per cent in 1981, 0.67 per cent in 1982, and 1 per cent in 1983. If this trend had continued, there would have been a net loss in membership in 1984. There was a loss in membership in 1984, but the surveys indicate that the loss was only 0.5 per cent. Later surveys indicated that the decline ended in 1985; there was a growth in membership of around 0.5 percent in 1986, and a growth of around 1 per cent in 1987. If this latest trend continues through 1990, earlier losses will be erased, and membership in 1990 will be around 2.5 per cent ahead of the 1980 figure.

A decadal growth rate of only 2.5 per cent is very low. That is

not even enough to keep pace with population growth. That small growth, however, is far better than the decline in membership of around 18 per cent that would have been experienced by 1990 if the 1965-1983 trend had not been reversed. Furthermore, if the 1984-1987 trend continues, the annual growth rate by the end of the century will be around 7.5 per cent, the decadal growth rate for the 1990s will be over 50 per cent, and we could anticipate doubling in membership in the first decade of the next century.

Since there is really very little that is new to report concerning growth rates among churches of Christ, most of my remarks will focus on a different kind of church growth update. This report will focus on trends in the religious world generally.

The latest reports indicate that the Church of God and the Assemblies of God are still the fastest growing demoninations in America. These and other Pentecostal churches, however, have evidently suffered the most from the recent scandals involving well known television evangelists. Conservative denominations are still growing faster than liberal denominations. However, Dean Kelly's 1972 study of *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* is no longer being interpreted as it once was. Kelly did not really say that conservative denominations are growing because they are conservative or that liberal denominations are declining because they are liberal. Those who have studied Kelly more carefully have found that what he really said is that conservative churches are growing because they are distinctive and evangelistic, and liberal denominations are declining because they are not distinctive or evangelistic. The statistics on patterns of growth and decline among the various denominations support this conclusion. Regardless of where various denominations are located on the liberal-conservative continuum, those that grow tend to be those that are evangelistic and so distinctive that everyone knows who they are, what they believe, and what they stand for. Those that decline tend to be those that are not evangelistic and that have become so ecumenical that no one knows for sure who they are, what they believe, or what they stand for.

One of the recent trends is that the liberal denominations

that declined so rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s have started emphasizing evangelism once more and have largely given up on the merger efforts of the Council on Church Unity. Instead of seeking oneness through denominational mergers, they are now seeking oneness through interdenominational cooperation.

Another important trend is indicated in the research that shows denominational loyalties to be far less significant to people today than they were in the past. People seem to be far more interested in the style of a church than in its theological position or organizational affiliation. There is even a growing awareness that denominational organizations may not be necessary. Elmer Towns recently published a book called *Is the Day of the Denomination Dead?* In it he claims that very large congregations can provide all the services that smaller churches once depended on denominations to provide. After I read his book, I told him that this is what leaders of the Restoration Movement have been saying all along. Unfortunately, he does not see it that way. That is not what he has heard us saying. All that he has heard us saying is, "We are not a denomination." Perhaps, instead of arguing about how the non-biblical word "denomination" should be defined and applied, we ought to focus more on how the biblical word "church" should be defined, how the church should be organized, and how independent local churches should cooperate with one another.

Ever since Vatican II, both Catholic and Protestant scholars have been involved in a careful re-thinking of liturgical issues. Out of this liturgical renewal have come several interesting developments. Several Protestant writers are now urging more frequent observance of the Lord's Supper—perhaps even as often as every Sunday. They are coming to see worship as participation rather than as performance. They are now questioning the wisdom of having professionally trained musicians, large choirs, and even instrumental music. Most are not ready to give up their instrumental music, but they are recognizing the importance of congregational singing.

Changes are even taking place in regard to baptism. Donald McGavran has many followers in many denominations who have been impressed with his insistence that in the New Tes-

tament, no one was regarded as being a Christian, a member of the Lord's church, until that person was baptized. Denominations that once looked only for decisions or professions of faith are now recognizing that the goal must be to help people become responsible members of the church. Denominations that practice infant baptism have come to recognize that baptism is only for believers. They still practice infant baptism, but they do not baptize the infant children of non-believers. They baptize only the infant children of those they regard as faithful Christians who pledge to bring these children up as Christians. Perhaps it would be wise for those of us in churches of Christ to realize that even in our own experience, there are significant differences between the radical conversion experienced by adults who obey the gospel and the gradual developmental process experienced by those who grow up in Christian families.

The growth of interest in the smaller church is one of the most significant developments of recent years. For many years, most denominations put most of their emphasis on building megachurches—large impressive congregations with thousands of members. Today there is a growing realization that the megachurch is the exception rather than the rule. More than half of all Protestant churches in America have less than fifty people in attendance at their largest assembly. Seminaries are beginning to realize that most of their graduates will serve throughout their lives in churches led by just one minister and not in megachurches with many specialists on the staff. For several years, many denominations tried to close their small, inefficient parishes. They forced a lot of congregational mergers. What they found, however, was that within five years, the merged congregation had typically declined to the size of the larger of the two congregations before the merger. They also observed that in the 1970s, every denomination that reduced the number of congregations declined in total membership, and every denomination that increased the number of congregations grew in membership. Furthermore, they noticed that in most cases, the change in the number of congregations came before a change in total membership.

For several years, the emphasis in most denominations was on bigness. There were a lot of church mergers and consolidations. Today, the emphasis is on planting more and more new congregations. There is a book called *The Smaller Church in a Super Church Era*, edited by Jon Johnston and Bill Sullivan. It tells the story of what happened in the Church of the Nazarene. After World War II, they planted a lot of new churches, and they grew rapidly in that period. Then they got into an era of mergers and consolidations in order to build really big churches that would have a lot of influence in the community. But when they did, their growth stopped, and they started to decline. Recently, however, they have put the emphasis back on church planting, and they have started to grow rapidly once more. The Baptists went through a similar experience, and at their most recent convention, they agreed to plant thousands of new congregations throughout the nation by 1990. Baptist churches in Texas plan to start two thousand new churches by September of 1990.

It might be interesting for churches of Christ to re-consider our own experience in this regard. Shortly after World War II, we started a large number of new congregations. Every time a congregation filled its building, a group would swarm like a hive of bees and start a new congregation. That trend continued up until about the mid-1960s. Since then, our emphasis has been on bigness, merging, and consolidating. But we were growing rapidly when we were planting all those new congregations, and our rate of growth declined past the zero point when we stopped planting new congregations. Perhaps the time has come for us to recognize what so many denominations are recognizing: Planting new churches is the best church growth strategy available to us today.

I believe that those of us who are interested in studying church growth in our fellowship need to be aware of the church growth research being done in the various denominations. Ever since I started preaching, in 1950, I have been trying to produce growth in churches of Christ. In 1970, I started doing research on patterns of growth and decline among churches of Christ in order to understand the factors associated with growth in churches of Christ. It was not until

1984 that I started studying the church growth literature generally. I went to Pasadena, California, to see what I could learn from the leaders of the Church Growth Movement: Donald McGavran, Peter Wagner, Carl George, Eddie Gibbs, and others at Fuller Seminar and the Fuller Institute. Working with these people and others such as Elmer Towns, John Vaughan, Charles Chaney, Chuck Hunter, Kent Hunter, and Win Arn, I helped organize the North American Society for Church Growth. I drafted the constitution for that society and presently serve on three of its editorial boards. Later I studied with Lyle Schaller, who has written more church growth books than anyone else alive today. I believe that I learned some valuable lessons from these people. In my opinion, however, churches of Christ should not accept everything that these people say without careful and critical examination.

I do not think of myself as being a Church Growth person (spelled with a capital "C" and a capital "G"). I do not fully identify with the Church Growth Movement or with those who are known as the "Fuller Group." I have several important reservations about their approach and even more important reservations about those who uncritically apply their conclusions to churches of Christ.

Donald McGavran, the father of the Church Growth Movement, spent many years collecting and analyzing data. A few of his followers have also worked diligently, gathering data. However, most of the writing in the Church Growth Movement is based on authority rather than data. They quote the authorities and quote one another with little empirical evidence to support what they say.

I believe that anything pertaining to church growth that is a matter of faith or doctrine must be investigated by thorough biblical scholarship. We must not do theology by conducting opinion polls. I also believe, however, that quotations from authorities do not provide the best way to study matters of method that relate to church growth. The only safe way to study these matters of method, in my opinion, is through careful empirical research—scientific, quantitative, statistical studies. Far too many of the conclusions accepted as Truth in the Church Growth Movement have very little empirical evi-

dence to back them up.

People in the Church Growth Movement have based most of their conclusions on cross-cultural, cross-denominational studies. Their effort has been to identify factors associated with church growth in any denomination anywhere in the world. I believe that it is too early in this investigation for such generalizations. The first step in any scientific inquiry is to collect as much descriptive data as possible. The next step is to generate hypotheses and test them empirically. Theory-building should come only after this kind of foundation has been developed. At this point in the development of this area of scholarly investigation, I believe that the focus ought to be on discovering what factors are associated with growth or decline within the context of each group. We should not even start the search for generalities until after the Baptists know what produces growth in Baptist churches, the Methodists know what produces growth in the Methodist churches, and others know what produces growth within their denominations. The cross-cultural, cross-denominational approach filters out the effects of both culture and the unique characteristics of each denomination. I believe that doctrine is important. I believe that how churches are organized is important. I do not want to filter out those important differences until growth is thoroughly understood within the context of each particular group. That is why I have focused all of my research on patterns of growth and decline among churches of Christ in the United States.

Leaders of the Church Growth Movement, in my opinion, are far too uncritical in their assumption that all growth in all denominations everywhere in the world is evidence of God's approval. The approach advocated by most Church Growth people is to look at only successes. I do not believe that we can know what produces success unless we compare successes with failures. I believe that the church growth research must always be based on comparisons of growing and declining churches and not just on studies of growing churches.

Some of the popularizers of the Church Growth literature, in my opinion, put far too much emphasis on a marketing approach. They claim that any church can grow—regardless of doctrine—if it has a good location, proper management, a

healthy cash flow, and good advertising. They seem to equate evangelism with salesmanship. They make unwarranted claims about Church Growth being "an exact science." All that I am willing to acknowledge is that some things about church growth can be studied scientifically.

Far too much of the literature in the Church Growth Movement uses the megachurch model. They focus on what works in churches with many full-time specialists on the staff and thousands of members. They take those principles and try to apply them to all churches, regardless of size. That is wrong. Fortunately, some writers in the Church Growth field are beginning to recognize this. In his book *Making the Small Church Effective*, Carl Dudley compares the small church to a single cell organism and the large church to a multicell organism. The study of what makes individual cells function properly can be applied to a single cell or to the individual cells of a multicell organism. But there are many things about the functioning of a multicell organism that do not apply to the single cell. In the same way, I believe that much more research needs to be done on what makes the small single cell church function effectively. That knowledge then can be applied to the individual cells of the large multicell church. Too much of the literature in the Church Growth field starts at the wrong end of the scale.

Having said all this, I must confess that much of what I have learned about church growth in various denominations does seem to be applicable in churches of Christ, in spite of the many ways in which we differ from these denominations. I still believe, however, that most of our focus needs to be on identifying factors associated with growth or decline among churches of Christ.