

WHY CHURCHES GROW

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PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

This preface contains some very important information that was not yet available when the first and second editions of this book were being prepared. This new information is essential in order to put into proper perspective some of the material presented in this book. This preface is being written early in 1981. A decade has now passed since I first started doing church growth research. Most of the research reported in this book came from a nation-wide survey conducted in 1973 and 1974 with some follow-up studies conducted in 1975 and 1976. The first edition of *Why Churches Grow* was published in 1977. Two new chapters were added in a revised and enlarged second edition published in 1979. Church growth research, however, is an on-going process. As we are now entering the decade of the 1980s, there is a need for an up-dated report on the status of church growth research.

No additions, corrections, or clarifications are needed in regard to the primary material presented in this book. The focus of this book is on research aimed at answering two important questions: 1) *Why do some congregations grow while others die?* and 2) *Why are some people receptive to evangelism while others are not?* In the process of answering these questions, information was collected concerning the annual rate of increase or decrease of membership in local congregations throughout the United States for each year since 1965. That information provides one of the factors needed for calculating a projection of future membership trends. The focus of this book is not really on such a projection. That one feature of this book, however, has attracted the most attention and it is in that area of future

membership projections that there is a need for some up-dated information and for some clarification.

The data I have been collecting tell whether the church of Christ in the United States is increasing or decreasing in total membership and also tell the rate of increase or decrease nation-wide. Such survey data, however, do not tell what the total membership actually is in the church of Christ. Until recently, the only available information on membership totals came from the almanacs. In 1965, the almanacs estimated that there were around 15,000 local congregations of the church of Christ in the United States with a total membership of 2,500,000. Based on that 1965 almanac estimate and my survey data concerning the rate of growth between 1965 and 1975, I estimated that in the late 1970s the church of Christ in the United States had a total membership of around 2,750,000 with as many as 17,000 local congregations. Those 1965 almanac estimates also provided the base for my projection of future membership trends. That projection indicated that in 1980 the church of Christ in the United States would stop increasing and start decreasing in total membership nation-wide. That projection also indicated that if the 1965-1980 trend were to continue unchanged, the church of Christ would cease to exist in the United States in approximately 50 years.

It is now evident that a major correction is needed. The 1965 almanac estimates were highly exaggerated. Mac Lynn at the Harding Graduate School of Religion in Memphis, Tennessee, has just finished the most thorough and accurate census of congregations ever conducted among the churches of Christ. Results of this census indicate that there are far fewer congregations and members than indicated in the almanac estimates. Including not only the "main line" congregations but also the various "splinter groups"—there are 12,706 local congregations with a total membership of 1,206,799. The number of "adherents" in these congregations is approximately 1,570,000. That figure includes the unbaptized children of church members and unbaptized adults who attended regularly. That particular statistic is important in a comparison of

the church of Christ with the various denominations that include all such "adherents" in their membership totals. When the various "splinter groups" are removed from the count, the census indicates that there are only 10,165 "main line" congregations with a total of approximately 1,256,000 "adherents" and with only 965,439 members. Among the "main line" congregations, there are only 200 with a membership of 500 or more, only 24 with a membership of 1,000 or more, only four with a membership of 2,000 or more, and only one with a membership of more than 3,000. The census indicates that the average congregation has a membership of only 100.

The total population of the United States, according to the 1980 federal census, is over 225,000,000. Religious census data on many local communities indicate that there are more members of the church of Christ who are not identified with any local congregation than the total number of all those who are identified with all local congregations of the church of Christ. If this condition prevails nation-wide, it is possible that there are between 2,000,000 and 3,000,000 people who would say that they are members of the church of Christ if anyone ever asked them. But the church of Christ cannot count on these non-identified members. Furthermore, the "main line" congregations cannot count on the "splinter groups." In realistic terms, what the church of Christ in the United States can count on at this time is approximately 10,000 local congregations with a total membership of 1,000,000.

The survey work that I have continued to do has clearly demonstrated that in 1980 the church of Christ in the United States did stop increasing and started decreasing in total membership. It is clear that if the 1965-1980 trend were to continue unchanged, the church of Christ would cease to exist in this nation in just a few years. Figuring the total membership at only 1,000,000 instead of 2,500,000 or more—it is also clear that the present trend would lead to zero-level membership in much less than 50 years.

There are, however, two very important points of clarification that must be made in order to put this projection into proper per-

spective. First of all, it must be noted that this is only a statistical projection of what would happen if the 1965-1980 membership trend were to continue with no change at all and that is not at all likely to happen. The history of religious groups that have gone into periods of decline indicates that the rate of decline tends to diminish as the membership grows smaller and smaller. Even if no corrections are made, it is likely that the church of Christ will survive in the United States for several more generations. The second point of clarification, however, is much more important. It is now much more likely that the necessary corrections will be made because *information is now available concerning what has gone wrong and what must be done to reverse the declining membership trends in the church of Christ*. It is this knowledge that I find the greatest cause for optimism.

If the research results reported in this book are properly applied in practice, the church of Christ can experience a tremendous period of rapid growth in the next few decades. Rapidly changing conditions in society are producing exactly the kind of situations most likely to make many people receptive to evangelism. I would urge, therefore, that you approach the study of this book with realistic optimism. Be realistic enough to recognize that there are some serious problems that must be corrected. But be optimistic enough to use the research results reported in this book in creative applications.

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PREFACE

This book was written for people who are serious students of church growth. After reading articles I have written about my research, many church leaders asked for an in depth report on that research. These leaders do not have a technical background but would not be satisfied with unsupported claims concerning the conclusions that I have reached in my research. They want enough background information for a careful and scholarly evaluation of those conclusions. This book was written primarily for those people.

On the other hand, Christians who are simply working to build up the church may not be interested in a technical or theoretical discussion of how I arrived at various conclusions. They simply want to know the conclusions. Their primary interest is in practical application. I would hope that such readers would read this book carefully. I feel that they will find in it many practical applications.

Another group interested in the study of church growth is made up of people with a background in the social and behavioral sciences. Such readers who might be interested in an in depth study or a replication of the research discussed in this book would need to consult the dissertation on which much of this book is based, "Pursuasion in Religious Conversion," (University of Illinois, 1975). Copies of that dissertation have been placed in the libraries of several colleges operated by members of the church of Christ. Microfilm copies are available from Xerox University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and are also available through inter-library loan.

Much of the technical, statistical, methodological, and theoretical material presented in that dissertation has been left out of this book. There is, however, material in this book that was not included in that dissertation.

The research project which provided the bulk of the data to be discussed in this book was started in 1973. This research started with a mail survey of 2,000 randomly selected congregations of the church of Christ throughout the United States. Responses were received from 1,009 of these congregations. A follow-up study was done in 240 of the non-responding congregations to determine the bias in the mail survey data. These data were used to select 48 congregations for in depth study: 16 congregations each in the top, middle, and bottom 20 percent in regard to net growth rate (conversion rate minus drop-out rate). The conversion rate figures in this study did not include the baptism of Christians' children but only the conversion of others. The in depth studies of these 48 congregations included data collected from the following sources: church records; interviews with the 48 pulpit ministers; interviews with 240 recent converts; interviews with 240 people whom someone from the congregation had tried to teach, but who had decided not to obey the gospel; interviews with 240 people who dropped out of the church soon after their baptism; and interviews with the 513 members of the congregations who were identified as being the ones who taught or tried to teach the 720 converts, drop-outs, and non-converts. There were two main purposes in this study: 1) to discover the significant differences among converts, drop-outs, and non-converts; and, 2) to discover the significant differences among congregations with a high, medium, or low net growth rate.

This nation-wide study answered many questions, but it raised more questions than it answered. Several follow-up studies were done to look into these questions. All of this research, which took much of my time for six years, along with my personal experiences in a quarter of a century in the

ministry and my personal observations in the work that I am now doing as an elder—these are the things that provide the basis of what I want to share with you in this book.

Whenever the growth rate of the church decreases, either something is wrong with the message, or something is wrong with the methods. In this case the message is what God wants it to be—although there may be some errors in the emphasis and approach. So the basic problem must be in the methods.

In the secular world, the methods of the social and behavioral sciences have been used for years in a variety of applications. Social science research tools have been used to study patterns of growth in various kinds of organizations, to measure public opinion, to predict election results, to forecast the potential market for products, and to determine the success of advertising campaigns. The scientific methods used in such research include surveys, interview techniques, psychological testing, opinion polls, and careful statistical analysis of results—usually with the aid of computers. Similar scientific methods are equally applicable in the study of evangelistic methods. Such research can explain where converts are coming from, where they are going, what methods are being used throughout the brotherhood, what results are being achieved with each method, and what is going wrong with present methods.

Most denominations with their strong centralized organizations have research specialists who do this kind of work on a denomination-wide basis and who provide consulting services to local congregations. The church of Christ has no centralized organization. It could, however, benefit from similar research.

CHAPTER ONE

PERSPECTIVES ON CHURCH GROWTH

Between 1945 and 1965, the church of Christ was the fastest growing religious group in the United States; however, it can no longer make that claim. In the past decade the church's conversion rate has decreased, the drop-out rate has increased, and thus the net growth rate has declined. In just ten years the church has slipped from first place to twelfth place on the growth rate list. Eleven denominations are now growing faster than the church of Christ.

In a typical congregation there are around 160 members and only eight baptisms per year. Six children of church members and two other people are baptized each year in that typical congregation. Half of these eventually drop out of the church. That typical congregation, therefore, is baptizing only four permanent converts per year. When the average annual death rate is subtracted, that leaves a net annual growth rate of less than one percent.

If the trend of the past decade continues into the future, the present net annual growth rate of around one percent will continue to decrease until around 1980 when growth will totally stop. The church will then begin to shrink. By around 1990, it will be back to the present size or below. Around the turn of the century, it will be down to only half its present size. During the next generation's lifetime, the church of Christ in the United States will disappear entirely if the trend continues. Something must be done to reverse this trend.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

The word church in the New Testament usually refers to the local congregation. Every work God gave to the church was assigned by Him to the local congregation, not to the universal church. In the New Testament pattern, the local congregation is the working unit of organization for evangelism, edification, benevolence, and worship. The universal church has no function and no earthly organization or structure above the level of the independent local congregations. The study of church growth, therefore, is primarily the study of growth at the level of the local congregation. Group dynamics works primarily at the local level. The growth of the local congregation is the key to the growth of the universal church.

As an indication of the importance of the local church, consider the missionary methods of the apostle Paul. He did not preach just anywhere. He preached in those places where there was a good opportunity to build strong local congregations. He built congregations in key population centers as first generation churches. When those congregations grew to maturity, they were in a good position to establish second generation congregations around them in an expanding missionary program. Paul sought places where he could start a chain reaction effect.

Suppose Paul had had to make a choice between two alternatives. One alternative would be to baptize 100 people in 100 different cities where the new converts would be totally isolated. The other alternative would be to baptize ten people in one city where those ten people could form the nucleus of a growing congregation. Paul would have chosen to baptize ten people in one city and thus begin the development of a congregation. Far more people would be saved in that way.

Almost anyone can count the number of seeds in an apple, but it takes a man of vision to count the number of apples in a seed. A concern with numbers can be healthy but not if it is a short-sighted concern. One congregation might baptize several

hundred people in a year, but not conduct its work in such a way as to build toward greater growth in the future. Another congregation might baptize only ten people in a year, but conduct its work in such a way as to build toward greater growth in the future. The end result might be that in the long run more people are saved through the influence of the congregation with only ten baptisms in a particular year than through the influence of the congregation with hundreds of baptisms in that same year.

In the long run, sound spiritual development of local congregations is the key to the salvation of the maximum number of individuals and to the real growth of the universal church.

Growth in the Early Church

Although numbers do not tell the whole story, rapid growth was one of the characteristics of the early church. In Mk. 16:15, Jesus told His followers to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. When Jesus gave this great commission, there were only eleven apostles and a relatively small number of disciples. From the beginning this new religious movement was so small it seemed unlikely that it would even survive—much less spread throughout the entire world. However, it did grow. From its beginning in Jerusalem, the church spread throughout Judea and Samaria and into the rest of the earth. Three thousand people were baptized on the day the church was established. After that, Acts 2:47 says that the Lord added to their number daily. That means at least one baptism per day—an absolute minimum of 365 baptisms per year. By the time of Acts 4:4, the congregation in Jerusalem had grown to the point that there were 5,000 men in that one congregation. Acts 5:14 says, "And believers were the more added unto the Lord, multitudes both of men and women." Acts 6:1 says that the number of disciples continued to multiply. Acts 6:7 says, "And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem exceedingly; and a

great company of the priests were obedient to the faith." Notice the Biblical emphasis on numbers and growth. Smallness was not considered a virtue in the early church. The Jerusalem congregation, according to the estimates of various scholars, had a membership of between 50,000 and 100,000.

Within one generation those early Christians, who started with such a small number, spread the church throughout the entire civilized world. Around 50 A.D., just one generation after the church was established, their enemies said that the Christians had "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). At about that same time, Paul said, "Have they not all heard? Yes, truly, their sound went out into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world" (Rom. 10:18). Around 61 A.D., when the church was not yet 30 years old, Paul said in Col. 1:23 that the gospel had been preached to every creature under heaven.

AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The historical record between the end of the first century and the beginning of the nineteenth century is not especially relevant to this study since the church fell away from the New Testament pattern. First the Catholic and then the Protestant denominations evolved. This was a period of apostasy. The historical record becomes relevant to this study at the end of the 1700s and the beginning of the 1800s, when the Restoration Movement began.

Several independent movements started at about this time in an effort to restore the church of the New Testament. By 1830 these independent movements had merged into one great effort. Between 1830 and 1850, the growth of the Restoration Movement was tremendous. Many people obeyed the gospel. In some cases entire denominational congregations as well as denominational organizations left denominationalism to join in the restoration effort. By 1850 the Restoration Movement

had become the fourth largest religious fellowship in the United States. In the decade preceding the Civil War, the restored church of the New Testament was the fastest growing religious body in the nation. In many places on the western frontier, it was the largest religious group. The Restoration Movement is the largest indigenous religious movement in American history.

Some other writers in the Restoration Movement heritage would probably have a different perspective; but as an historian of the Restoration Movement and as a member of the church of Christ, my view is that division almost destroyed the restored church in the decades following the Civil War. Although the division actually came much earlier, it was not until 1906 that the federal government in its census recognized the church of Christ as being independent from other heirs of the Restoration Movement. In the early 1900s, the church of Christ was much smaller than the other heirs of the Restoration Movement. It had lost most of its members, most of the church buildings, almost all of its colleges, and almost all of the educated ministers. For several decades, the church of Christ was almost unknown outside the South. The brotherhood suffered in those years from a negative attitude, a lack of vision, and a lack of growth.

World War II scattered members of the church of Christ throughout the nation and the world. When that war was over, Christians came home with a missionary zeal, and in the two decades following World War II, there was a renewed interest in evangelism. By 1965 the church of Christ had become the largest of the heirs of the Restoration Movement and the tenth largest religious group in the nation.¹

¹Actually there are no really accurate membership statistics since there is no central denominational organization. It is estimated, however, that in 1965 the church of Christ had around 2,500,000 members, between 15,000 and 16,000 local congregations in the United States, and a foreign mission program that was expanding rapidly.

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE PRESENT SITUATION

A Decade of Decreasing Growth

By 1976 the church of Christ was no longer the fastest growing religious group in the United States. In the past decade the conversion rate has decreased, the drop-out rate has increased, and thus the net growth rate has declined. Instead of being in first place on the growth rate list, it is now in twelfth place. In 1975 probably less than 136,000 people were baptized in all the congregations of the church of Christ in the United States. Now the church probably has around 2,750,000 members in 17,000 local congregations in the United States. Research indicates that congregations are now having an average of only one baptism per year for every 20 members. Christians' children make up 75 percent of those being baptized and about half of them drop out of the church after they grow up and leave home. The church is baptizing only one convert per year for every 80 members of the church and about half of these converts drop out of the church within five years after their baptism.

The present net annual growth rate of less than 1 percent is better than what most religious groups are experiencing today. The Catholics and the liberal Protestant denominations are experiencing a net annual loss. Only the conservative, evangelical, fundamentalist groups are growing. But that net annual growth rate of less than 1 percent is far below the level of growth in the 1945-1965 period. It is far below the level of growth in the 1830-1861 period when the Restoration Movement was expanding rapidly. And it is far below the level of growth in the first century—especially in the 33-67 period when the Church experienced its fastest growth.

Some local congregations seem to be growing, but most of them are really just swelling with transfers from other congregations. In the typical congregation, 75 percent of those

who are added to the membership come by transfer from another congregation, not by baptism. Congregational development is important and therefore these transfer members are important. Such transfers, however, do not make the church grow.

A PERSPECTIVE ON FUTURE TRENDS

The present trend is for the church to grow smaller and smaller while the world's total population grows larger and larger. It took all the time from Adam (starting over again in the time of Noah) until the time of Christ for the world's population to reach one quarter of a billion. It took almost 16 more centuries for the population to grow to a total of one billion. It then took only two centuries for the world's population to double. By the 1930's, the world's population had grown to a total of three billion. In March of 1976, the population of the world reached four billion. If the trend of recent years is not reversed, there will be six billion people living on this earth by 1990.

The church will be 2,000 years old in just a little over half a century. By that time the world's total population will be 20 billion if present trends are not reversed. By that time the total membership in the church of Christ will be zero if present trends are not reversed.

This pessimistic projection need not occur. There are some indications that the church has already turned the tide and a much more optimistic projection for the future is in order. Some congregations of the church of Christ in the United States have recently begun to grow at a rate which parallels the growth of the early church.

What would happen if the church of Christ were to start with its present membership in the United States and experience for the next few years the kind of growth that was experienced in the early church? The gospel of Christ could be preached to every person on earth by 1990. By the year 2000,

the church could have a total membership of over one billion with members scattered throughout the entire world. By the time the church is 2,000 years old, it could have a membership of almost 10 billion—almost half the world's population.

These figures, of course, are based on the assumption that the population explosion will continue. What is even more important is that these figures reflect what could happen if the church started baptizing one person per year for every three members and none of them dropped out. This is not likely to happen, but these figures show what is possible.

CHAPTER TWO

A PROFILE OF THE CONVERT

Evangelism is the process of influencing others in such a way that the Christ who lives in Christians and in their message is formed in the lives of other people. Christ becomes a part of people through the same process by which people become themselves. Selfhood in general is created and sustained through interaction with others. Communication with others is the most important factor influencing the development of mind, personality, or selfhood. People become themselves as they identify with others and with various reference groups. Family members and close personal friends constitute the primary reference group. A local congregation with which a person identifies is a secondary reference group that is very important in this study.

Patterns of Religious Influence

When most of a person's relatives and friends belong to the same denomination, that person has a homogeneous pattern of religious influence in his primary reference groups. If every member of a person's family and every one of his close personal friends belongs to the same denomination, it is easy for that person to define himself as being a member of that denomination or at least as having a preference for that denomination. A mixed or heterogeneous pattern of influence, however, cannot serve this self-defining function. If each member of a person's family and each close friend belongs to a different denomina-

tion, then that person's identification with family and friends would not help him define himself religiously. In the results of this survey, therefore, one would predict that subjects who have a mixed, or heterogeneous, pattern of religious influence among their family and friends should be more likely to be found among the converts. This would be so because their original reference group identification did not give them any clear self-definition in regard to religion. On the other hand, one would predict that the subjects in this survey who have a homogeneous pattern of religious influence among their family and friends would more likely be found among the non-converts or the drop-outs.¹

Results of a test comparing the relative degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity of religious influence in the primary reference groups of converts, drop-outs, and non-converts are presented in Table 1.

¹The 720 subjects of this survey were divided into 10 groups according to the relative degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity of religious influence in their primary reference groups. Because of ties in ranks, the 10 groups were not of equal size. At one extreme we had the group with the scores in the lowest 10 percent of the range. These people had the most homogeneous pattern of religious influence in their primary reference groups. Almost all of their family and friends belonged to the same denomination. At the other extreme we had the group with the scores in the highest 10 percent of the range. These people had the most heterogeneous or mixed pattern of religious influence in their primary reference groups. Their friends and the members of their family belonged to many different denominations.

TABLE 1
**HOMOGENEITY-HETEROGENEITY OF
 RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE IN SUBJECTS'
 PRIMARY REFERENCE GROUPS**

Categories of Subjects	Pattern of Religious Influence										T O T A L S
	Most Homogeneous					Most Heterogeneous					
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Converts	3	7	16	22	28	21	27	33	37	46	240
Drop-Outs	40	45	45	25	20	16	21	10	6	12	240
Non-Converts	70	51	38	23	12	11	10	12	10	3	240
TOTALS	113	103	99	70	60	48	58	55	53	61	720

Only three of the 240 converts came from the group with the most homogeneous pattern of religious influence in their primary reference groups while 46 of the 240 converts came from the group with the most mixed pattern of religious influence. In the row for the converts, notice how the numbers get larger as you move from the most homogeneous to the most heterogeneous groups. Only 32 percent of the converts came from the five groups with the more homogeneous patterns of religious influence among their family and friends while 68 percent of the converts came from the five groups with the more mixed patterns of religious influence. The very opposite is true with the drop-outs and the non-converts. On those rows, notice how the numbers get smaller as you move from the most homogeneous to the most heterogeneous groups. Seventy-three percent of the drop-outs came from the five groups with the more homogeneous patterns of religious influence while only 27 percent came from the five groups with the more mixed

patterns. Eighty-one percent of the non-converts came from the five groups with the more homogeneous patterns of religious influence while only 19 percent came from the five groups with the more mixed patterns.

The findings reported in Table 1 clearly indicate that if all a person's friends and relatives have the same religious affiliation as he does, it is unlikely that he will convert. If such a person does convert, he is likely to drop out of the church soon after his conversion. Additional research on this matter indicates that when there is a very homogeneous pattern of religious influence in a circle of friends and relatives, the person who is regarded as the religious opinion leader of the group is much more likely to convert than is a low status member of the group. If such a group leader converts, he is likely to bring the entire group with him. Most of the books on personal evangelism suggest that the ideal audience is a single person or a family. The results of this research, however, suggest that there is one condition in which that approach would not be best. If a circle of friends and relatives all have the same religious affiliation, evangelistic effort is much more likely to be successful if the entire group can be taught all at once—with special attention focused on the opinion leader of that group.

Change in Life Situation

If reference group identification is important, then it should logically follow that changes in a person's life situation should be associated with the results of evangelism. Changes in life situation resulting from moving, changing jobs, changing marital status, and the like tend to break down previous patterns of identification with family and friends. New identifications in this period of transition are only potential and are likely still quite weak. Hence, the more change a person has recently experienced in his life situation, the more it is likely that he should need some new reference group

identification. Evangelism provides a person with a new identification with individuals and with a local congregation as a new reference group. It should, therefore, be more likely that a person who has recently experienced a high degree of change in his life situation would be receptive to evangelistic persuasion. In addition to the spiritual values, his conversion would serve the function of establishing a new self-defining group affiliation to take the place of identifications which have been broken by changes in his life situation.

The degree of change that a subject had recently experienced in his life situation was measured by the psychological stress scale developed by Thomas H. Holmes. In Holmes' procedure, a numerical value is assigned to each change that a subject has recently experienced in his life situation. The specific numerical value assigned to each reported change is as follows:

Death of spouse	100
Divorce	73
Marital separation	65
Death of a close family member	63
Marriage	50
Marital reconciliation	45
Retirement	45
Gain of new family member	39
Change in financial status	38
Change in work responsibilities	29
Son or daughter growing up and leaving home	26
Wife beginning or stopping work	26
Beginning or end of school	26
Change in residence	20

The 720 subjects of this survey were arrayed according to the reported degree of change that they had recently experienced in their life situation. At one extreme was the group with the scores in the lowest 10 percent of the range. These subjects had experienced very little change in their life situation. At the other extreme was the group with scores in the highest 10

percent of the range. These subjects had experienced the highest degree of change in their life situation. Because of ties in ranks, groups were not of equal size. Results of a test comparing the relative degree of change in life situation for converts, drop-outs, and non-converts are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
CHANGE IN LIFE SITUATION

Subject Categories	Degree of Change in Life Situation										TOTALS
	Least Change					Most Change					
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Converts	3	3	6	11	24	22	26	34	53	58	240
Drop-Outs	27	36	29	40	21	27	20	17	11	12	240
Non-Converts	35	33	37	32	27	23	22	7	18	6	240
TOTALS	65	72	72	83	72	72	68	58	82	76	720

On the row for the converts, notice how the numbers in the cells get larger as you move from the group with the least change to the group with the most change. Only three of the 240 converts came from the group that had experienced the least change while 58 of the 240 converts came from the group which had experienced the most change. Less than 20 percent of the converts came from the five groups which had experienced less change in life situation while just over 80 percent of the converts came from the five groups which had experienced more change. The situation was exactly reversed with the drop-outs and non-converts. The numbers in the cells get smaller as you move from the group which had the least

change to the group which had the most change. Sixty-four percent of the drop-outs came from the five groups which had experienced more change while only 36 percent of the drop-outs came from the five groups which had experienced less change. Sixty-eight percent of the non-converts came from the five groups which had experienced more change while only 32 percent of the non-converts came from the five groups which had experienced less change. The data presented in Table 2 make it clear that the more change a person has recently experienced in his life situation, the more likely he is to be receptive to evangelistic persuasion. People with little change in their life situation are less likely to convert and more likely to drop out if they do convert.

Many evangelistic efforts in the church of Christ have focused on relatively young people as the ideal subjects for evangelism. The results of this research, however, suggest that *any time in life when a person experiences major change, he is much more likely to be receptive to evangelistic persuasion.* The greatest degree of change typically comes between the time a person graduates from high school and the time he reaches age 30. The years from 30 to 45 are typically rather stable in terms of life situation. Many people convert below the age of 30; few convert between the ages of 30 and 45. At around 45 to 50 years of age, however, there is another major period of change when a person's children grow up and leave home. There is another important period of change at 60 to 65 when a person retires. Later in life, there is another period of change when a person experiences the death of a spouse. Half of the stress points on the Holmes scale are assigned to events typically experienced after the age of 50. It does not, therefore, seem to be wise to concentrate entirely on young people while ignoring those who are older. There is nothing wrong with having ministers who specialize in working with young people, but perhaps there should also be ministers who specialize in working with older people. If present trends continue, before

the end of this century the majority of the people in the United States will be 50 years of age or older.

There was a time in our culture when older people were still very much a part of family life experience. They typically lived with or at least very near their children and grandchildren. That is no longer the case. Older people today are experiencing much more change in their life situation as they advance in years. They are often left without the direct influence of family and friends who previously made up their reference groups. Patterns of dissatisfaction are also very important in determining who will be a likely subject for evangelism, and older people in our culture tend to have the kinds of dissatisfactions which make them likely subjects for evangelism.

Another application of these findings about the degree of change in life situation is in regard to selecting communities for evangelistic efforts. Older and more stable communities are less likely fields in which to work than are the new, growing, changing communities. People who have just moved into a community and who have not yet put down their roots are much more likely to be receptive to evangelistic persuasion than are those people who have lived in one place for many years. This probably explains why congregations in rapidly growing suburban areas are not only growing rapidly by transfer of membership and by the baptism of members' children, but are also reaching far more adult converts than are congregations in older and more stable communities.

Perhaps the most important application of these findings about the change in life situation factor has to do with the method of outreach. Someone once said that the way to build a strong congregation is to find the hurt in a community and heal it. Look at that Holmes stress scale again. Notice how many of those items—especially the major ones—have something to do with the family. The change in residence factor—which accounts for so much of the growth of our suburban congregations—is worth only 20 points. You get 29

points for a son or daughter growing up and leaving home, 39 points for the addition of a new family member, 50 points for marriage, 65 points for marital separation, 73 points for divorce, 45 points for marital reconciliation, 63 points for the death of a family member, and 100 points for the death of a spouse. Seventy-five percent of the points in the Holmes scale are directly related to the family.

The family in modern American life is in trouble. Many marriages end in divorce or desertion. Many more continue as a constant battle—but not really as happy homes. Probably only 20 percent to 25 percent of the homes in this nation could be properly classified as happy homes—and even in these happy homes there is much room for improvement. New Testament Christianity has the only viable answer to the family problems this nation is experiencing. The church has something very valuable to offer the community. This is one way of finding the hurt in the community and healing it—and that makes congregations grow. If Christians can offer service to the community in helping to improve the quality of family life, they can reach people at a time in their lives when they are experiencing the greatest change in life situation. People who are not yet interested in learning how to save their souls are often interested in learning how to save their marriages and their homes. A church program stressing the family is one good way to get that job done. People will often attend a weekend workshop on family life when they would never attend a traditional gospel meeting. In such a workshop Christians can contact people who are likely to be receptive subjects for evangelism.

Benevolent work—especially the work of church-related child care agencies—is one of the most important ways in which Christians find the hurt in the community and heal it. The work of child care agencies can be one of the most effective evangelistic tools. The workers in child care agencies constitute one of the greatest resources of the church. These people

are trained in offering the kind of family counseling that heals the greatest hurt in the communities. The people in the church of Christ who are trained in marriage and family counseling could be used much more effectively in programs that would contact some of the people who are most likely to be receptive subjects for evangelism.

Patterns of Dissatisfaction

If the power of persuasion were totally in the message, then all who hear the gospel would obey. The truth is that the power of persuasion is in the person who is persuaded and the message serves only as a catalyst. The message may help to pull the trigger, but the power that produces the explosion is within the individual. Persuasion has to start with motives that are already present in the individual. It is important, therefore, to study patterns of dissatisfaction.

Subjects in this survey were asked whether or not they were dissatisfied with their denomination or with their non-religious life style before anyone from the church of Christ attempted to influence them. If they said that they were dissatisfied, they were asked to explain why they were dissatisfied. In addition, dissatisfied subjects were asked what things worried them, what things troubled them, and what things they were looking for in life at the time before anyone from the church of Christ tried to influence them.¹

¹The system used in assigning scores to these responses took into consideration both the strength of the expressed dissatisfaction and the degree to which the expressed dissatisfaction related to conversion. Those subjects who reported no dissatisfaction were assigned a score of 5 as a neutral point on a 1-9 scale. Those who reported dissatisfactions and concerns over moral or religious matters where gospel obedience would be an appropriate way of resolving the dissatisfaction were assigned scores between 6 and 9. Impersonal concerns (such as concern over the nation's high divorce rate) were scored lower; personal concerns (such as concern over a threatened divorce in the subject's family) were scored higher. The greater the intensity of the expressed concern the higher the score. With some subjects, the responses indicated concerns not relevant to or even

Some of the people interviewed in this survey reported no dissatisfactions at all. Few of these were found among the converts. Most were non-converts or drop-outs. Others listed various concerns or dissatisfactions—some personal, some impersonal, some weak, and some intense. Not all expressed concerns were relevant to evangelistic persuasion. Subjects who had inappropriate patterns of dissatisfaction were less likely to be in the convert category and more likely to be in the non-convert or drop-out categories. Subjects who had appropriate patterns of dissatisfaction were more likely to be found in the convert category—especially if their concerns were intense and personal.

In Table 3, converts, drop-outs, and non-converts are compared according to how they fit into nine categories representing their pattern of dissatisfaction. Only 8 percent of the converts had inappropriate concerns while 50 percent of the drop-outs and non-converts had an inappropriate pattern of concerns. Less than 3 percent of the converts reported no dis-

¹inconsistent with the attempt to persuade them to obey the gospel. When the pattern of responses was judged to be inappropriate or irrelevant, the subject was assigned a score on this item from 1 to 4, with 1 representing very personal and very intense concerns of an inappropriate nature and with 4 representing inappropriate impersonal concerns of low intensity. The judgment was made on the basis of the over-all pattern of expressed concerns.

TABLE 3
PATTERNS OF DISSATISFACTION

Subject Categories	Inappropriate Concerns				NO EXPRESSED CONCERNS	Appropriate Concerns				TOTALS
	Intense and/or very personal	Strong and/or personal	Moderate and/or impersonal	Weak and/or very impersonal		Weak and/or very impersonal	Moderate and/or impersonal	Strong and/or personal	Intense and/or very personal	
Converts	1	5	7	6	6	24	46	68	77	240
Drop-Outs	36	29	24	31	65	23	13	11	8	240
Non-Converts	37	33	26	24	86	19	9	4	2	240
TOTALS	74	67	57	61	157	66	68	83	87	720

satisfaction while 27 percent of the drop-outs and 36 percent of the non-converts reported no dissatisfaction. Eighty-nine percent of the converts reported appropriate concerns, while 23 percent of the drop-outs and 14 percent of the non-converts reported appropriate concerns. On the basis of these data it is possible to conclude that people who have an appropriate pattern of dissatisfaction are much more likely to convert. Those who have no dissatisfactions or who have an inappropriate pattern of dissatisfactions are much less likely to convert and much more likely to drop out if they do convert.

If a person is satisfied with his non-religious life style or with his present denominational affiliation, he is not at all

likely to convert. If he does convert, he is much more likely to drop out. Well over 90 percent of the people who are converting and staying converted were already dissatisfied with their religion or with their non-religious life style before anyone from the church of Christ tried to influence them. Some people in our brotherhood do almost all of their evangelism among the most satisfied, hard working, active members of various denominations. Such people are already interested in religion and therefore are willing to talk about religion. But the data from this survey indicate that such people are not likely subjects for evangelism. The dialogue of evangelism can produce dissatisfaction in such people. They may discover that their way of looking at things has been wrong. Dissatisfaction, therefore, may come after and as result of evangelism. In most cases, however, the people who are converting were already dissatisfied before we ever contacted them.

Many evangelistic efforts of the church of Christ in recent years have been designed deliberately to be as non-selective as possible. In door-to-door campaigns, Christians have tried to set up as many cottage meetings as possible. Such an approach might be justified if there were unlimited time, unlimited resources, and unlimited manpower. Time, however, is short; resources are limited; and the laborers still are few. It would seem wise, therefore, to concentrate efforts for now on the kind of canvassing that locates and identifies those people who are already looking and who are already dissatisfied for the right reasons. Christians ought to be looking for quality, not quantity, as they seek likely subjects for evangelism.

Religious Backgrounds

If religious conversion is at least partially explained in terms of individuals forming self-defining group affiliations, then it should be easier to secure such affiliation if the individual is already at least partially identified with the

group. One would predict, therefore, that the closer a subject is in his original theological position to that of the church of Christ, the greater the likelihood of his conversion. Subjects whose original theological positions were much more liberal or much more toward the fundamentalist extreme than that of the church of Christ should be much less likely to convert and much more likely to drop out if they do convert. In general, a subject is most likely to be attracted to a new reference group that is similar to his original reference group on all points except those points in the original reference group which he found objectionable.

One of the individual characteristics in this survey that turned out to be significant in distinguishing among converts, drop-outs, and non-converts was the relation of the subject's original theological position to that of the church of Christ. The 720 subjects interviewed in this survey indicated their religious affiliation at the time before anyone from the church of Christ tried to influence them to obey the gospel. For purposes of this particular comparison, the various religious groups were represented by points along a single 9-point conservative-liberal continuum. On this continuum, 1 equals extreme fundamentalist groups, 5 equals a position about the same as that of the church of Christ, and 9 equals groups much more liberal than the church of Christ. This particular continuum was defined in terms of the attitude of a particular group toward the interpretation and the authority of the Bible. On the issue of Biblical authority alone, the church of Christ might well be regarded as the most conservative religious group in the nation. On the related issue of interpretation, however, there are groups that should be classified more toward the fundamentalist end of the continuum.

The way people use the term "fundamentalist" has changed somewhat in recent years. There are members of the church of Christ who would not object to being call fundamentalists. In

this study, however, the term refers to the more classic type of fundamentalism. In those terms, fundamentalism means that the Bible must always be interpreted literally with no figurative meaning ever allowed. The premillennial groups are typical examples of that view.

In contrast to the classic type of fundamentalism, the position held by members of the church of Christ is the moderate position. That position is that the Bible should be interpreted using the same rules of hermeneutics that are applied to any other written document. The text should be interpreted literally unless something within the text itself indicates that a figurative meaning was intended. Figurative interpretation, however, should be allowed in these cases where the text itself so indicates.

The liberal position, which is accepted by most of the Protestant denominations, is that the text should be interpreted figuratively if a literal interpretation seems unreasonable on the basis of human reasoning. On this basis, liberal Protestant theologians regard all references to miracles, the supernatural, heaven, or hell as being figurative. The Catholic position is more conservative than that of the liberal Protestant groups, but the Catholics insist that the Bible be interpreted figuratively whenever a literal interpretation conflicts with Catholic tradition, statements by church councils, or statements by the Popes. On this scale, therefore, the Catholic position was given a score of 6. Extreme fundamentalist groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and other premillennial groups, were given a score of 1. Extreme liberal groups, such as the Unitarians, were assigned a score of 9. Subjects who had no religious affiliation or preference were assigned to the most liberal category. An anti-religious or non-religious position would likely minimize Biblical authority and argue for figurative interpretation even more than most liberal Protestant groups.

Table 4 presents the results of a test comparing converts,

drop-outs, and non-converts on how they fit into nine categories relating their original theological position to that of the church of Christ. As you look at the cells

TABLE 4
ORIGINAL THEOLOGICAL POSITION

Subject Categories	Original Theological Position of Subjects in Relation to the Theological Position of the church of Christ Groups									TOTALS
	Fundamentalist					Liberal				
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Converts	5	7	13	23	72	48	36	25	11	240
Drop-Outs	37	30	24	21	11	23	25	34	35	240
Non-Converts	35	23	26	24	15	19	29	32	37	240
TOTALS	77	60	63	68	98	90	90	91	83	720

of this table, notice how few converts but how many drop-outs and non-converts come from the groups at either extreme. Note that 30 percent of the converts already had a position about the same as that of the church of Christ (column 5). Only 5 percent of the drop-outs and 6 percent of the non-converts had that original position. Sixty percent of the converts had either the same original position as that of the church of Christ on this continuum or a position only slightly more conservative or slightly more liberal. Only 23 percent of the drop-outs and the non-converts were in that category. Seventy-seven percent of the drop-outs and 76 percent of the non-converts were classified in the six most extreme categories while only 30 percent of the converts held comparable theological positions. The data presented in Table 4 clearly indicate that those who

converted tended to be those whose original theological position was already similar to that of the church of Christ. Those whose original position was much more conservative or much more liberal were less likely to convert and more likely to drop out if they did convert. The data presented in Table 4 also indicate that people in the more liberal groups are converting much more often than those in the fundamentalist groups. The data on patterns of dissatisfaction show that people in the fundamentalist groups tend to be much more satisfied. Many people in the liberal Protestant denominations, however, are dissatisfied because of the growing trend toward liberalism in their denominations.

An interesting observation about the 720 subjects of this survey, as shown in Table 4, is that 37 percent of them came originally from groups more conservative than the church of Christ. Most observers of the modern religious scene would probably say that there are few groups more conservative than the church of Christ—even using the definition that was used in this survey. The great majority of Christendom is more liberal than the church of Christ. What this means is that members of the church of Christ are probably spending 37 percent of their time trying to influence no more than 5 percent or 10 percent of Christendom. And in that effort they are dealing with the people who are most satisfied with what they already have. Members of the church of Christ are spending less than half of their time trying to influence the great majority of Christendom. And yet there is far greater dissatisfaction among the members of the more liberal groups.

This chapter has focused primarily on those things about the individual which reflect the influence of his primary reference groups. In addition to the importance of the reference group analysis, the results reported in this chapter can also generally be understood in terms of alienation. In most cases a person begins the process of conversion by becoming alienated from his original reference group identification and from the self-

image that resulted from that reference group identification. At this point, the alienated individual comes into contact with one or more members of the church of Christ. He identifies with these Christians and with their congregation as a new reference group. In some cases the contact with members of the church of Christ comes before the alienation, but in any event the person is alienated from his original reference group identification and establishes a new identification with individual Christians and with their local congregation as a new reference group. In this environment of identification, he goes through a learning process and eventually obeys the gospel. In psychological terms, the result is a transformation of personal identity. In theological terms, the result is that the Christ who lives in the members of that congregation is formed in the heart of the new convert.

The Age Factor

In the study of the 720 subjects discussed throughout this chapter, one of the individual characteristic variables that did not turn out to be significant in distinguishing among converts, drop-outs, and non-converts was the age factor. Converts, drop-outs, and non-converts were equally distributed through all age levels. All 720 subject of that study, however, were adults. There is reason to suspect that the conversion process is somewhat different for children who are brought up by members of the church of Christ. For them, there is no alienation from an earlier reference group identification. And in the case of Christians' children who obey the gospel at an earlier age than was the case with the 720 subjects discussed throughout this chapter, there is reason to suspect that the age factor may be more important. A follow-up study was done to investigate this matter.

The records of several randomly selected congregations were studied for the period 1965-1970 in order to identify 200 subjects who were baptized at various ages. In no case was

there any record in these congregations of children being baptized before the age of 8, so that was selected as the starting point. The search was continued until there was a list of 25 subjects who were baptized at 8 years of age, 25 who were baptized at 9 years of age, and so on through the last group which included 25 subjects who were baptized at 15 years of age. The next step was a check of current records in these congregations in order to find out how many of these subjects had dropped out of the church and how many were still faithful members. Results of a test comparing those who were still faithful and those who have dropped out on the variable of the age at which they were baptized are presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5
PRESENT STATUS AND AGE AT TIME OF BAPTISM

Subject Categories	Age at which Subject Was Baptized								TOTALS
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
Still Faithful	7	9	11	12	15	15	16	17	102
Drop-Outs	18	16	14	13	10	10	9	8	98
TOTALS	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	200

The relation shown in Table 5 is quite weak, although statistically significant. As you go across the row for those who are still faithful, notice how the numbers in the cells get larger and larger as the age of baptism increases and notice how the reverse is true with those who have dropped out of the church.

In a continuation of this study, the records of the congregations were examined concerning those who are still faithful

members in order to determine how many had been satisfied with their original baptism and how many had later been re-baptized. Results of a test comparing those who were re-baptized and those who were not re-baptized on the variable of the age at which they were baptized originally are presented in Table 6. Notice how the younger the subject was at the time of his original baptism, the more likely he was to be re-baptized.

TABLE 6
RE-BAPTISM AND AGE
AT THE TIME OF THE ORIGINAL BAPTISM

Subject Categories	Age at which Subject was Baptized Originally								TOTALS
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
Re-Baptized	7	8	7	7	4	3	0	0	36
Not Re-Baptized	0	1	4	5	11	12	16	17	66
TOTALS	7	9	11	12	15	15	16	17	102

One final test was done with these data. In this test, the subjects who were eventually re-baptized were grouped with those who dropped out and this group was compared with those subjects who were not re-baptized and did not drop out. Results of that test are shown in Table 7.

TABLE 7
 PRESENT STATUS AND AGE
 AT TIME OF ORIGINAL BAPTISM

Subject Categories	Age at which Subject was Baptized Originally								TOTALS
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
Still Faithful, Not Re-Baptized	0	1	4	5	11	12	16	17	66
Re-Baptized or Dropped Out	25	24	21	20	14	13	9	8	134
TOTALS	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	200

The data reported in Table 7 make it very clear that age at the time of baptism is an important factor. Only 2 percent of those who were baptized before the age of 10 remained faithful and were satisfied with their original baptism. Less than 7 percent of those who were baptized before the age of 11 remained faithful and were satisfied with their original baptism. Only 10 percent of those who were baptized before the age of 12 remained faithful and were satisfied with their original baptism. Forty-four percent of those who were baptized at the age of 12 remained faithful and were satisfied with their original baptism. Sixty percent of those baptized after the age of 12 remained faithful and were satisfied with their original baptism. These data make it clear that subjects who are baptized before the age of 12 are much more likely to drop out of the church or to be dissatisfied with their original baptism. Subjects who are baptized at the age of 12 or older are much less likely to drop out of the church or to be re-baptized.

An explanation of these survey results may be found in what

typically happens in the development of children at about the age of 12 or 13. The ability to do abstract thinking typically develops at about this time. This is the major reason for the distinction in our modern educational system between elementary and secondary education. The ability to do abstract thinking typically begins about the time a child enters the sixth or seventh grade and thus enters a middle school or a junior high school.

According to Acts 5:14 and Acts 8:12, New Testament baptism was for men and women. There is no Bible example of boys and girls being baptized. Jewish usage gives us a way of understanding how these terms were used. In the Jewish tradition, a boy was regarded as becoming a man for purposes of worship after his twelfth birthday. This is probably the significance of the visit of Jesus to Jerusalem when he was 12 years old (Lk. 2:41-52). In the modern Jewish tradition, the bar mitzvah comes at the time of the thirteenth birthday. The Jewish tradition, therefore, regards a boy as becoming a man for religious purposes at about the same time that modern educators tell us a child first develops the ability to do abstract thinking.

There are some things about gospel obedience that would seem to call for the ability to do abstract thinking as a necessary prerequisite. The essence of sin is rebellion against God. A very small child can obviously do things that are wrong, but at that level of development those acts are essentially a rebellion against parental authority rather than a rebellion against God. At this stage of development, therefore, there is a serious question as to whether or not the child could be regarded as a sinner. There is also, therefore, a serious question as to whether or not baptism at this stage of development could really be for the remission of sin. God does not want children to sin just so they can qualify for baptism. They must, however, become mature enough to think in the abstract terms necessary to understand the nature of rebellion

against God. They must be able to recognize that, because of the limitations of human nature, they are and in this life they always will be imperfect by God's standards. They must be able to see that they cannot earn salvation by their own merit. They must, therefore, recognize their need for a Savior.

It is important to reach children and start teaching them at the earliest possible age. Some very good teaching programs have been developed in an effort to make sure that young people know what they are doing when they are baptized. There is some question, however, as to whether the knowledge factor alone is enough to consider. There is also the principle of readiness. A five year old could memorize and recite all the right answers, but no five year old is ready for baptism.

These reflections on the question concerning the proper age for baptism have not resolved the issue. It is not possible to set any certain age as the age of accountability. This is really a condition or a state, not an age. Furthermore, much more research is called for before empirical investigation could give us anything more than the hint suggested in this study.

Conclusion

In the case of teaching Christians' children, the conversion process does not involve alienation from previous reference group identifications. Such alienation, however, is involved in the case of the adult convert. In both cases it is important that the subject identify with individual Christians and with a local congregation as a reference group. Within this framework of identification, the subject learns and obeys the gospel. As a result of this process, the Christ who lived first in Christians is formed in the heart of the convert. That is what evangelism is all about.

CHAPTER THREE

A PROFILE OF THE GROWING CONGREGATION

The primary research on which this book is based involved an in depth study of 48 selected congregations. These congregations were selected on the basis of their net growth rate. For purposes of this study, net growth rate was defined as the adult conversion rate minus the drop-out rate of these adult converts. Sixteen of these congregations were in the top 20 percent of a large nationwide sample in regard to their net growth rate, 16 were in the middle 20 percent, and 16 were in the bottom 20 percent. The previous chapter focused on some individual characteristics of converts, drop-outs, and non-converts in these selected congregations. The focus of this chapter is on differences which distinguish among congregations with a high, medium, or low net growth rate.

One finding of this research was that the 16 congregations with the highest adult conversion rate did not have the highest net growth rate. In the 16 congregations of the high net growth rate group, the adult conversion rate was 6.9 per year. The average drop-out rate of these adult converts was only .33 per year—a drop-out rate of only 5 percent. Thus the average net growth rate was 6.57 per year. In the 16 congregations of the medium net growth rate group, the average adult conversion rate was very high—9.12 per year. The drop-out rate of these adult converts, however, was also very high—4.26. That means that 47 percent of these converts became drop-outs. The

net growth rate in these congregations, therefore, was only 4.86 per year. In the 16 congregations of the low net growth rate group, the average adult conversion rate was only 2.84 per year. The drop-out rate of these adult converts was 1.37. In other words, 48 percent of these converts eventually dropped out of the church. The net growth rate, therefore, was only 1.47 per year. All of these differences were statistically significant.

It takes both a high conversion rate and a low drop-out rate to produce a high net growth rate. The medium net growth rate group was baptizing more adults than were the congregations in the two other groups. The medium net growth rate group of congregations had the highest adult conversion rate. Their problem was that they also had the highest drop-out rate and thus their net growth was only moderate. The low net growth rate group of congregations had two problems: a low conversion rate and a high drop-out rate.

In many ways the congregations of the medium net growth rate group are the most interesting. Congregations of this type receive a great deal of attention because of the relatively large number of baptisms they report. Some other congregations do not baptize quite as many people and therefore do not receive as much publicity, but because their drop-out rate is so low they are actually doing more good in the long run than are the congregations of the medium net growth rate group. What the church of Christ needs to do is to combine the best features of the medium net growth rate group (high conversion rate) and of the high net growth rate group (low drop-out rate). Then it will really have an acceleration of its growth curve.

The reader should keep in mind that throughout the United States, the average congregation of the church of Christ has about 160 members and is baptizing only eight people per year—and only two of these are adult converts. That is one baptism per year for every 20 members and only one adult convert per year for every 80 members. The average drop-out rate is 50 percent. The 48 congregations involved in the

research project discussed here were somewhat larger than average and had a higher than average conversion rate. The important thing in this research is not that these 48 congregations are statistically representative of the church of Christ throughout the United States, but rather that the *differences* among these three groups of congregations are representative of *differences* that are characteristics of the church of Christ throughout the nation. That which distinguishes among the high, medium, and low net growth rate congregations of this survey is likely to be the very same thing as what distinguishes among the growth rates of congregations throughout the nation.

A Membership Similar to the Community

The church must be significantly different from the community in many important moral and spiritual factors. There are, however, some ways in which it helps for a local congregation to be similar to the community in which it is located. In the study of the 720 primary subjects of this research (240 converts, 240 drop-outs, and 240 non-converts), subjects were much more likely to be found in the convert category if they were similar in age, socio-economic status, and educational level to the congregation with which they were associated. Where there was much difference between the subject and the congregation, the subject was much less likely to be a convert and much more likely to be either a non-convert or a drop-out.

Any effort to persuade a person to affiliate with a group is much more likely to be successful if the individual and the group already have some areas of partial identification. This being the case, it logically follows that a congregation that is similar to the community in which it is located on such variables as age, socio-economic status, and educational level would be drawing most of its converts from the largest portion of the population and would, therefore, have a good potential

for growth. On the other hand, a congregation which differs significantly from the community in which it is located would be drawing most of its converts from a smaller part of the population and thus would have less potential for growth.

As was reported in Chapter 2, age was not within itself a significant factor in distinguishing among the adults who were converts, drop-outs, and non-converts. But the relation between the average age in the congregation and the average age in the community did turn out to be important. The more similarity there was between the average age in the congregation and the average age in the community, the higher the conversion rate and the higher the new growth rate. In the 16 congregations with a high net growth rate, the average age in the congregation was only 2 years 9 months above the average age in the community. In the medium net growth rate group of congregations the average age in the congregation was 7 years 7 months above the average age in the community. In the low net growth rate group of congregations, the average age in the congregation was 11 years 9 months above the average age in the community. All of these differences were statistically significant.

In this research the traditional labels of upper, upper-middle, middle, lower-middle, and lower class were used to describe the average levels of socio-economic status in the congregations and in the communities. The high net growth rate group of congregations had an average position about one half a level above that of the community. The medium net growth rate group of congregations had an average position about one half a level below that of the community. The low net growth rate group of congregations had an average position more than two levels below the community. In this survey, the greater the similarity between congregation and community in average socio-economic status levels, the higher the net growth rate.

This research involved five educational levels from the high school drop-out to the graduate degree level. The high net growth rate group of congregations had an average position on this variable about one half a level above that of the community. The medium net growth rate group of congregations had an average position on the educational level variable about half a level below the community. The low net growth rate group of congregations had an average position more than two levels below the community on the variable of average educational level. The greater the similarity between congregation and community on the educational level, the higher the conversion rate, the lower the drop-out rate, and thus the higher the net growth rate.

These findings do not indicate that people of any particular age group, socio-economic status level, or educational level are the best subjects for evangelism. What they do indicate is that the congregation which will be most efficient in evangelizing the community in which it is located—all other things being equal—is the congregation which is similar to or just slightly above the community on these variables. A congregation where the average age is quite high could do an effective job if that congregation were located in a retirement village, but would probably be limited in effectiveness if located in a young suburban community. A congregation made up of middle class members could do an effective job if located in a middle or lower-middle class neighborhood, but would probably be less effective in an upper class neighborhood. A congregation in which the average member has only a high school education could do an effective job in a community with a similar or slightly lower educational level, but would probably be somewhat limited in a university community. One reason that the growth rate levels off in some congregations is that the addition of new members significantly changes the make-up of the congregation and thus changes its relationship to the community.

A Heterogeneous Membership

It is clear that similarity of subject and congregation is important and similarity of congregation and community is also important. If a congregation has a very homogeneous membership in regard to age, socio-economic status, or educational level, then the congregation would be similar to only a small segment of the community. This would seem to suggest that a homogeneous congregation would be less successful in attracting and keeping converts than would be the case with a heterogeneous congregation. In a heterogeneous congregation, almost everyone in the community would find some people with whom he is already at least partially identified because of similarity in such things as age, socio-economic status, and educational level. A heterogeneous congregation would, therefore, attract more people. It might be argued, however, that the appeal of a homogeneous congregation would be stronger—although that appeal would be limited to a smaller segment of the community. Several writers in the church growth field have taken that position. The question, then, is this: Is a weak appeal to a large segment of the population or a strong appeal to a small segment of the population more effective in producing a higher net growth rate?

The results of this survey offer only a very tentative answer to this question. None of the 48 congregations surveyed really had a high degree of heterogeneity. Furthermore, it is possible that another factor was involved. The more heterogeneous congregations in this survey tended to be located in places where the church of Christ is numerically rather weak. Most of these heterogeneous congregations were the only congregation of the church of Christ in their communities. The more homogeneous congregations tended to be located in places where there were several congregations of the church of Christ. It is clear, therefore, that much more research is needed. These survey results, however, indicate that the more heterogeneous the congregation is in regard to the age of its

members, the higher the conversion rate and the higher the net growth rate. The more heterogeneous a congregation is in regard to the socio-economic status of its members, the higher the conversion rate, the lower the drop-out rate, and the higher the net growth rate. The more heterogeneous a congregation is in regard to the educational level of its members the higher the conversion rate, the lower the drop-out rate, and the higher the net growth rate. All of these differences are statistically significant.

In heterogeneous congregations which are similar to the community, more members are likely to come into personal contact with non-members. Furthermore, these non-members are likely to find areas of partial identification with more members in such things as similarity of age, similarity of socio-economic status, or similarity of educational level. This should facilitate the process of those non-members establishing a self-defining reference group identification with that local congregation.

Some writers in the church growth field have argued that the best policy is to have many small homogeneous congregations in a community and to have each congregation focus on a different group in regard to age, socio-economic status, educational level, and the like. However, for such an approach to be effective, it would be necessary to have a level of organization above that of the local congregation in order to determine where, when, and how new congregations would be built. The churches of Christ do not believe that such extra-congregational levels of organization are approved by God. Furthermore, such a fragmentation of the church seems to be contrary to the principal of unity taught in the New Testament (Col. 3:11). Such fragmentation greatly compounds the problem of the already serious shortage of preachers and the even more serious shortage of qualified leaders. The smaller a congregation is, the larger a percentage of its budget must go to provide for local expenses and thus a smaller percentage of

the budget is available for mission work and benevolent work. It is largely because of a tendency to establish small homogeneous congregations and thus tie up most of its financial resources in local expenses that the church of Christ throughout the United States is spending 3 percent of its budget to help the needy and only 2 percent on mission work. The first congregation of Christendom grew to a membership of between 50,000 and 100,000 before persecution scattered the Christians throughout the world. Perhaps Christians today should not start worrying about a congregation being too big until it approaches the size of that congregation in Jerusalem. A few large heterogeneous congregations can do far more to spread the gospel of Christ than can many small homogeneous congregations.

An Involved Membership

People differ in the degree to which they are identified with various groups. For some people their religious group identification plays a very minor role in their self-image. For others it is central. The involvement level of individual members of the church of Christ was measured and compared with a measurement of how central their church membership was in their self-image. That research found a very high positive correlation between these two measurements. Church membership is a central part of the self-image of people who are highly involved in the work of the church. Such church membership is only a minor part of the self-image of those who are not actively involved in the work of the church.

A part of what happens in conversion is that affiliation with a congregation helps a convert define himself. The more involved a person becomes in the work of the congregation, the more important the congregation becomes in his life. It logically follows, therefore, that a congregation which offers people many opportunities for involvement would be more successful in attracting and keeping converts than would a

congregation which offers few opportunities for involvement. In order to test this assumption, the involvement level was measured in each of the 48 congregations included in this survey. The involvement score included the following items:

- 1) the average percentage of members in attendance at the regularly scheduled services of the congregation;
- 2) the percentage of members having a leadership role in the congregation;
- 3) the percentage of members having a specific work assignment; and,
- 4) contribution per member per week—with one point counted for each ten cents in contributions.

In the 48 congregations, the involvement scores ranged from a low of 120 to a high of 259 with 175 as the average. In the high net growth rate group of congregations the average involvement score was about 207. The average involvement score in the medium net growth rate group of congregations was about 177. The average involvement score was only 142 in the low net growth rate group of congregations. All of these differences were statistically significant. The involvement level was clearly an important factor in determining whether or not a congregation was successful in evangelism. The higher the involvement level the higher the conversion rate, the lower the drop-out rate, and thus the higher the net growth rate.

Size as a Factor in Involvement

An analysis of data on congregational size and involvement level in almost 1,500 local congregations has revealed a consistent negative correlation. In general, the larger the congregation the lower the involvement level. Actually it is not quite as simple as that. In very small congregations there is so little to be involved in that the involvement level is low. But the involvement level increases rapidly with congregational size up to a membership of about 200. After that, the involvement level drops rapidly as congregational size increases. Alan Wicker, a psychologist who studied the Method-

ist Church, found essentially the same results. One problem with these results, however, is that they do not explain the causes of the lower involvement level in the larger congregation. Another problem is that they do not explain the many exceptions to the rule. Some congregations which I have studied had the "ideal" size of around 200 but had a very low involvement level, while some very large congregations had a very high involvement level. Obviously additional research was called for.

The Ratio of Roles to Members

Why does the involvement level tend to decrease as size increases? The most logical explanation, in my opinion, is that offered by Roger Barker and his associates. Their approach is called Behavior Setting Theory. The main element in this theory is the ratio of the number of available roles for the members to fill to the number of members who are available to fill those roles. In Barker's study of big and small schools, he found that involvement levels decrease as school size increases. The reason for this, according to Barker's research, is that the number of available roles to be filled by the students does not increase as fast as does the number of students who are available to fill those roles. In a very small school there might be two roles for every student. In a very large school there might be two students for every role. Barker found that the correlation between the actual roles-to-member ratio and the involvement level was much stronger than the correlation between size and the involvement level.

In order to apply this approach to the church situation, church leaders were asked to identify all the roles available to be filled in the program of work at their congregations. One congregation with around 2,000 members found that it had only 400 roles to be filled. That congregation's entire program of work could have been done with only 20 percent of the members having a specific task assignment and with no member having more than one job. Eighty percent of the

members had nothing to do. The involvement level in that congregation was very low. In the years since that initial research was conducted, that particular congregation has made many organizational improvements in an effort to develop more meaningful task assignments for members. Today, even though that congregation has continued to increase in size, the actual roles-to-member ratio is much higher and the involvement level has greatly improved.

The correlation between the actual roles-to-member ratio and the involvement level is much higher than the correlation between size and the involvement level. The problem with the larger congregations is that they have not been able to increase the number of task assignments fast enough to keep pace with their expanding membership. The involvement level is often low because there simply are not enough jobs to go around. When this happens, the congregation has an organizational problem and may need the help of a qualified organizational consultant.

Actually, the real problem was not always the actual roles-to-member ratio, but was sometimes the perceived roles-to-member ratio. In other words, a larger congregation might actually have more than enough specific task assignments to go around, but the members might not be aware of the many ways in which they could get involved. A follow-up study to check on this was conducted in the 48 congregations which were involved in the primary research project. In each of those congregations, a random sample was taken of at least 10 percent of the members or 50 members—whichever was larger. These members were asked to identify the number of specific roles, jobs, or task assignments they were aware of that were available in their congregation. That figure divided by the membership of that congregation is that person's perception of the roles-to-member ratio in that congregation. The figures given by all subjects surveyed in each congregation were averaged for that congregation and the resulting figure was

used as an estimate of the perceived roles-to-member ratio for that congregation.

When the perceived roles-to-member ratios were averaged for all 16 congregations in the high net growth rate group, the resulting figure was approximately .55—meaning that these people were aware of about 55 jobs for each 100 members in their congregation. The average perceived roles-to-member ratio for the medium net growth rate group of congregations was about .43 or about 43 jobs for each 100 members. The average perceived roles-to-member ratio for the low net growth rate group of congregations was about .27 or about 27 jobs for each 100 members. All of these differences were statistically significant. Furthermore, there was an extremely high positive correlation between the involvement scores in each congregation and the perceived roles-to-member ratio for that congregation. A correlation of 1.0 is a perfect correlation. Correlations that strong are almost never found in social science research. But in this case a correlation of .99868 was found and that is the highest correlation the author has ever seen in social science research. What that means is simply that it is not just the size of the congregation that influences the involvement level and it is not just the actual roles-to-member ratio. The size and involvement correlation is significant, but it explains only 30 percent of the variance. The correlation of the actual roles-to-member ratio and involvement is even stronger, but it explains only 70 percent of the variance. The correlation of the perceived roles-to-member ratio and involvement is so strong that it explains all but .0026% of the variance.

If a congregation has a good actual roles-to-member ratio but a low perceived roles-to-member ratio, the problem is one of communication and the congregation may need the services of a qualified communication consultant. A congregation can have a high involvement level no matter how large it becomes—if that congregation will do the necessary organ-

izational work so as to have a high actual roles-to-member ratio and if the congregation's leaders will communicate in the right way so as to have a high perceived roles-to-member ratio. If a congregation can maintain a high involvement level, its conversion rate will be higher, its drop-out rate will be lower, and thus its net growth rate will be higher.

The Role of the Preacher

The role of the pulpit minister is so important in the life of the congregation that this discussion of congregational characteristics would not be complete without a discussion of the role of the preacher. Many people in the church of Christ throughout the United States would probably have predicted that it would be possible to distinguish among congregations in the high, medium, and low net growth rate groups on the basis of several characteristics of the preacher. In this research, however, many of the characteristics people might have regarded as important did not turn out to be significant at all.

Many congregations of the church of Christ—particularly the large growing suburban congregations—refuse to consider employing anyone as their minister unless he is relatively young. They seem to think that a young preacher will attract young people and that this is what is needed for the congregation to grow—particularly if it is a suburban congregation. Middle-aged preachers are thus pushed into the smaller towns or into the older downtown congregations. Older preachers are pushed even further back. Results of this research, however, indicate that the age of the preacher was not a significant factor in distinguishing among congregations in the high, medium, and low net growth rate groups. In fact, what little statistical difference there was favored the older rather than the younger preachers.

The educational level of the preacher was another factor that did not turn out to be statistically significant. What difference there was favored the preachers with more educa-

tion, but that difference was not significant. The characteristics of the preacher that turned out to be significant were the preacher's view of evangelism and the preacher's style of preaching.

The Preacher's View of Evangelism

The 48 pulpit ministers interviewed were asked to read three statements concerning the nature of evangelism. These statements were designed to reflect three models which will be discussed in a later chapter: the information transmission model, the manipulative monologue model, and the non-manipulative dialogue model. Each preacher was asked to indicate the statement which came the closest to expressing his own view. Results of this test are presented in Table 8. Notice that all the congregations in

TABLE 8
PREACHER'S VIEW OF
EVANGELISM AND NET GROWTH RATE

Net Growth Rate Groups of Congregations	Preacher's View of Evangelism			T O T A L S
	Information Transmission	Manipulative Monologue	Non- Manipulative Dialogue	
High	0	0	16	16
Medium	1	15	0	16
Low	14	1	1	16
TOTALS	15	16	17	48

the high net growth rate group had pulpit ministers who accepted the non-manipulative dialogue model of evangelism. In the medium net growth rate group of congregations, 94 percent of the preachers accepted the manipulative monologue model (remember that this is the group with the highest conversion rate and also the highest drop-out rate). In the low net growth rate group, 87 percent of the congregations had preachers who accepted the information transmission model.

The Preacher's Style of Preaching

In a pilot study, 100 ministers were asked to describe their style of preaching. Two groups emerged in this study. One group of preachers characterized their preaching as being basically positive and aimed primarily at the needs of people who are already members of the church in order to provide encouragement, inspiration, and instruction. The other group of preachers characterized their preaching as being basically negative ("corrective" was the term that most of these preachers preferred), aimed primarily at the needs of people who have not yet obeyed the gospel, and intended to demonstrate the error of various religious doctrines and practices.

The pulpit ministers of the 48 congregations included in this survey were given two statements to read concerning style of preaching. One statement characterized the positive and the other the negative style as outlined above. These 48 ministers were asked to indicate which statement came the closest to being an accurate description of their own style of preaching. In the obtained data it was possible to distinguish among congregations in the high, medium, and low net growth rate

groups, on the basis of the preacher's style of preaching. These data are presented in Table 9. Notice that in

TABLE 9
STYLE OF PREACHING AND NET GROWTH RATE

Net Growth Rate Groups of Congregations	Preacher's Style of Preaching		T O T A L S
	Positive	Negative	
High	14	2	16
Medium	3	13	16
Low	4	12	16
TOTALS	21	27	48

the high net growth rate group, 87 percent of the preachers chose the positive style. In the medium net growth rate group, 81 percent of the preachers chose the negative style. In the low net growth rate group, 75 percent of the preachers chose the negative style.

As one might suspect, in the obtained data the preacher's view of evangelism and the preacher's style of preaching were related. As shown in Table 10, 80 percent of the preachers who accepted the information transmission model

TABLE 10
PREACHER'S STYLE OF PREACHING
AND VIEW OF EVANGELISM

Style of Preaching	Preacher's View of Evangelism			TOTALS
	Information Transmission	Manipulative Monologue	Non-Manipulative Dialogue	
Positive	3	1	17	21
Negative	12	15	0	27
TOTALS	15	16	17	48

as their view of evangelism had a negative style of preaching. All of those who accepted a non-manipulative dialogue view of evangelism had a positive style of preaching. Ninety-four percent of those who accepted the manipulative monologue model had a negative style of preaching.

The role of the pulpit minister has been somewhat de-emphasized in recent years as the church of Christ has placed more and more stress on the importance of personal evangelism. The research reported in this book, however, tends to support a view of the evangelistic process in which the preacher plays a very important role. The identification of the subject with the local congregation is a crucial part of the evangelistic process. The preacher is perhaps the most important single factor in projecting the image of the congregation. Furthermore, pulpit preaching provides the subject with exposure to a Christian personality in a more powerful way than almost any other means of evangelism. Dynamic, Christ-centered pulpit preaching allows the subject to see the Christ who lives in the heart of the preacher.

Contrary to popular terminology in the church of Christ, pulpit preaching is not an impersonal form of evangelism. Pulpit preaching is personal evangelism. What Christians usually call personal evangelism could be even more effective in this regard, but usually, in the perceptions of those being influenced, it is not. The 720 primary subjects of this survey were asked to discuss the various methods of evangelism to which they were exposed. When personal evangelism was done with excessive reliance on charts, film strips, slides, projectors, record players, and the like (and this was typically the case in the cottage meetings involved in this survey), the subjects perceived the encounter as being less personal than a sermon. They typically saw the personal worker as being like a manipulator of equipment rather than as being a friend engaged in a genuine dialogue. Sermons were rated by these 720 subjects as being more personal than any other method of evangelism with the single exception of a personal evangelism encounter of the conversational variety.

Summary

This chapter has presented data suggesting that certain group characteristics must be considered in predicting the success of a congregation in its efforts to attract and keep new converts. On the basis of the data presented in this chapter, the following conclusions can be reached about optimal conditions for evangelism:

- 1) the average age in the congregation was similar to the average age in the community;
- 2) the average socio-economic status level in the congregation was similar to or slightly above the average socio-economic status level in the community;
- 3) the average educational level in the congregation was similar to or slightly above the average educational level in the community;
- 4) the congregation was heterogeneous in regard to age;

- 5) the congregation was heterogeneous in regard to socio-economic status;
- 6) the congregation was heterogeneous in regard to educational level;
- 7) the congregation had a high level of involvement based on a high perceived roles-to-member ratio;
- 8) the congregation's pulpit minister viewed evangelism as a non-manipulative dialogue rather than as information transmission or a manipulative monologue; and,
- 9) the congregation's pulpit minister had a positive style of preaching.

The importance of these group characteristic variables can be seen in a test of their combined predictive power. Nine predictions, as outlined above, were made and confirmed in the data presented in this chapter. These predictions relate to the question of which characteristics would be associated with congregations in the high, medium, and low net growth rate groups. For purposes of this test of combined predictive power, these nine variables were dichotomized so that each congregation either matched or did not match the prediction. A congregation which did not match any of these predictions would thus score 0 and a congregation which matched all of these predictions would score nine. In the obtained data, the average congregation in the high net growth rate group scored 7.94. The average score in the medium net growth rate group of congregations was 6.09. In the low net growth rate group of congregations the average score was 3.19. All of these differences were statistically significant. No congregation in the high net growth rate group scored lower than six and no congregation in the low net growth rate group scored higher than four.

It would seem, on the basis of the individual characteristic data presented in Chapter 2 and the group characteristic data presented in this chapter, that there is strong support for the view of the evangelistic process that is presented in this book.

The individual most likely to convert and not drop out is that individual who, for some reason, has a higher than average need for establishing a self-defining identification with a congregation as a reference group. The congregation which is most likely to make and keep converts is the congregation which is in the best position to fulfill the needs of individuals who are seeking a self-defining identification with a congregation as a reference group.

The above line of analysis suggests that the conversion process will be most effective when the individual is not only exposed to persuasive messages designed to secure his obedience to the gospel, but is also exposed to those messages which are used within the congregation to increase the involvement level of the members. The distinction that is traditionally made in the church of Christ between "evangelism" to attract new members and "edification" to increase the involvement level of the present members is not necessarily a valid distinction—at least not in the perception of the subjects. Any communication designed to increase the involvement level of the present members by showing them how much they are needed and how many things they could be doing in the congregation would also serve an evangelistic function of attracting new members. Such communication would make these subjects see the congregation as a group in which they would be needed and wanted. In a similar way, any communication designed to attract new members could serve as edification for the present members in that it would tend to reinforce their original commitment to the group.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVANGELISTIC METHODS AND RESULTS

Throughout this book evangelism has been discussed in terms of a process in which a Christian influences another person in such a way that this other person identifies with the Christian and with his local congregation as a reference group. In this environment of identifications, the other person learns and obeys the gospel. Thus the Christ who lives in the heart of the individual members of that congregation is formed in the heart of the new convert. A personal relationship is essential in this process.

In the primary research on which this book is based, 240 converts and 240 drop-outs were asked to indicate changes in their friendship patterns. Each subject was given a score reflecting the degree of change in his friendship pattern. In that score, one point was added for each former friend who is not a member of the church of Christ and who is no longer a close personal friend. An additional point was added for each new close personal friendship formed between the subject and some member of the congregation with which he affiliated. In the obtained data these scores ranged from zero to nine. One problem with comparing converts and drop-outs on this variable was that the drop-outs might have formed fewer close personal friendships in the congregation simply because they dropped out and thus did not have the same opportunity to form such friendships as did the converts. In order to correct for this, it was necessary to match converts and drop-outs for

the length of time that they were active members of the congregation. For example, converts who were interviewed six months after their baptism were matched with drop-outs who were active members of the congregation for six months before they dropped out. It was not possible to find such a match on all 240 converts and 240 drop-outs. This comparison, therefore, was limited to 50 converts whose length of membership matched that of 50 drop-outs. The data from that comparison are presented in Table 11. These data suggest that

TABLE 11
CHANGES IN FRIENDSHIP PATTERNS

Subject Categories	Number of Changes in Friendship Pattern Following conversion										TOTALS
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Converts	0	0	0	1	2	2	8	13	12	12	50
Drop-Outs	8	13	14	8	4	2	1	0	0	0	50
TOTALS	8	13	14	9	6	4	9	13	12	12	100

when subjects formed personal relationships with members of the congregation, they were likely to remain faithful. When they did not form such personal relationships, they were likely to drop out of the church.

The data presented in Table 11 clearly illustrate the need for an efficient new member orientation program in local congregations in order to cut down on the drop-out rate. These data, however, show much more than that. They also demonstrate

the importance of a personal relationship with individual Christians as a part of the total conversion process.

Similarity of Age

In the data obtained in this survey it was possible to distinguish among converts, drop-outs, and non-converts on the basis of the relative degree of similarity between the age of the subject and the age of the person who was trying to influence that subject to obey the gospel. The average age difference between the personal workers and the converts was 11 years 3 months. For the drop-outs this figure was 23 years 7 months. For the non-converts the average age difference was 25 years 11 months. All of these differences were statistically significant. In the data obtained in this survey, the typical personal worker was younger than the average member of the congregation and was also younger than the subject he was trying to influence. In 47 percent of the cases the personal workers were trying to influence older subjects. In 15 percent of the cases they were trying to influence people about their own age. And in 38 percent of the cases they were trying to influence younger subjects.

Similarity of Socio-Economic Status

The socio-economic status levels used in this comparison are the same five levels used earlier in reference to congregation-community similarity and subject-congregation similarity. In 45 percent of the cases studied in this research of 720 converts, drop-outs, and non-converts, the subjects had a level of socio-economic status which differed by two or more levels from that of the personal worker who was trying to influence them, but only 20 percent of the converts came from this group, while 68 percent of the non-converts and 88 percent of the drop-outs were in this category. By way of contrast, 55 percent of the subjects had a level of socio-economic status the same as or just one level above or below that of the personal worker who was trying to influence them, yet this group accounted for 80 percent of the converts.

Similarity of Educational Level

In the comparison of subjects and the personal workers who were trying to influence them, data from this survey revealed that 51 percent of the subjects had an educational level which differed by two or more levels from that of the personal worker, but only 34 percent of the converts came from this group. On the other hand, 49 percent of the subjects had the same educational level or just one level above or below that of the personal worker, yet this group accounted for 66 percent of the converts.

Direction of Influence

While the general finding of the research discussed above is that similarity between subject and personal worker is important, additional analysis of the data revealed that when there is a difference, the direction of that difference is important. The best results are achieved when the personal worker and the subject are about the same age. When there is an age difference, it is better for the personal worker to be older than the subject. In the same way, it is best for the personal worker and the subject to be at about the same socioeconomic status level and educational level. When there is a difference, it is better for the personal worker to be above rather than below the subject on these variables. Results are better when the direction of influence is downward rather than upward, but the best results are achieved when the direction of influence is horizontal.

A possible explanation of these findings about similarity and direction of influence is the research that has been done on source credibility. Most research on source credibility has found three main factors: trustworthiness, competence, and dynamism—with the first two factors being much more important than the third. Trustworthiness is enhanced when source and receiver are as similar as possible. That is the situation in which the receiver of a message is most likely to feel that the source of the message is trustworthy. Competence

is enhanced when the source is perceived as being better informed or more of an expert than the receiver on the particular matter being discussed. Evangelism is most likely to be effective when the personal worker and the subject are as much alike as possible on every dimension except that the personal worker knows more about the Bible. The optimal situation is not one in which the subject sees the personal worker as being vastly superior in Bible knowledge. In that situation, the subject is likely to feel intimidated. What is best is for the personal worker to be seen as knowing just a little more about the Bible than the subject does. If the personal worker can also be dynamic, then all factors are present and the subject would likely be most receptive.

The Personal Worker's View of Evangelism

The research for this book included interviews with the 513 Christians who were identified as being the ones who influenced or tried to influence the 720 converts, drop-outs, and non-converts.¹

The 513 personal workers involved in this study were asked to read the same three descriptions of evangelism that were used in the study of the preachers. Each personal worker was asked to indicate which of the three statements came the closest to describing his own view of evangelism. These three statements were designed to reflect three different views of evangelism: evangelism as transmission of information, evangelism as a manipulative monologue, and evangelism as a non-manipulative dialogue. In the obtained data it was possible to

¹Throughout the church of Christ in the United States, the term personal worker is typically used to identify such people as these 513 Christians. I personally have some misgivings about the use of this term. It seems to imply that those who are involved in other kinds of evangelism are doing something impersonal. I do not believe that this is the case. All evangelism is personal as I understand it. However, for the sake of effective communication, I have used the term personal worker throughout this book—especially in this chapter.

distinguish among converts, drop-outs, and non-converts on the basis of the personal worker's view of evangelism. These data are presented in Table 12.

TABLE 12
INFLUENCE ON SUBJECTS OF THE
PERSONAL WORKER'S VIEW OF EVANGELISM

Categories of Subjects	Personal Worker's View of Evangelism			T O T A L S
	Information Transmission	Manipulative Monologue	Non- Manipulative Dialogue	
Converts	35	36	169	240
Drop-Outs	25	209	6	240
Non-Converts	180	58	2	240
TOTALS	240	303	177	720

The data presented in Table 12 show that subjects associated with personal workers who accepted a non-manipulative dialogue view of evangelism were the most likely to convert. Seventy percent of the converts were in this category. When the personal worker accepted the information transmission view of evangelism, the subjects were least likely to convert. Eighty-seven percent of the non-converts were in this category. When the personal worker accepted the manipulative monologue view of evangelism, the subjects were most likely to convert and then drop out of the church soon after their conversion. Seventy-five percent of the drop-outs were in this category.

The Subject's Perception of the Personal Worker

A pilot study revealed three typical ways in which subjects perceived personal workers. Based on the results of that pilot study, each of the 720 subjects in this survey was asked whether the personal worker with whom he was associated seemed more likely "a teacher teaching a lesson," "a salesman selling a product," or "a friend discussing a matter of mutual interest." In the obtained data it was possible to distinguish among converts, drop-outs, and non-converts on the basis of this variable. Seventy-one percent of the converts saw the personal worker in the role of friend. Eighty-five percent of the drop-outs saw the personal worker in the role of salesman. Eighty-seven percent of the non-converts saw the personal worker in the role of teacher as shown in Table 13.

TABLE 13
INFLUENCE ON SUBJECTS OF THEIR PERCEPTION
OF THE PERSONAL WORKER

Categories of Subjects	Subject perceived "personal worker" as being like a:			T O T A L S
	Teacher	Salesman	Friend	
Converts	5	65	170	240
Drop-Outs	36	203	1	240
Non-Converts	208	22	10	240
TOTALS	249	290	181	720

The Subject's Perception of the Interaction

Subjects were asked whether or not the personal worker, as he sought to influence them, ever asked them to express their views on topics being discussed. If they said that they were

asked to share their views, they were asked whether it seemed that the personal worker was simply using this as a manipulative technique or that he seemed to be genuinely interested. In the obtained data it was possible to distinguish among converts, drop-outs, and non-converts on the basis of this variable. Seventy-one percent of the converts reported that the personal worker asked them to share their views and seemed to do so because of a genuine interest. Eighty-three percent of the drop-outs reported that the personal worker asked them to express their views but seemed to do so simply to manipulate. Eighty-six percent of the non-converts reported that the personal worker did not ask them to express their views at all. Data from this comparison are presented in Table 14.

TABLE 14
INFLUENCE ON SUBJECTS OF THEIR PERCEPTION
OF THE INTERACTION

Categories of Subjects	Subject's Perception of the Interaction			TOTALS
	Subject not asked to express his views	Subject asked to express his views but only to manipulate	Subject asked to express his views because of genuine interest	
Converts	5	65	170	240
Drop-Outs	36	200	4	240
Non-Converts	207	23	10	240
TOTALS	248	288	184	720

As one might suspect, the subject's perception of the personal worker and his perception of the interaction were highly related. Ninety-nine percent of the subjects who saw the

personal worker in the role of teacher reported that he did not ask them to express their views. Ninety-nine percent of the subjects who saw the personal worker in the role of salesman reported that he asked them to express their views but seemed to do so in order to manipulate. All of the subjects who saw the personal worker in the role of friend reported that he asked them to share their views and seemed to do so because of a genuine interest. Data from this comparison are presented in Table 15.

TABLE 15
RELATION OF SUBJECT'S PERCEPTION
OF PERSONAL WORKER AND INTERACTION

Subject perceived personal worker as being like a:	Subject's Perception of the Interaction			T O T A L S
	Subject not asked to express his views	Subject asked to express his views but only to manipulate	Subject asked to express his views because of genuine interest	
Teacher	246	0	3	249
Salesman	2	288	0	290
Friend	0	0	181	181
TOTALS	248	288	184	720

It is possible, of course, that the subject's perception of both the personal worker and the interaction were influenced by the choice that the subject made. Those who converted might have altered their perception or their memory of their original perception of the personal worker and the interaction. Originally negative impressions may have been altered so as to be more consistent with the choice the subject made to convert. Similarly, subjects who decided not to convert or to drop out

after conversion might have altered any originally favorable impressions in order that their perceptions might be more consistent with their subsequent behavior. Such an explanation might be accepted as a total explanation if the obtained data revealed nothing but relations between various perceptions of the subject. In the obtained data, however, there were other strong relations. Table 16 shows a strong relation between the personal worker's view of evangelism and the subject's perception of the personal worker. The personal workers who said that they accepted the information transmission model of evangelism were seen by the subjects as being like a teacher. Those who said that they accepted the manipulative monologue model were seen in the role of salesman. Those who said that they accepted the non-manipulative dialogue model were seen in the role of friend. There was also a strong relation

TABLE 16

**PERSONAL WORKER'S VIEW OF EVANGELISM AND
SUBJECT'S PERCEPTION OF PERSONAL WORKER**

Personal Worker's View of Evangelism	Subject perceived "personal worker" as being like a:			TOTALS
	Teacher	Salesman	Friend	
Information Transmission	209	20	11	240
Manipulative Monologue	33	270	0	303
Non-Manipulative Dialogue	7	0	170	177
TOTALS	249	290	181	720

between the personal worker's view of evangelism and the subject's perception of the interaction—as shown in Table 17. Personal workers who accepted the information transmission model and who were seen as teachers did not ask the subject to express his views. Those who accepted the

TABLE 17
PERSONAL WORKER'S VIEW OF EVANGELISM AND
SUBJECT'S PERCEPTION OF INTERACTION

Personal Worker's View of Evangelism	Subject's Perception of the Interaction			TOTALS
	Subject not asked to express his views	Subject asked to express his views but only to manipulate	Subject asked to express his views because of genuine interest	
Information Transmission	230	3	7	240
Manipulative Monologue	18	285	0	303
Non-Manipulative Dialogue	0	0	177	177
TOTALS	248	288	184	720

manipulative monologue model and were seen as salesmen asked the subject to express his views but seemed to do so only for purposes of manipulation. Those who accepted the non-manipulative dialogue model and were seen as friends asked the subject to express his views and seemed to do so because of a genuine interest.

The strong relations between the personal worker's view of evangelism and the subject's perception of both the personal worker and of the interaction suggest some degree of accuracy

in the subject's perception. The data presented in Tables 16 and 17 strongly suggest that the personal worker's view of evangelism was reflected in the pattern of his interaction with the subject and that the subject formed his perception of the personal worker, at least in part, on the basis of this pattern of interaction. The data presented in these tables strongly support the idea that establishment of a pattern of friendship is an important part of the conversion process.

Influences in Evangelism

The subjects interviewed reported 11 different types of evangelistic persuasion through which they had been influenced. These 11 types of evangelistic influence were: 1) sermons in the regular worship services; 2) Bible classes; 3) gospel meetings; 4) cottage meetings; 5) informal Bible study primarily involving conversation; 6) religious radio programs; 7) religious television programs; 8) direct mail advertising; 9) Bible correspondence courses; 10) religious books, tracts, and other printed material; and, 11) social activities with members of the congregation. Church related social activity is not typically regarded as being a medium of evangelistic persuasion. Subjects, however, often reported that they were influenced by association with members of the congregation in such social situations—even though the situation involved no formal presentation of any evangelistic message. For this reason, this kind of association was included as a medium of evangelistic influence. This is one case in which it appears that the medium was the message.

The total number of types of evangelistic influence used by each of the 48 congregations surveyed was recorded. The mean numbers of media used by congregations were: 8.62 for the high net growth rate group of congregations; 6.94 for the medium net growth rate group; and 3.37 for the low net growth rate group. All of these differences were statistically significant.

A record was also made of the number of media of influence to which each subject was exposed. The converts of this survey were exposed to an average of 5.79 different media of evangelistic influence. The corresponding figure for the drop-outs was 2.16 and the figure for the non-converts was 2.07. The differences between the converts and the other two groups of subjects were statistically significant, but the difference between the drop-outs and the non-converts was not significant.

Conversion is a process in which an individual makes a self-defining choice that involves identification with a congregation as a new reference group. There is more to conversion, but this factor is an important part of the process. An implication of this view is that types of influence which are group-related should be more effective than those that are not group-related. Four of the types of influence included in this study are clearly group-related: sermons in regular worship services, Bible classes, gospel meetings, and church-related social activity. These types of influence all involve direct participation by the subject in a context which puts him into contact with the congregation as an assembled and functioning body. Many of the subjects in this survey were exposed only to types of influence which are not group-related. Many of the subjects were influenced only through cottage meetings and never had any contact with the congregation as a whole. The mean numbers of group-related media of influence to which subjects were exposed were: 3.29 for the converts; .62 for the drop-outs; and .59 for the non-converts. The differences between the converts and the other two groups of subjects were statistically significant. The difference between the drop-outs and the non-converts was not significant.

Six of the types of influence outlined earlier involve personal contact either in a group context or in a private context. These include the four group-related media discussed earlier plus cottage meetings and informal Bible study primarily involving

conversation. The mean number of personal contact media used by the congregations of this study were: 5.94 for the high net growth rate group of congregations, 4.94 for the medium net growth rate group, and 4.12 for the low net growth rate group. All of these differences were statistically significant.

In the obtained data it was also possible to distinguish among subjects on the basis of the number of personal contact media of influence to which they were exposed. The mean numbers were: 4.16 for the converts, 2.17 for the drop-outs, and 1.85 for the non-converts. The differences between the converts and the other groups of subjects were statistically significant, but the difference between the drop-outs and the non-converts was not significant.

It is possible to conclude that the more types of evangelistic influence used by a congregation and the more a congregation used group-related and personal contact media, the greater the probability that the congregation would be in the high net growth rate group. Furthermore, the greater the total number of types of influence to which a subject was exposed and the more a subject was exposed to group-related and personal contact media, the greater the probability that he would convert.

The principal difference between the converts and the drop-outs of this survey was that the converts were influenced more by group-related media while the drop-outs were influenced largely by cottage meetings—which is a personal contact medium but is not group-related. *When a person has no meaningful personal contact with the congregation in the process of his conversion, he is likely to feel no meaningful sense of identification with the congregation after his conversion and therefore he is likely to drop-out.* This should not be taken as a condemnation of the cottage meeting method of evangelism. Most of the converts in this survey who stayed converted were influenced by cottage meetings. The difference was that they

were also influenced by some group-related media at the same time.

It should be remembered that the medium net growth rate group of congregations had the highest conversion rate, but also had the highest drop-out rate. These congregations tended to put the greatest stress on cottage meetings as their primary method of evangelism. In this survey, when the cottage meeting method was used as the only method of influence before baptism, it almost always produced drop-outs rather than converts who stayed converted.

This research indicates that there is no one certain evangelistic method that can guarantee results. In general it seems that the fewer gadgets, props, visual aids, and the like that come between the Christian and the person he is trying to influence, the better the results. When a personal worker comes into a subject's house carrying a projector, screen, record player, slides or film strip, records, charts, and other aids for a cottage meeting, that is what many people in the church of Christ call personal evangelism. However, the subjects exposed to this kind of evangelism did not see it as being very personal at all. They saw such personal workers as being equipment manipulators. Results seemed to be better when the only tool was an open Bible. And yet it is not really as simple as that. What is important is the quality of the relationship, not the structure of the teaching method or the kind of tools that are used. Some people have been able to establish a warm personal relationship in spite of using many tools. Others who use only an open Bible have been unable to establish the right kind of communicative climate.

The most important single element in establishing the right kind of climate seems to be the attitude of the personal worker. If he comes to transmit information or to manipulate, the flow of communication seems to be all one way. What is required in every case—no matter what tools are used and no matter what evangelistic method is used—is a conversational approach.

The personal worker must be genuinely interested in the subject. He must be ready, willing, and eager to listen. He must honestly try to look at things from the perspective of the subject. He must try to learn from what the subject has to share. Only then will the subject be willing to listen and look at things from the perspective of the personal worker. What is crucial, therefore, is that the interaction take the form of a non-manipulative dialogue in which both participants are searching for a better understanding of the truth. God's truth has nothing to fear in such an honest encounter.

Members of the church of Christ have tended to let the structure of the situation define the use of the word personal. What they should do is to let the quality of the relationship define that term. Books are generally regarded as impersonal, but a really evangelistic book is personal. The Bible is a book and yet it is personal. The personality of Jesus Christ is clearly seen in the Bible. Radio and television are generally regarded as impersonal media of mass evangelism rather than being a form of personal evangelism. But if the speaker uses the mass media effectively, there is a personal quality in the relationship that is established. A teacher in a Bible class or a preacher in the pulpit can establish a personal relationship in a dynamic manner. A personal worker in a cottage meeting situation can also establish a personal relationship in a most effective way—but the structure of the situation does not within itself make the relationship personal.

Each medium of communication has its own unique properties. Pulpit preaching is one of the most effective and most personal channels for evangelism. However, it is an ineffective use of the mass media to take the structure of a pulpit presentation and force it into a radio program, a television program, a newspaper column, or a book—just as it would be ineffective to stand up and preach a sermon in someone's living room.

The subjects who were interviewed in this study reported

several ways in which they found sermons to be useful. In comparison with cottage meetings, for example, they reported that when sermons discussed specific questions, they tended to give a more satisfactory answer than was received in cottage meetings. The sermons went into more detail, presented a more connected train of thought, and did not get off onto other issues the way the cottage meeting presentations often did. Another important point these people reported is that sermons tended to be much more motivational than the cottage meeting lessons. Many subjects reported that they learned the correct way of thinking on doctrinal issues through cottage meetings, but that it was not until they were moved by the emotional appeal of a sermon that they actually decided to obey the gospel. One of the main differences between the 240 drop-outs of this survey (most of whom were influenced through cottage meetings alone) and the 240 converts who stayed converted (most of whom were influenced by many evangelistic methods—including sermons) was that the conversion of the drop-outs was almost entirely an intellectual matter. They simply changed sides in a religious argument. The converts who stayed converted reported that their conversion was emotional as well as intellectual. And they said that sermons were an important influence in their conversion.

Evangelism in the private situation is most effective in establishing a genuine dialogue. Evangelism in the public situation is more effective in presenting in depth instruction and in providing motivation. Books, tracts, and other printed matter—as media of evangelism—are most effective in providing detailed instruction to aid the subject in his own private study and are especially effective when used along with a program of private and public instruction. Mass media evangelism through radio, television, newspapers, and the like is most effective in locating people who are likely subjects for additional evangelistic efforts. When mass media are used for teaching purposes, they tend to reach only those who already

agree with what is being taught. They certainly do not reach a non-religious audience effectively. It would be realistic to regard all mass media evangelism as a form of advertising. Through the mass media congregations can arouse interest, project an image, and persuade those who are interested in what they have to share to make some response that will let them know about their interest.

Summary

Twelve of the predictions involved in this research related to the question of which congregational characteristics would be associated with high net growth rate. These predictions were that a congregation would likely be found in the high net growth rate group if:

- 1) the average age in the congregation was similar to the average age in the community in which the congregation was located;
- 2) the average socio-economic status level in the congregation was similar to or slightly above the average socio-economic status level in the community;
- 3) the average educational level in the congregation was similar to or slightly above the average educational level in the community;
- 4) the congregation was relatively heterogeneous in regard to the age of its members;
- 5) the congregation was relatively heterogeneous in regard to the socio-economic status of its members;
- 6) the congregation was relatively heterogeneous in regard to the educational level of its members;
- 7) the congregation had a high involvement level based on good organization which produces a high *actual* roles-to-member ratio and on good communication which produces a high *perceived* roles-to-member ratio;
- 8) the congregation's pulpit minister viewed evangelism as a non-manipulative dialogue;

- 9) the congregation's pulpit minister had a positive style of preaching;
- 10) the congregation used a relatively large number of evangelistic methods;
- 11) the congregation used a relatively large number of personal contact methods of evangelism; and,
- 12) the congregation used a relatively large number of group-related methods of evangelism.

Considering each of these predictions as a dichotomous variable, each of the 48 congregations of this study was given a score—which could range from zero through twelve—indicating the number of times that the congregation matched the predictions. In this comparison the mean scores were: 10.17 for the high net growth rate group of congregations; 6.92 for the medium net growth rate group of congregations; and 3.48 for the low net growth rate group of congregations. All of these differences were statistically significant.

Other predictions related to the question of which of the 720 subjects of the survey would most likely be in the convert category rather than in the drop-out or non-convert categories. These predictions were that a subject would most likely be in the convert category if:

- 1) the subject had a relatively heterogeneous pattern of religious influence in his primary reference group;
- 2) the subject had recently experienced a relatively high degree of change in his life situation;
- 3) the subject was already dissatisfied with his non-religious life style or with his present religious affiliation and his pattern of dissatisfaction was such as would reasonably be resolved by gospel obedience;
- 4) the subject's original theological position was relatively similar to that of the church of Christ on a conservative-liberal continuum;
- 5) the subject's age was similar to the average age in the congregation;

- 6) the subject's socio-economic status level was similar to or slightly below the average socio-economic status level in the congregation;
- 7) the subject's educational level was similar to or slightly below the average educational level in the congregation;
- 8) the subject's age was similar to that of the personal worker with whom he was associated;
- 9) the subject's socio-economic status level was similar to or slightly below the socio-economic status level of the personal worker with whom he was associated;
- 10) the subject's educational level was similar to or slightly below the educational level of the personal worker with whom he was associated;
- 11) the personal worker with whom the subject was associated viewed evangelism as a non-manipulative dialogue;
- 12) the subject perceived the personal worker as being in the role of a friend discussing a matter of mutual interest;
- 13) the subject's perception of the interaction with the personal worker was that he asked the subject to express his views and did so because of a genuine interest;
- 14) the subject was exposed to many kinds of evangelistic influence;
- 15) the subject was exposed to a relatively large number of personal contact methods of evangelism;
- 16) the subject was exposed to a relatively large number of group-related methods of evangelism; and,
- 17) the subject had a relatively large number of changes in his friendship pattern after his conversion.

Related to these predictions are the predictions that the subject most likely to convert would be associated with a congregation matching the 12 predictions discussed earlier. There was, therefore, a total of 29 predictions—each viewed as a dichotomous variable—on which each of the 720 subjects of this survey either matched or did not match. In the obtained data the means on this prediction matching score were: 22.17

for the converts, 12.98 for the drop-outs, and 8.07 for the non-converts. All of these differences were statistically significant.

Data presented throughout this book have provided strong support for the view of evangelism as an identification process. The key elements in this model of evangelism are the personal quality of the relationship between the Christian and the subject who is being influenced and the degree to which the subject is influenced to identify with the congregation as a new reference group. Evangelistic methods that produce the results needed in this process, therefore, must involve personal contact and must also be group-related.

CHAPTER FIVE

EVANGELISM THROUGH COMMUNICATION

In the past decade, the church of Christ in the United States has slipped from first place to twelfth place on the growth rate list. A part of the problem is that the conversion rate has declined. A much more serious problem, however, is that the drop-out rate has greatly increased. Data presented in Chapter Two suggest that a part of the problem is that Christians have not been spending enough time working with people who are most likely to be receptive. Instead, they have been trying to influence people who are the least likely to convert and the most likely to drop out if they do convert. The material discussed in Chapter Three indicates that another part of the problem is that Christians have not built up the kind of local congregations which are most likely to attract and keep new converts. The information presented in Chapter Four implies that another part of the problem is that too much of the emphasis in evangelism has been on methods which are likely to produce only temporary persuasion rather than lasting conversion. The purpose of this final chapter is to tie together these research findings and to provide a way of analyzing the results of this research.

Evangelism and Communication

Since evangelism is a type of communication, it is important to understand the nature of communication. That is no easy task. A fish would probably be the last creature to discover water because water is such a constant part of its environment. For much the same reason, it is hard for people to discover the

nature of communication. That which is uniquely human (mind, personality, or selfhood) is created and sustained in an environment of communication. Communication is such a constant part of the environment that people seldom notice it. But they need to notice it and understand it if they would really understand the nature of evangelism. There are several models of communication which are popular although inadequate and which are most certainly not appropriate as models for evangelism. Christians need to understand these models and see the basic assumptions about the nature of man that are implicit in these models. They then need to consider a different model of human communication that is consistent with the Biblical view of man.

The Information Transmission Model

Some people view communication as a one-way transmission of information from a sender to a receiver. Plato believed that ignorance is the only cause of evil. According to Plato, if all men had equal knowledge of the truth, all men would be equally good. This view assumes that man is essentially like a computer. If he is fed correct data, he will give the correct response. According to this view, if the receiver does not do what he is supposed to do, it is because the sender did not transmit the correct information or because the sender did not transmit the information in the correct manner. Control, according to this view, rests with the sender. Responsibility, therefore, also rests with the sender. There is no room in this theory for individual choice or free will. It is a doctrine of determinism.

There are people practicing evangelism according to the information transmission model. They feel that their task is simply to tell other people what God wants them to do. They do a lot of talking, but very little real listening. If they listen at all, it is only to discover what errors they need to correct. When people who are exposed to this kind of evangelism refuse to obey the gospel, the evangelists typically blame themselves.

They feel that they must have left something out or said something in the wrong way. It is evident, therefore, that they accept the doctrine of determinism which puts the control in the sender rather than in the receiver.

The problem with the information transmission model of evangelism from a Biblical perspective is that it leaves no room for the power of choice or free will of the individual. From a practical standpoint, the trouble with the information transmission type of communication is that it contributes nothing to the development of authentic selfhood. The only kind of communication that contributes to the development of authentic selfhood is that kind of communication which treats the other person as though he really is a person with a mind and a will of his own. If communication does not contribute to the development of authentic selfhood in general it cannot contribute to the development of Christian selfhood. The information transmission model of communication, therefore, is not appropriate as a model of evangelism.

The Manipulative Monologue Model

Some people view communication as a means of manipulation. A source sends a message through a channel to a receiver and that message serves as a stimulus which elicits a response in the receiver. The message stimulus might be simple information, as in the information transmission model, but it might also be emotional appeal or some aspect of conditioning. This view assumes that man is essentially like a robot. If you punch the right buttons, he will respond in the right way. This view, of course, is simply another version of the theory of determinism.

The techniques of high pressure salesmanship are based on this model of communication. Unfortunately, almost all of the books on personal evangelism have been built on the model of selling. They have even taken their terminology from books on how to sell. That is why so many of these books on personal evangelism talk about finding prospects, getting your foot in

the door, and even closing the sale. Treating someone as though he is a prospect is not the same thing as treating someone as though he is a person. It should be pointed out that there are many good salesmen who do not use high pressure tactics of manipulation. Even in their selling, they practice a non-manipulative dialogue. Unfortunately, these people have not become the models for evangelism as it is taught in most of the books on personal evangelism.

There are many people practicing evangelism according to the manipulative monologue model. They see the influence as being all one-way. They are not really interested in listening unless they can use the pretense of listening for manipulative purposes. When these people talk about soul winning, it soon becomes apparent that they mean winning as in a contest, not winning as in a courtship.

The manipulative monologue model of communication is just as deterministic as the information transmission model and therefore equally unacceptable as a model for evangelism. Both views are contrary to the Biblical teaching about the free will of the individual. Communication in either of these forms fails to treat the receiver as a person and therefore contributes nothing to the development of authentic selfhood. When communication does not contribute anything to the development of authentic selfhood in general, it cannot contribute anything to the development of Christian selfhood. For that reason, both the information transmission model and the manipulative monologue model are inappropriate as models for evangelism.

Non-Manipulative Dialogue

The word communication comes from the Latin words *communis* which means to make common or to share. What is shared in communication is meaning, but receivers of messages are not passive receivers of meaning. Meaning is something that a person constructs in his own mind as he seeks to make sense out of the messages he receives. The messages

that people transmit to others might be thought of as stimuli, but they are so weak that they cannot possibly be taken as a total explanation of what follows. You send a message and another person acts, but the action is far too great an effect to be explained totally by the strength of the message. The message is too weak a cause to explain the effect which follows. To find the motivating power of the other person's action, we must look within that other person. Our messages can never be anything more than a catalyst. They may trigger a response in the other person, but that is all. The power which produces or motivates the other person's action is within that other person—not in the message. It is important in a study of evangelism to look at the process from the standpoint of the receiver.

The view of communication as a non-manipulative dialogue is based on the recognition that no two people ever see things in exactly the same way. Non-manipulative dialogue, therefore, is an effort to look at things from the perspective of the other person as the other person looks at things from our perspective. In evangelism, non-manipulative dialogue takes the form of a conversation in which each participant seeks to share with the other his faith and his understanding of the Bible.¹

If Jesus Christ really dwells in you, if your life comes into contact with the life of another person, if you communication

¹Some people think that some kind of relativism or existentialism is implied "If we have Absolute Truth," they ask, "why should we listen to others?" Let me make it clear that I am not an existentialist. I do not believe in any kind of moral, ethical, or spiritual relativism. I believe that absolute truth is possible and knowable through the kind of divine revelation we have in the Bible. I do not believe, however, that in this present life any human being is infallible. There is always the possibility that we could learn from what others have to share with us. We never know all truth. We are never perfect in our understanding. I do not believe that God's truth has anything to fear in an open and honest dialogue and I know that without dialogue we can never practice the kind of evangelism that God wants us to practice.

with that other person is a non-manipulative dialogue and thus authentic communication, and if in this context you share the message of Christ with that other person—then the Christ who lives in you and in your message may be formed in the heart of that other person. That is how evangelism works.

Non-manipulative dialogue does not rule out an effort to persuade another person to adopt your viewpoint. In non-manipulative dialogue, one may express disagreement with another, may seek to influence him, or may attempt to show him the error of his ways. But always the influence must be exerted in a non-manipulative manner that respects the free choice and individuality of the other person. Communication is not manipulative when the speaker tries to persuade the listener, but rather when the speaker uses the listener and thus relates to the listener as an object rather than as a subject.

The principle of non-manipulative dialogue does not rule out strong convictions held by the individual nor does it rule out an effort to share those convictions with others in the hope of influencing them. It may be fairly said, in fact, that non-manipulative dialogue demands conviction and an interest in the other person which would motivate an effort to share such conviction. Non-manipulative dialogue is a situation in which the persuader treats the other person as a person and not as an object to be manipulated. The manipulator, on the other hand, wants to win the other person to his point of view even at any cost.

Christians could use coercion to compel people to be baptized. They could use all the manipulative techniques of high pressure salesmanship to get people to do what they want them to do. They could use all the tricks of seduction and deception to change the overt behavior of others. They could use all the techniques of conditioning to modify behavior. But with all of these methods they could never achieve anything more than compliance, not true conversion.

The Nature and Purpose of Evangelism

The typical adult convert goes through the following steps: 1) alienation from some original reference group identification and from the self-image which resulted from that identification; 2) personal contact with one or more Christians and with their congregation; 3) identification with those Christians as reference persons and with their congregation as a reference group; 4) a displacement of the original reference group influence; 5) a learning process in which the individual accepts a new way of looking at things; 6) the decision to obey the gospel; and, 7) a gradual transformation of personal identity. This outline is not a new seven step formula to replace the traditional five steps of gospel obedience. Hearing, faith, repentance, confession, and baptism are all involved. This seven step outline is simply a way of looking at things from the perspective of the adult convert who is going through the process of becoming a Christian.

Success in evangelism is often defined in terms of statistics which report the number of baptisms. That is a good way of defining success from the perspective of the people we are trying to influence. Success for the evangelist, however, should not be defined that way. Success for the evangelist should be defined in terms of sharing. The purpose of evangelism is to share faith and understanding of God's will with others so that they may make an authentic choice. If others really understand what is being shared with them and make an authentic choice to reject it, Christians have achieved their true purpose. Christians can and should contact as many people as possible and authentically share their faith with them in a non-manipulative dialogue. The choice, however, must be theirs.

Selective Evangelism

If a farmer spent all of his time and effort planting seed and cultivating a meager crop on a dry and rocky hill while neglecting fertile fields where a much more abundant harvest

could be produced, he would not be wise. In much the same way, it would not be wise for Christians to spend all of their time and effort in evangelism working with people who are not receptive. The wise thing to do would be to start first with those people who are most likely to be receptive. Many evangelistic efforts in the past have been deliberately designed to be as non-selective as possible. There are those who condemn any effort to be selective in evangelism.

The ministry of Jesus involved a kind of selective evangelism. He was sent to the Jews. In the limited commission, Jesus sent the apostles to the Jews. "And into whatsoever city or village you shall enter, search out who in it is worthy; and there abide till you go forth. And as you enter into the house, salute it. And if the house be worthy, let your peace come upon it: but if it be not worthy, let your peace return to you. And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, as you go forth out of that house or that city, shake off the dust of your feet" (Mat. 10:11-14). The apostle Paul practiced selective evangelism. He went first to the Jews and taught those who were willing to listen; then he went to the Gentiles and taught the Gentiles who were willing to listen. The Holy Spirit was selective in guiding Paul's evangelism. Acts 16:6 says that the Holy Spirit did not allow Paul to go to Asia in the early part of his second missionary journey—although he did go to Asia (Ephesus) later on that journey. Paul and his companions wanted to go to Bithynia and the Holy Spirit did not let them (Acts 16:7). The Holy Spirit directed Paul to Troas and on to Philippi. The Holy Spirit selected one place over another. That is selective evangelism. The parable of the sower (Mat. 13:1ff) is a clear argument in favor of selective evangelism. So is the statement of Jesus in John 4:35, "Lift up your eyes and look on the fields that are white unto harvest." It would not be proper to leave out any individual group of people in the evangelistic efforts, but it is both Scriptural and practical to go first to those who are most likely to be receptive.

Conclusion

The authentic communication of non-manipulative dialogue is direct, spontaneous, open, honest, and frank. Both people are really present in that kind of communication. It is not like the situation in which the mind of one person—or perhaps the minds of both persons are a thousand miles away. In authentic communication two people work from a basis of mutual equality and mutual respect. Each person cares about the other. Neither person tries to control the other. In that kind of communication, each person, in effect, says to the other, "Here is what I am. Here is how I see the world. Now let me learn who you are, what you are, and how you see the world. Let me look at the world for a while through your eyes and you look at the world for a while through my eyes."

Such a sharing process involves serious risks. You will find that this sharing process changes your view of things and thus changes your image of yourself. When you come away from a genuine dialogue like that, you will never be exactly the same person who went into that dialogue. But because of this very fact that dialogue is person-risking, it is person-making. This is how we develop and grow. This is what education is all about. But there is no sharing at all and therefore no growth at all unless you are willing to look at the world through the eyes of the other person just as you want the other person to look at the world through your eyes. You must be willing to learn from others if you would really teach them.

When we practice a kind of evangelism that does not treat the listener as a person with a mind and a will of his own, the most that we can hope to achieve is a temporary compliance—not true conversion. You can get people into the baptism through manipulation. You can get people to become members of the church—*temporarily*—through manipulation. But it takes something more than manipulation to influence others in such a way that Christ will be formed in them. Christian selfhood cannot be developed through manipulation.

Non-manipulative dialogue is the only kind of communication that works in the long run in evangelism.

If we are to correct the declining growth curve of the past decade and avoid the projected death of the church of Christ in the United States, there are several things that we must do. First, we must concentrate our present efforts on finding and reaching those people who are most likely to be receptive. Second, we must build the kind of congregations that are most likely to attract and keep new converts. Third, we must concentrate on personal contact and group-related methods of evangelism that are most likely to result in the greatest number of converts and the smallest number of drop-outs. And most important of all—in all of our evangelistic efforts, we must use the non-manipulative dialogue form of communication.

CHAPTER SIX

WHAT HAS GONE WRONG?

The first five chapters of this book have reported results of research on patterns of growth in the churches of Christ. The approach taken in this chapter and in chapter seven is somewhat different. Although some additional research is reported in these two concluding chapters, the primary focus is on analyzing what has gone wrong and what must be done to correct the problems.

These two concluding chapters were not included in the first edition of *Why Churches Grow*. Research reported in these chapters had not yet been done at that time. Furthermore, trends in the churches of Christ had not yet developed fully enough at that time for the kind of analysis presented in this chapter concerning what has gone wrong and the kind of analysis presented in chapter seven concerning what is needed to correct the problems.

The first edition of *Why Churches Grow* focused on conditions and problems in the mid 1970s. Results of later research indicate that as the decade of the 1970s now comes to an end, conditions have not really changed and the problems still have not been solved. The net growth rate in the churches of Christ is still decreasing steadily as it has ever since 1965.

In 1977-1978, it appeared that conditions were improving. In that two year period, there was a 25 percent increase in the number of baptisms being reported in the churches of Christ. That increase, however, needs to be put into proper perspective. What it means is that the typical congregation with 160 members that was baptizing eight people per year in the 1973-1976 period baptized nine people in 1977 and 10 people in 1978. That still leaves a lot of room for improvement. In addition, recent survey results indicate that since 1976 the drop-out rate in the churches

of Christ has increased even faster than the conversion rate. As a result, the net growth rate has continued to decrease. Furthermore, preliminary figures for 1979 indicate that while the drop-out rate is still increasing, the conversion rate is decreasing once again. It now appears that the typical congregation with 160 members will end 1979 with only eight or nine baptisms.

The most recent survey results indicate that in the churches of Christ approximately 40 percent of the local congregations have stopped growing and now are just holding their own; approximately 35 percent have started to decline in membership; only 25 percent are growing—and most of the growing congregations are not growing as rapidly now as they were just a few years ago. Over the past few years, the gap between the growing and the non-growing congregations has grown wider and wider.

This continuing decline in the net growth rate has come about in spite of the positive results of what some have called "the workshop movement." This "movement" began in the early 1970s with an annual "soul winning workshop" at the International Bible College in Florence, Alabama. By the late 1970s, many similar workshops were being conducted throughout the nation. As a result of these workshops, many members of the church of Christ have been motivated to increase their level of evangelistic activity. What most have not yet learned, evidently, is how to use the kind of evangelistic methods and the many other elements in the life of the church that are needed to produce *lasting* growth.

The declining growth trend of the past 15 years has not yet been reversed in the churches of Christ. Unless this trend is reversed, growth will totally stop early in the 1980s. After that, the total membership of the churches of Christ throughout the United States (and probably throughout the world) will be smaller and smaller each year. Shortly after the turn of the century, total membership world-wide will be only half what it is today. If the declining growth trend of the past 15 years is continued on into the future, the church of Christ will cease to exist on the earth in just 50 years!

Since the first edition of *Why Churches Grow* was published and I have been discussing this research at lectureships, workshops, and other meetings throughout the nation, the question that I have been asked most often is "What has gone wrong?" Since the church of Christ was the fastest growing religious group in the United States in the 1945-1965 period and since the net growth rate in the church of Christ has declined so much in the 15 year period since 1965, people want to know what is different about these two periods of time. People want to know what has changed. In my opinion, what has happened in the past 15 years is that conditions in the world have changed and conditions in the churches of Christ have kept the church from adapting properly to these changing conditions in the world.

Changing Conditions in the World

The world's need for the gospel has not changed. Furthermore, people are still receptive to the gospel message if they are influenced in the right way. However, methods that once were effective in reaching people are not as effective today.

"Alienation" is the one word that best describes conditions in the world today. People are not as close to other people as they used to be. Identification with the primary reference group of family and friends is not as strong a force as it once was. The family, the basic unit in the structure of society, is gradually being destroyed. In the 1945-1965 period, the divorce rate in the United States remained relatively stable at approximately 25 percent and divorce was very rare among members of the church of Christ. Since 1965, the divorce rate in the nation has increased from 25 percent to almost 50 percent and the divorce rate among members of the church of Christ has increased significantly. The declining growth rate in the churches of Christ over the past 15 years is almost a perfect mirror-image of the increasing divorce rate among members of the church of Christ.

Sociologists who study changing patterns of the American life style have noted that for several decades the most significant

change, statistically speaking, has been in regard to friendship patterns. In comparison with conditions a few years ago, people today do not have as many friends, the friends they have are not as close, and the friends are not as lasting. People move around today a lot more than they did just a few years ago. The average worker today goes through three different careers in a lifetime. People today just do not have the roots that people had a few years ago.

The moral standards of the nation have also changed significantly in the past 15 years and the change has involved a serious decline in moral standards. The crime rate has increased and the greatest increase has been among young people. Alcoholism and other forms of drug abuse have increased—especially among young people. Venereal disease has reached epidemic proportions. There has been a tremendous increase in the number of abortions and yet the number of illegitimate births has still increased. One out of every six brides is already pregnant at the time of the wedding.

Popular entertainment reflects the declining moral standard and also contributes significantly to that decline. Movies are dirtier than ever and the average young person has viewed over 500 feature-length films by age 18. Television is dirtier than ever and the average young person has spent over 18,000 hours watching television by age 18. Television has clearly become the most powerful influence in modern American life. Many of the popular magazines and books of today would have been regarded as pornography just 15 years ago. Lyrics of popular songs typically advocate a way of life that is clearly immoral by Christian standards. By age 18, the average boy or girl today has spent far more than 20,000 hours being influenced by the immoral standards of popular entertainment. That is far more than the total amount of time that even the most faithful Christian young people have spent at church, at school, and in conversation with their parents—all put together!

You can put a frog into a pot of water, put that pot of water on

the stove, and increase the temperature gradually enough so that the frog will not notice the change. As long as the frog remains alive, it can jump out of the pot at any time. But since the frog does not notice the change in temperature, it stays in the pot and boils to death. That is what is happening to Christians in a world that is growing more and more corrupt. The moral standards of some Christians have already declined. What has happened to most Christians is that they have developed an increased tolerance to sin. They just do not notice it any more.

Conditions that Have Hindered Growth in the Church

The church is the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23). A body has many different members that perform many different functions in many different ways and a body must have this diversity if it is to survive (I Corinthians 12:12-27). A body must have the ability to grow, to change, and to adapt itself to its environment or it will die. We must never exchange the body of Christ for something that is not the body of Christ. In matters of faith, the church must never change. If the church of Christ changes in matters of faith, it will no longer be the church of Christ. In the area of methods, however, the church must be free to adapt to changing conditions in the world. If the church of Christ does not change in the area of methods, it will stagnate and die. Both of these problems have contributed to the declining growth rate in the church of Christ over the past 15 years.

God wants the church to have unity in matters of faith (I Corinthians 1:10, Ephesians 4:1-6). We achieve that unity through strict obedience to God's word. Since faith comes by hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17), a matter of faith is, by definition, a matter on which the word of God tells us what to do. A matter of opinion is, by contrast, a matter on which the word of God does not tell us what to do. God wants the church to have liberty in matters of opinion (Galatians 5:1). The church ought to be conservative in matters of faith and liberal in matters of opinion. The declining growth rate in the church of Christ over the past 15

years has been caused, at least in part, by a trend in the opposite direction—a trend to become conservative in matters of opinion and liberal in matters of faith.

Right wing extremists ignore the need for liberty in matters of opinion. They reject any new methods. They make their customs into a law which they bind on all others in the church. They insist on conformity in matters of tradition where the widest possible degree of tolerance should be allowed. Thus they treat the word of man as though it has as much authority as the word of God.

Left wing extremists ignore the need for strict obedience to the word of God and thus for unity in all matters of faith. They do things for which they have no Bible authority. They change not only in matters of opinion but also in matters of faith. Thus they treat the word of God as though it had no more authority than the word of man. The fundamental problem with both kinds of extremism is a lack of respect for the unique authority of God's word.

Conservatism in Matters of Opinion

Congregations which are conservative in matters of opinion tend to have certain characteristics in common. They tend to be sound in doctrine, but also sound asleep. What they practice is really the conservatism of indifference. These are the congregations that refuse to use any new methods. They are not concerned with numbers or growth. They are suspicious of those congregations that are growing. Most of these congregations are not growing and many have already started to decline in membership. There are many such congregations. But since these congregations are not growing, they are not looked to as models for other congregations to follow. Because of their lack of influence, these congregations that are conservative in matters of opinion probably are not as serious a danger in the long run as are those congregations which are liberal in matters of faith. The immediate problem of the declining growth rate, however, is pri-

marily attributable to these congregations that are conservative in matters of opinion.

The preaching and teaching in these congregations that are conservative in matters of opinion tends to be focused primarily on that small part of the Bible that deals with doctrines people need to learn if they have not yet obeyed the gospel. But they almost totally neglect that large part of the Bible that teaches Christians how to live the more abundant life.

The person who can be reached effectively by this kind of preaching is the person who already believes in God, already believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and already understands that the Bible is the inspired word of God and therefore the final authority in religion. This person has already heard and understood the basic message of the gospel. But this person has not yet come to a proper understanding of certain doctrinal issues dealing with gospel obedience, the non-denominational nature of the church, worship, and a few related matters. This kind of person already recognizes the relevance of the kind of preaching that is typical in those congregations that are conservative in matters of opinion. The only trouble is that there are not many people in the world who fit this description.

Typically, in these congregations that are conservative in matters of opinion, one can attend Bible classes for years without ever learning anything new. These classes simply rehearse the doctrine week after week. As a result of the shallow kind of teaching and preaching provided in these congregations, the members do not experience much real spiritual growth. Members of these congregations seldom learn much beyond how to argue religion with non-members.

These are the congregations that tend to accept the information transmission model of evangelism. These congregations still depend largely on traditional gospel meetings that are no longer attended very well even by the members—much less by the non-members. At the level of personal evangelism, these congregations still depend largely on traditional cottage meeting methods in

which individuals are influenced by one member of the congregation but never exposed to the other members or to the church as an assembled and functioning body.

It is obvious that there is some bottle-neck hindering the growth of these congregations and like every bottle-neck, this one is right at the top of the bottle. The greatest single problem in this kind of congregation is its leadership style. The eldership in this kind of congregation functions only as a board of directors performing a decision-making function. In the New Testament, there are three titles for this office. The various titles refer to different functions. The title "elder" or "presbyter," refers to a decision-making function. The title "overseer" or "bishop" refers to an administrative function. The title "shepherd" or "pastor" refers to the function of spiritual counseling and teaching. But in these congregations, the title that is used almost all the time is the title "elder." When these congregations pray for their elders, almost all the time they pray, "Help the elders make wise decisions." About all these congregations or elders see in this office any more is the decision-making function.

Several years ago, when these congregations were smaller, the elders found it relatively easy to keep in close personal contact with the members. As these congregations grew, it became more difficult to maintain that personal contact. Because the elders did not grow in their leadership ability, the eldership in these congregations became more and more isolated. This isolation of the eldership in these congregations has led to a condition in which the elders actually lord it over the church.

Preachers who have become frustrated with this kind of eldership have been leaving full-time local work in record numbers recently. At least 500 and probably closer to 1,000 preachers have left full-time local work in the churches of Christ in the past 15 years. A few years ago I helped to conduct a survey of these preachers who have recently left full-time local work in order to find out why they left. Frustration over problems with the eldership was the major reason these preachers gave for leaving full-

time local work. The preachers I am talking about were not young, uneducated, inexperienced, unqualified men who had not been successful. I am talking about mature, educated, experienced, qualified men who had already proven themselves to be successful in the ministry. The loss of these men from full-time local work in the church is surely one of the major reasons for the declining growth trend in the churches of Christ over the past 15 years.

The style of leadership in these congregations must be changed in order to correct the many problems that are keeping these congregations from growing as they can and should be growing.

Liberalism in Matters of Faith

Congregations that have become liberal in matters of faith tend to have certain characteristics in common. What these congregations practice is really the liberalism of neglect. Although some of these congregations teach a few false doctrines, the real problem is that they do not teach much doctrine at all. The preaching and teaching in these congregations is not at all distinctive. It is the kind of preaching and teaching that one could hear in almost any Protestant denomination.

These congregations have made a response to the need for change, but they have not made an appropriate response. Most of these congregations have adopted new methods and some of these congregations are growing—although most are not achieving lasting growth. However, since they are growing, they are looked to as models for other congregations to follow. Because of their greater influence, that danger that is presented by these congregations is probably more serious in the long run and needs to be considered in greater depth.

The preaching and teaching in these congregations is often seen by the people of the world as being relevant to their needs, but it has very little real Bible content. These congregations are not being provided either the milk or the meat of God's word. Instead, they are fed a diet of spiritual junk food.

In order to understand the weakness in this kind of preaching and teaching, it is necessary to consider the role of the Bible in the messages they present. The problem is not how many passages of Scripture they quote. The problem is that the Bible does not play a central role in the structure of their preaching and teaching.

Every message has a central idea, an outline of main points and sub-points, some authoratative proof material, and some illustrative or motivational material. What a preacher ought to do is to consider the spiritual needs of the congregation and then go to the Bible to find God's message on that subject. The Bible should be the source of the central idea, the outline of main points and sub-points, and the authoritative proof material. Once a preacher has that basic structure in mind, he should use his own imagination or consult secular sources to come up with the illustrative and motivational material needed to put the message across.

What some preachers are doing today, however, is to use their own imagination or consult some secular source to provide the basic structure. They read a book on personal motivation, salesmanship, psychology, sociology, philosophy, or religion. Then they let that uninspired source provide the central idea, the outline of main points and sub-points, and even the authoritative proof material. Once they have that basic structure in mind and have already decided what they want to say, they go to the Bible to find some illustrative or motivational material. They may end up quoting a good many passages of Scripture. But what they present is actually a seular speech disguised as a sermon. It may be interesting and entertaining. It may even attract large crowds—temporarily. But the Bible does not play a central role in the structure of the message. It is not really God's message.

Some very well-known preachers in the church of Christ have told me that you cannot build a large congregation with the kind of Bible preaching that I have suggested above. Some have told me that since we all believe the same gospel and yet some congregations are growing while others are not—the gospel is not the key to church growth. The truth of the matter is that while we

may all believe the same gospel we are not all preaching the same gospel. The gospel is still the only key to lasting church growth. A lack of trust in the power of the gospel is a serious problem in these congregations that have become liberal in matters of faith.

Some very well-known preachers in the church of Christ have told me that the only way to build a large congregation is to build it around the personality of the preacher. There are many congregations that have been built around the personality of the preacher. If that preacher ever moved or died, the congregation would not survive. But any congregation that is so totally dependent on any one preacher rather than on the power of the gospel does not deserve to survive because it has become the church of the preacher rather than the church of Christ.

Most preachers would probably deny any effort to build the church around their own personality. However, research that I have recently been doing studying communication styles illustrates the degree to which congregations actually are being built around the personality of the preacher. There are four basic communication styles that we have studied in this research: Sensor, Intuitor, Thinker, and Feeler.

Some preachers primarily use the Sensor communication style. They have a very practical focus on the here and now. They are action-oriented and results-oriented. They are not interested in lengthy explanations of background theory, or evidence. They want to get to the "bottom line" and get there in a hurry. When talking about some new method, their primary concern is with the visible results to be achieved immediately by that new method.

Some preachers primarily use the Intuitor communication style. They are more original, creative, and imaginative. In their preaching, they talk primarily about the nature, meaning, and implications of things. They focus on the interrelation of ideas and concepts. When talking about some new method, their primary concern is with what that new method would imply or what it would lead to in relation to various doctrines and practices. Unlike the Sensors, who motivate primarily by talking about visible

results already achieved, these Intuitors motivate primarily by talking about the possibilities of what can be in the future.

Some preachers are primarily Thinkers. They depend on logical argument and evidence. Their primary concern is with deciding between the true and the false. They are analytical, rational, logical, and they tend to be good organizers. When talking about some new method and when trying to motivate others, their primary concern is with judging the evidence in favor of the proposal.

Some preachers are primarily Feelers. They are personally more influenced by emotional appeal than they are by logic and they tend to rely primarily on emotional appeal as they seek to motivate others. Their primary concern is with judging between the valued and the not-valued. When talking about some new method, their primary concern is with what that method would mean in terms of human values. They are more people-oriented and they tend to be very good motivators.

There is nothing uniquely Christian about these communication styles. All four styles are equally valuable. These four styles are simply individual psychological differences and are probably based on different types of brain physiology resulting in different ways of processing information. Sensing and intuiting are opposite ways of perceiving and it appears that sensing is the left-brain method of perceiving while intuiting is the right-brain method of perceiving. Thinking and feeling are opposite ways of judging and it appears that thinking is the left-brain method of judging while feeling is the right-brain method of judging.

If people are identifying with the Christ who lives in the heart of the preacher, these communication style differences should not significantly influence the results. But if people are identifying with uniquely human aspects of the preacher's personality, these communication style differences would likely influence the results.

I have recently tested a large sample of preachers who had worked for several years with relatively large congregations in

cities where there are several local congregations. In each of these congregations, I also tested a large random sample of the members who had affiliated with that congregation (by baptism or by transfer of membership) during the tenure of that preacher. What I found was a large and statistically significant overrepresentation of new members who match the communication style of the preacher. There was a statistically significant underrepresentation of new members whose communication style differed from that of the preacher. What seems to be happening is that preachers who are Sensors are attracting members who are Sensors; Intuitors are attracting Intuitors; Thinkers are attracting Thinkers; and Feelers are attracting Feelers. Although there are other possible interpretations, these data seem to suggest that local congregations are being built around the personality of the preacher to a much greater degree than many would like to admit. People seem to be identifying with uniquely human aspects in the personality of the preacher rather than identifying with the Christ who lives in the heart of that preacher.

In some places, churches of Christ are no longer actively seeking to reach the lost. Instead, they are seeking to build up their local congregation through a cut-throat kind of competition with other local congregations in the area. Their "evangelism" is aimed at building up the local congregation through transfer of membership. This approach has become extremely blatant in some places in recent years. This is a sure sign of decadance.

Some of the congregations that have become liberal in matters of faith are still practicing evangelism, but most accept the manipulative monologue model of evangelism. Both in preaching and in personal evangelism, these congregations use a high pressure kind of manipulation. Some of these congregations are so concerned with numbers and visible results that it often appears that they are interested in numbers for the sake of numbers.

A few of these congregations seem to be taking a cost-effectiveness, souls-per-dollar approach in evaluating methods. Congre-

gations of this type do not do much mission work outside the local community or much work to help the needy. They concentrate their efforts on methods that produce the greatest number of local baptisms per dollar invested in a given budget year.

Congregations of this type often depend on the argument of pragmatism rather than on Biblical authority to justify their methods. If a method is producing visible results, they point to those results as evidence of God's approval rather than going to the Bible to prove that their methods are acceptable.

Some congregations of this type claim that evangelism is the *only* work of the church and they define "evangelism" very narrowly as the effort to persuade people to be baptized. These congregations do not regard worship, benevolent work, Bible classes, or foreign mission work as being justified in their own right apart from their effectiveness in building up the size of the local congregation.

Some of these congregations that have become liberal in matters of faith appear to be growing rapidly and therefore have become influential models of church growth. Some of these congregations are reporting very impressive baptism statistics. What one does not hear about, however, are their equally impressive drop-out statistics. But some of these congregations that have been reporting over 100 baptisms per year for the past five years still have essentially the same total membership they had five years ago. That would seem to indicate a very high drop-out rate.

Many of these congregations that have become very influential have stressed their total attendance figures. But in some of these congregations, the increase in attendance has come entirely from children brought in through a bus ministry. Bus ministry, of course, can be a valuable kind of outreach. Bus ministry can be an effective method of mission work. Ultimately, however, the strength of a growing congregation is the adult members and their children. In a few congregations with large bus ministries where total attendance figures have grown so rapidly, a closer examination of the record shows that for several

years there has been no increase at all—and sometimes even a significant decrease—if you count only the adult members and their children. This is not said to discourage the use of bus ministry. It is simply a warning about the danger of ignoring the needs of the adult members and their families.

Some people have seen methods that are effective in one congregation and they have gone back to their home congregation and tried to high pressure the elders into adopting that method. Even when the methods these people have been advocating have been good, the results of this effort have often been division. There is a growing faction spirit in the churches of Christ. Congregations that emphasize bus ministry, youth worship, and workshops are being isolated into a separate fellowship. Congregations that emphasize campus ministry, "soul talks," and "prayer partners" are being isolated into a separate fellowship. Congregations that emphasize a do-nothing approach to doctrinal purity are also being isolated into a separate fellowship.

These congregations that have become liberal in matters of faith have leadership problems that are typically quite different from the leadership problems discussed earlier. What needs to be changed in those congregations where the elders lord it over the church is the style of leadership. What these congregations have changed, however, is not the style of leadership but the structure of church organization. In some of these congregations we are being told that there should be elders, but no eldership. We are being told that elders should be role-models and father-figures, but not decision-makers. Some of these congregations have already rejected the New Testament pattern in which the eldership functioned as the highest level decision-making body in the congregation. They have moved in the direction of a denominational pattern in which decisions are made by the majority vote of the members. In some of these congregations we are being told that an eldership does not have the right to make any decision that is contrary to the will of a majority of the members. Specifically, we are being told that an eldership does not have the

right to fire a preacher if the majority of the members want to keep that preacher. In some of these congregations we are being told that preachers do not function under the oversight of the elders. According to this doctrine, the preacher in his role as a member is under the oversight of the elders just like any other member of the church—but the preacher in his role as a preacher is not under the oversight of the elders. This same line of reasoning would suggest that a deacon in his role as a deacon, a teacher in his role as a teacher, or a janitor in his role as a janitor is not under the oversight of the elders.

What is being taught in some of these congregations is that decisions ought to be made by the majority vote of the members. What is actually being practiced in some of these congregations is that the preacher runs the church. Large public meetings are good channels of communication from the leadership to the members, but they are not good channels of communication from the members to the leadership. It is easy to manipulate a large public meeting. The most effective persuader in the congregation can easily control that kind of meeting. It is usually the preacher and not an elder who is the most effective persuader in the congregation. This is especially true when the congregation has been built around the personality of the preacher. Preachers can use large public decision-making meetings to give an appearance of great openness when really the situation has effectively silenced any expression of dissent. In some congregations the elders no longer lord it over the church, but the preacher does. What these congregations have done, therefore, is to reject the Bible doctrine concerning the authority of the eldership. They have replaced it with the doctrine that decisions should be made by majority vote. In practice, however, what they have done is to move toward a denominational pattern in which the preacher runs the church.

Conclusion

Conservatism in matters of opinion and liberalism in matters of faith have greatly hindered the growth of the church of Christ in the past 15 years. As I have discussed these problems throughout the nation since the first edition of *Why Churches Grow* was published, many have asked me to identify leading "mainstream" congregations that have avoided both extremes and that can, therefore, be trusted as good models of church growth. There are such local congregations, but I do not believe that following them is the approach we should take. Instead of looking to any local congregation as our model of church growth, we should look to God's word. Even if no "mainstream" congregations could be found between the extremes of conservatism in matters of opinion and liberalism in matters of faith, there is at least a middle path between the extremes and we can follow that path whether or not anyone else is doing so.

What has gone wrong in the past 15 years is that the churches of Christ have been hindered by the problems of extremism. Many congregations have failed to recognize the changes going on in the world. They have refused to change their methods in order to adapt to the changing conditions in the world. Other congregations have recognized the need to change, but they have not only changed in matters of opinion, they have also changed in matters of faith. Both of these problems must be corrected if the church of Christ is to start growing once again the way it can and should be growing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO CORRECT THE PROBLEMS?

The strength of the church is in its Christ-centered message, not its men or its methods. Periods of growth and progress in the church have always been periods of dynamic Bible-based Christ-centered gospel preaching. In Isaiah 55:11, God said, "My word shall not return unto me void. It shall accomplish that which I please and it shall prosper in that purpose whereunto I have sent it." Romans 1:16 says that the gospel is "God's power unto salvation." I Corinthians 1:21 says that it pleased God to save the world through preaching.

The early church had power because of what it preached. The early Christians did not preach psychology or sociology. Acts 5:42 says "And daily in the temple and in every house they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ." They did not preach politics or economics. Acts 8:35 says that when Phillip preached to the Ethiopian treasurer, "he preached unto him Jesus." The early Christians did not preach philosophy. In I Corinthians 1:22-24, Paul said, "The Jews require a sign and the Greeks seek after wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." In I Corinthians 2:1,2, Paul said, "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified." It was the plain preaching of the simple gospel message that produced the amazing growth of the early church and that is just exactly what we need today.

Total evangelism is the only way to produce lasting church growth. Evangelism is the process of influencing others in such a way that the Christ who dwells in us and in our message will be formed in the hearts and lives of those we seek to influence. Three things are needed to accomplish this purpose. First, we must find methods that effectively identify those who are likely to be receptive to the gospel and then influence them in such a way as to produce lasting conversions. Second, we must have the kind of organization that gets the members involved in the work of the local congregation. And third, we must have the kind of counseling and teaching that helps Christians grow spiritually so that they will be able to solve the problems they face and learn to live the more abundant life.

REACH THE LOST

In order to persuade, you have to start with people where they are, not where they ought to be. You must begin by answering the questions they are already asking. You must begin with needs that they already recognize as being relevant in their lives. Preaching, teaching, personal evangelism and mass media evangelism must all be relevant. That does not mean that you deal only with the questions people are already asking. Some people have not yet learned how to ask the most important questions. But it does mean that you *start* with the questions they are already asking.

There are none so lost as those who do not even know that they are lost, but that is the condition of most people today. Most people today do not have any worthwhile aim, goal, direction, or purpose in life. They do not know who they are, where they came from, what they are supposed to be doing here, or where they are going. We need to start with these people by assuring them that there is a meaning to life. They need to learn that there is a God and that they are made in the image of God. They need to understand that the Bible is the inspired word of God. They need to see that the purpose of this life is to glorify God by becoming like

God so that we can prepare to live forever with God in heaven. They need to learn what is wrong in their lives (alienation from self and alienation from others) has come about because of their alienation from God. They need to understand that sin is the cause of their alienation from God. They need to learn that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died to save them from the guilt, the power, and the eternal consequences of sin.

Find the Hurt and Heal It

Donald McGavran, one of the nation's best-known writers in the church growth field, says that the way to build a strong church is to find the hurt in a community and heal it. Ultimately, of course, sin is the hurt that needs to be healed by salvation. But in order to persuade, we must start with the hurts people already recognize in their lives. The greatest hurt that people in this nation are feeling right now is the hurt that is caused by the breakdown of the family. Most people are not interested in saving their souls, but they are interested in saving their marriages. This is but one example of a hurt that people already recognize in their lives.

There are many methods that can be used to establish a point of contact by dealing first with needs people already recognize in their lives. Congregations could offer counseling for non-members as well as for members who have personal, emotional, marital, or family problems. As a back-up to the spiritual counseling done at the level of the local congregation, we also need some area-wide Christian counseling centers with professionally trained Christian counselors in various fields. Child care work provides another valuable kind of outreach. There is a growing number of young adults beyond college age who are still single and a special class to meet the needs of that group could provide a good evangelistic outreach. There is an even greater need for a special ministry to those who are single *again*. People who have lost a spouse through death or divorce have needs that are often neglected in most congregations. Christians who have learned to adjust to

the loss of a spouse through death or divorce could offer valuable help to others who are just now going through that adjustment. A singles ministry of that nature could be a useful evangelistic outreach. A special class or program to help parents without partners is another useful outreach. There are many ways to find the hurt and heal it: a special ministry to senior citizens, hospital ministry, prison ministry, programs to provide food and clothing for the poor, disaster relief work, day care centers, Christian schools all the way from kindergarten through college, and many other useful approaches.

Congregations that are conservative in matters of opinion fear such methods as those outlined above. A major reason for this fear is that congregations which are liberal in matters of faith have abused such methods. They have practiced a social gospel approach in which these things are done as an end rather than as a means to an end. They have not used these programs as a way of reaching people so that they could eventually teach them the gospel. There is, however, a middle path that can and should be taken between the extremes. That middle path is to use such methods but use them as a point of contact and then follow up on that contact with the kind of teaching that leads these people to become Christians.

Use the Mass Media Effectively

The churches of Christ have not generally used the mass media effectively. The primary function of the mass media is not just to provide a channel of communication, but to deliver an audience to someone who wants to get a message to that audience. When we use the mass media to present doctrinal sermons, we have the channel of communication but we have to create our own audience. Generally it is only those who already basically agree with us who will read our doctrinal sermons in print, view our doctrinal sermons on television, or listen to our doctrinal sermons on radio. That use of the mass media can have some positive results

—but only if we do a lot of advertising and promotion in order to create our own audience.

It is much more effective to use the mass media for purposes of advertising. Scholars who have studied the persuasion process have identified several stages in that process. At the awareness stage the individual learns of the existence of a new idea but lacks information about it. At the interest stage the individual develops an interest in the new idea and seeks information about it. At the evaluation stage the individual makes mental application of the new idea to his situation and decides whether or not to try it. At the trial stage the individual actually applies the new idea on a small scale in order to determine its usefulness in his own situation. And at the adoption stage the individual uses the new idea continuously on a full scale. A large body of research indicates that the mass media are most influential at the awareness and interest stages. The mass media have little influence at all in the evaluation and trial stages and only a minor influence in the adoption stage.

These five stages occur in the process of evangelism. The mass media can be an effective way of making people aware of the fact that there is a unique New Testament gospel that is taught in the churches of Christ. Mass media messages can arouse a person's interest to the point that he will write or call or visit in order to seek out information. From this point on, however, personal contact methods (such as cottage meetings) and group-related methods (such as sermons and Bible classes) are much more effective. At the evaluation and trial stages, the individual makes mental application of the things he has learned. He may attend worship services or Bible classes, take part in a Home Bible study, or at least talk to a member of the church. In the evaluation and trial stages, the mass media have little influence at all. Once the person has become a Christian, mass media methods of teaching have a minor influence in confirming that decision—but the major influence is still through personal contact and group-related methods.

Doctrinal sermons in print, on radio, or on television tend to reach the very small target audience of those who already agree. Apart from an extensive independent program of advertising and promotion, they do not reach a secular or non-religious audience. Even if they did, such methods do not involve the kind of personal contact and group-related methods that are so important in the conversion experience. Few people will read a religious book or magazine, but many will read an advertisement. Few will listen to or view traditional religious programs on radio or television, but many would be exposed to a 60 second spot. The mass media can be used most effectively to create awareness and to arouse interest. After that, what is needed is a follow-up through personal contact and group-related methods. Mass media evangelism needs to be used primarily as a screening process to identify those who have been interested and therefore are likely to be receptive to the gospel message.

Preach and Teach Effectively

There are several things to keep in mind about the message that is used as the original point of Contact—whether through the mass media or through other methods of outreach. That message should deal with needs people already recognize in their lives, but it should not be a secular message. It must be a Bible-based Christ-centered message. That message which serves as the initial point of contact should not focus on doctrinal issues that people in the target audience do not yet see as being relevant to their needs, but it should be a distinctive message. That message should not leave people with the impression that the church of Christ is “just another Protestant denomination” with social programs which meet their personal needs. The bland leading the bland will never produce the results we need. And the most important thing to remember is that we must go beyond that initial point of contact. There are some good works that we do that are fully justified in their own right entirely apart from their effectiveness as evangelistic methods. However, we do not really pro-

vide the help people need if all we do is feed their bodies and ignore their deeper spiritual needs. We must do everything in our power to go beyond the initial point of contact and lead people to a full understanding of the gospel.

Avoid Manipulation

One of the clearest implications of the research reported earlier in this book is that evangelistic methods must not be manipulative. However, the way most members of the church of Christ talk about conversion betrays the belief that evangelism is manipulation. When talking about the role of the evangelist or personal worker, they always use the active voice. They ask, "How many people did you convert last year?" But when talking about the role of the convert, they do not use the active voice. They do not ask, "When did you convert?" Instead, they ask, "When were you converted?" or "Who converted you?" This language betrays the belief that converts are passive and conversion is something that the personal worker does to the "prospect."

Manipulation is not ethical persuasion. Persuasive appeals aimed at young children or at people who are mentally incompetent are inherently manipulative since the people in the target audience are not capable of giving informed consent. Foot-in-the-door techniques that trick people into hearing persuasive messages they would not listen to if they knew what that message would be are manipulative. Withholding vital information needed for an informed decision is manipulative. The use of strong emotional appeals that are not clearly backed up by factual evidence and logical reasoning is manipulative. The use of emotional appeal to overwhelm reason is manipulative. At each stage in the persuasion process, the person being persuaded must be able to give informed consent or else the persuasive effort is manipulative.

There are several ways in which we need to apply these principles in evangelism. We should teach young children, but we should not try to persuade them to obey the gospel until they are old enough to know what they are doing. When we invite

people to study with us, they should know what we plan to study and what our purposes are. We should not use strong emotional appeal in our efforts to persuade people to obey the gospel until we are sure that they fully understand what is involved. They must be able to count the cost of their obedience. We should not try to steal cheap grace. Instead, we should stress the challenges and demands of discipleship. When we persuade people to obey the gospel, they should know what that decision will mean in terms of changes in their lives. They do not need to know all the details and doctrines. That takes a lifetime of study. But they must know that obeying the gospel means that they are turning over control of their lives to the Lord. Furthermore, when there are obvious changes that must be made for repentance to be genuine, those changes must be clearly pointed out so that the person can know what must be done.

In the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3-17), Jesus told about some seed that fell on the shallow rocky soil. That seed did not have the deepness of earth needed to develop a good root system. That plant came up out of the ground too quickly. Since the plant came up out of the ground before a good root system had developed, it soon withered and died. That is what happens to people when manipulation is used to get them to be baptized before they have learned enough to understand fully what they are doing.

Change Friendship Patterns

Another clear implication of the research discussed earlier in this book is that evangelism must involve a change in friendship patterns. It is not enough to change what people believe and practice concerning doctrines. We must bring them into that fellowship which is the family of God. In a world that is becoming more and more corrupt, there must be an increasing degree of separation from the world by Christians. One of the problems today is that there is too much world in the church and not enough church in the world.

Teaching people on a one-to-one basis is important, but it is not enough. While they are being influenced in that manner, they should also be exposed to the church as an assembled and functioning body. Take those people with you to Bible class where they will meet other Christians. Take them to worship services where they will be exposed to dynamic Christ-centered Bible-based gospel preaching. Do not end your personal contact when the individual is baptized. Do not let their personal contact be limited only to you. Do everything you can to help them make friends with other members of the congregation. And above all, in this effort do all that you can to make sure that they are not just identifying with you and with others as new friends—but that they really are identifying with the Christ who dwells in each one of you. In that way, Christ will be formed in them.

In a world where the moral standards are getting lower and lower every year, it is essential that there be an increasing degree of separation from the world by Christians. At the present time, there is far too much world in the church and not enough church in the world. Effective evangelism requires that we maintain some contact with non-Christians. However, the primary reference group of a Christian should be made up largely of other Christians. The whole church must minister to the needs of the whole person. Christians need to have many opportunities for fellowship and wholesome fun with other Christians. According to Luke 2:52, Jesus grew intellectually, physically, socially, and spiritually. Christians need the kind of atmosphere in which all these kinds of growth can be accomplished. Christian education is one of the best ways to provide that atmosphere. We need to encourage more of our young people to attend Christian colleges. We need to develop more private Christian schools all the way from kindergarten through high school. We also need to develop some Christian schools beyond high school level for those young people who do not need a four-year liberal arts education. Around 80 percent of the jobs that will be available in the next generation will call for some business, vocational, or

technical training beyond the high school level, but will not call for a four-year liberal arts college education.

We need to provide more opportunities for Christians to come out of the world and be separate. As the world around us grows more and more corrupt, the time may soon come when Christians will even need to build separate communities. In our efforts to be separate from the world, we must never lose the contacts that make evangelism possible. We must find ways to maintain contact with non-Christians while still achieving the goal of separation from a world that is growing more and more corrupt.

Make Disciples

In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus taught that evangelism is a process of making disciples. Furthermore, He taught that after we baptize people, we must "teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded." A disciple is a student. Education is a much better model of what real evangelism involves than is salesmanship. The salesmanship model of evangelism has produced a lot of drop-outs. What we need are disciples. A really good Bible school program supplemented with guidance for individual study at home is one of the best ways to cure the drop-out problem in churches of Christ.

Pulpit preaching can also be valuable in making disciples. Balance is the key to effective preaching. We do not need the kind of preaching in which all the emphasis is placed on lessons for those who have not obeyed the gospel. There is, however, a need for doctrinal preaching on the first principles—even when few non-members are present in the audience. Christians need to be confirmed in their faith. Christians need to learn how to teach others. There will always be a need for sound doctrinal preaching because the church is never more than one generation away from apostasy.

Throughout this book, I have talked about the danger of a declining growth rate that will, if unchanged, lead to a zero level membership in the churches of Christ within 50 years. However,

we need to keep in mind that Satan did not destroy the early church with the strategy of a declining growth rate. Instead, he turned the church of Christ into something that was not the church of Christ. In the early days of the Restoration Movement, Satan was not able to stop the rapid growth of the church so his strategy, once again, was to turn the church of Christ into something that was not the church of Christ. It has happened before and it can happen again. Sound Bible teaching in the classroom and powerful doctrinal preaching in the pulpit are two of the best ways to insure against this danger.

In addition to the need for what we usually call doctrinal preaching, however, there is also a need for plain preaching on moral issues that we used to take for granted in the churches of Christ. There is also a need for motivational preaching and it is here that the pulpit has its greatest power. Teaching people on a one-to-one basis is essential. Sound Bible teaching in the classroom is essential. But in these methods we are dealing largely with the intellect. We must also touch the heart and move the will. The pulpit is the most effective means of persuading people to do what they already know they ought to do.

In summary, in order to reach the lost, we need to begin with people where they are. We need to use the mass media and other methods to establish a point of initial contact. In that effort, we must deal first with the needs people already recognize in their lives. Once we have used these methods to identify those who are likely to be receptive, we must follow up with effective preaching and teaching. In our evangelism we must avoid manipulation. We must help people change friendship patterns. And we must help them to become life-long students of God's word.

INVOLVE THE MEMBERS

Total evangelism includes more than reaching the lost. It also includes involving the members in the work of the local congregation. If a congregation does not use its members it will lose them. In the nation-wide survey discussed earlier in this book,

the congregations with the highest drop-out rate were the congregations with the lowest involvement level. In this section, we will consider several things that are needed to increase the involvement level in congregations.

Create a Balanced Program

A high level of involvement in a congregation, according to the research discussed on pages 40-45, is based on having an adequate number of meaningful roles for the members to fill and on keeping the members informed about the available roles. Many congregations do not have enough roles for their members to fill. That shortage of roles is made far more serious by the unequal distribution of those roles. A few willing workers have been given many roles to fill. Most of the members have nothing to do.

Some congregations have been built around one particular kind of ministry or program. In those congregations, the only members who are really involved are those taking part in that one special program. But the church is a body. A body must have diversity if it is to survive. Evangelism, edification, benevolence, and worship are functions required of every local congregation. Successful congregational development requires a balanced program involving many areas of activity. The following list is only suggestive of the many functions that can be included in a balanced program: worship arrangement, Bible school, training programs, youth activities, singles ministry, senior citizens ministry, fellowship, foreign and domestic mission work, prison ministry, bus ministry, personal evangelism, visitation, hospital ministry, counseling, child care work, disaster relief work, programs to help the poor, office help, printing, records, accounting, advertising, building maintenance—and the list could be extended much longer depending on the needs of the local congregation. All members of the congregation need to be involved in leading the lost to Christ, but there are many ways in which this goal can be accomplished and it is not essential that all members work in the same way. A balanced program of congregational activity offers

the widest possible opportunity for each member to get involved.

A balanced membership is also an important factor in congregational development. The highest involvement level as well as the best net growth rate is achieved by congregations that are heterogeneous enough to match the community in which they are located. On this point some people have thought that the results of my research contradict the "homogeneous unit of principle" discovered in the research of Donald McGavran and his associates. As I understand it, however, there is no real contradiction. My research and the research by McGavran and his associates measure different ends of an inverted U-shaped curve. My data support the conclusion that it is not best for a congregation to be more homogeneous than the community in which it is located. Their data support the conclusion that it is not best for a congregation to be more heterogeneous than the community in which it is located. Their research does not support the conclusion some have reached favoring racially segregated congregations in racially integrated communities or favoring congregations of only one socio-economic status level in communities including all socio-economic status levels. Both their research and mine support the conclusion that it is best for congregations to be similar to the communities in which they are located.

Practice an Open Style of Leadership

Group dynamics research has demonstrated clearly that the more people you can get involved in the formulation of a program the more people you will have committed to the execution of that program. Congregations where the elders lord it over the church tend to have a very low involvement level. We must not go to the extreme that some have in which the very structure of church organization is changed. We must not reject the Bible doctrine about the eldership in favor of a denominational system in which everything is decided by majority vote or one in which it is the preacher who runs the church. The eldership clearly has a God-given decision-making responsibility. There is, however, a need

for a change in the style of leadership in many of our congregations. Elders need to keep the members informed about all major matters being considered. Elders need to create channels of communication so that all the members can have some meaningful input in the decision-making process. The members must be heard. Their views must be considered. At the input stage of the decision-making process, congregations need all the diversity that is possible. Once the eldership has made the decision, more communication is needed in order to persuade the members to accept that decision and support whatever programs have been planned. An eldership should not just order the members to obey. They must persuade by their teaching and by their example. Once that has been done, congregations need all the unity that is possible. If elderships will practice an open style of leadership instead of lording it over the congregation, the involvement level will be greatly improved.

Delegate Authority

Once an eldership has received all the input it can get from the members and the eldership has made the decision about what is to be done, the eldership needs to define the objectives and outline the policy guidelines needed for implementing each program. A deacon who is selected to work in a particular program should be given all the decision-making authority that is needed to implement the program according to the objectives and within the policy guidelines determined by the eldership. An eldership cannot delegate accountability. All an eldership can delegate is decision-making authority. In many congregations, however, the eldership never delegates decision-making authority to the deacons. As a result, the eldership ends up doing the work that should have been done at the deaconate level and the deacons are not very involved because they really do not have much to do. Deacons who are given decision-making authority need to learn this same lesson about the importance of delegation. Deacons need to delegate as much decision-making authority as they

can to the members who work with them in a particular program. Delegation is one of the most important but most neglected keys to increased involvement in congregations.

Organize for Involvement

The involvement level tends to be very low in congregations where the leaders are more concerned with the accomplishment of tasks than they are with the development of people. When task-oriented leaders consider a proposed program, the first question they ask is "Can we afford it?" and the second question they ask is "Do we have enough willing workers to get the job done?" Both of these are valid questions, but they should not be considered so early in the decision-making process. The first thing that should be considered is "What do the people need?" The next thing to consider is "How can we meet this need?" At this stage in the decision-making process, the key question to consider is "Does God want us to do it?" Once that is decided, the questions to consider are "How can we raise the money to pay for it?" and "How can we recruit the workers needed to get the job done?" Many local churches have a low involvement level because there really is not much to be involved in. Many congregations have only a minimal activity level because plans are limited to those things that can be accomplished with presently available funds and workers.

When everything in a congregation is done by a few willing workers, that is a good indication of a task-oriented leadership. The involvement level in a congregation can be increased by looking first at the interests of the people rather than at the demands of the tasks. Congregations need to conduct annual church worker enrollment surveys asking each member what kind of church work he or she wants to do for the next year. Congregations need to keep accurate records of what works each member has been asked to do and what works each member has done. Task-oriented leaders select the willing workers who are best qualified because that is the easiest way to get the jobs done.

People-oriented leaders look first for ways to get all the members involved.

In summary, if church leaders will create a balanced program of work, practice an open style of leadership, delegate as much decision-making authority as possible to as many people as possible, and practice a people-oriented rather than a task-oriented kind of organizational leadership, the involvement in the congregation can be greatly improved. When that is done, the drop-out rate will decrease the net growth rate will increase and that is what it takes to produce lasting growth in the churches of Christ.

Help Christians Grow

Total evangelism includes more than reaching the lost and involving the members. It also includes helping Christians grow spiritually. The goal of total evangelism is to get people into heaven, not just to get people into the baptistry. Many things are needed to achieve that goal, but two of the most important are shepherding and preaching.

Have Faithful Shepherds

One of the major reasons for the declining net growth rate in the churches of Christ over the past 15 years is that too many elders have been functioning only as decision-makers and have been neglecting their role as shepherds. One of the main reasons that elderships need to delegate as much decision-making authority as possible to their deacons is so that they will have the time that is needed for their work as shepherds. Elderships also need to improve their work as overseers in order to have more time for their work as shepherds. In many small congregations, elderships tend to turn over all the administrative function to the preacher and that is wrong. But in many larger congregations, elderships do not use their deacons or their preachers and other full-time workers on their staff fully enough in this area of administration. Elderships need to oversee enough to make

sure that the objectives they have defined are being met and that the policy guidelines that they have set are being followed in each program. Much of the day-to-day administrative work, however, can properly be turned over to those who are working under the direction of the eldership and that will leave the elders more time for their most neglected work—their spiritual counseling and teaching work as shepherds.

The responsibility for spiritual counseling and teaching rests primarily with the shepherds of the congregation. Preachers can help in counseling. There is also an important role for professionally trained Christian counselors. This is one area of work, however, where the possibility of delegation is very limited. Elders must not neglect their decision-making role or their administrative role. But they can limit those functions to the most important matters that can be tended to only at the eldership level. If they will do that, they will have the time that is needed for their work as shepherds.

To accomplish their work as shepherds, elders need to know the people and they need to know God's word. Too many elders and also many preachers have let non-Christian or even anti-Christian professional counselors intimidate them and keep them from helping Christians with their personal, emotional, and family problems. Most of these problems are caused by sin and guilt in the lives of the people. Elders who know the people and know the Bible ought to be able to recognize sin and teach people what God's word says about how to solve the problems caused by sin. If elders cannot identify a spiritual problem or if spiritual counseling does not help in a particular situation, that is a good indication that professionally trained Christian counselors are needed. But the great majority of the problems that Christians face should be solved at the level of the local congregation by the spiritual counseling and teaching provided by the congregation's shepherds. If we can have the kind of shepherding that we need, the drop-out rate in the church will decrease and as a result the net growth rate will increase.

Preach the Word!

Preaching is important in reaching the lost and in getting the members involved in the work of the local church, but it is even more important in helping Christians grow spiritually. Preaching is probably the most important area in which conditions have changed in the churches of Christ over the past 15 years and in which major improvements are now needed in order to correct the problems of declining growth. When the congregation is not involved in evangelism or is not using the right evangelistic approach, one of the major reasons is that preachers have not taught them God's word on the matter. When congregations are not organized properly and elders lord it over the church, one of the main causes of that problem is that preachers have not had the courage to preach God's word and thus expose this error. When Christians are not growing spiritually as they should be growing, one of the primary reasons is that preachers have not provided the spiritual diet that is needed for growth.

Preaching in the churches of Christ is not as balanced as it used to be. Several years ago there was a balance between teaching and motivation, between logical and emotional appeal, between the milk and the meat of God's word. Furthermore, there used to be a lot more Bible content in the preaching than there is in many places today. In some congregations today, the preaching is Biblical but dull. In other congregations the preaching is entertaining but not very Biblical. In the last five years since I left full-time local work in the ministry, I have had the opportunity to hear a good many different preachers throughout the nation. As a life-long student of God's word and as a professor of communication, I would offer the opinion—for whatever it may be worth—that the quality of preaching in the churches of Christ has declined significantly over the past 15 years. One of the factors involved may be that it used to be typical for our preachers to have at least four years of college education and the trend in recent years has been for preachers to have only two years of non-college training. An even more important factor may be

the 500 to 1,000 mature, experienced, capable, qualified, and successful gospel preachers who have left full-time local work in the last 15 years. But whatever the cause, this is a problem that must be corrected.

In I Timothy 4:13-15, Paul told Timothy how to be a good evangelist. Timothy was to "give heed to reading, to exhortation, and to teaching." He was not to neglect the gift which God had given him. Paul said, "Be diligent in these things; give yourself wholly unto them." To do the kind of preaching that congregations need, preachers must spend much time in study, meditation, and prayer. They must grow intellectually, personally, and spiritually in order to keep pace with the ever-increasing needs of the congregation. A preacher's primary responsibility should be to make sure that whenever he steps into the pulpit he is fully prepared to present God's message to the congregation in the most effective way he can. Unfortunately, many preachers have become so busy with the lesser ministries that they have neglected their most important ministry—the ministry of the word. As a result, the spiritual diet that they serve to the congregation is neither appetizing nor nourishing.

Preachers, however, are not the only ones at fault. There are many congregations that do not want dynamic Christ-centered Bible-based gospel preaching. They do not want to have anyone rock the boat. They do not want to have anyone challenge them to an ever-increasing level of spirituality. They do not want to be awakened to the conditions of suffering humanity or to the needs of a world that is lost in sin. They do not want any intellectual challenge. They do not want to think. They want Christianity turned into a sugar-coated aspirin tablet—something that tastes good, goes down easily, and makes them feel a little better for a little while without ever curing a thing. They are at ease in Zion and that is where they want to stay. But just as surely as it is a preacher's duty at times to comfort the afflicted, it is also his duty at times to afflict the comfortable.

Preachers need to realize that spiritual growth cannot be

achieved through a constant barrage of criticism. Jesus Christ was a positive person who lived a positive life and taught a positive religion. Today we have many preachers who have found it popular to preach a negative religion. The reason this kind of negative religion has become popular in some congregations is that we have many people in the church who converted on a prejudice and now have to be sustained on a prejudice. They never really turned to Jesus Christ, they just turned against religious error. And since they are negative converts, these people are never happy unless they have something new to be against. They always have to find some new ax to grind, some new issue to fight, or some new hobby to ride. But this kind of negative religion will never make the church grow as it should. Unfortunately, many Christians have been defeated and deflated by a continual reminder of all their shortcomings. Many never leave a worship assembly feeling happy and secure. They seldom sense the glory of their salvation. Of course, II Timothy 4:2 tells us that the church needs reproof and rebuke, but the church also needs to be led in rejoicing. We need the soul-satisfying meditation about the salvation that is ours in Christ. We need to feel the security that is ours in the grace of God. We need to sense the thrill of eternity and the glory of immortality. We need to be inspired just as much as we need to be corrected. We need to be encouraged and lifted up with hope just as much as we need to be reprovved and rebuked.

Ephesians 4:15 commands us to "preach the truth in love." God is a God of love and His gospel is a message of love. But if we preach this message of love in a spirit of hatred, anger, arrogance, boastfulness, and sinful pride—then by our manner we have destroyed the effectiveness of God's message. If by our manner of preaching the truth we drive people away so that they do not obey the gospel, their blood will be required at our hands. II Timothy 2:24,25 says that "The servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle toward all, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those who oppose themselves."

A young man was once sent out to do some personal evangelism. When he came back, the preacher asked him "Did you do any good?" And the young man answered, "Well I didn't convert him—but I sure did pin his ears back." The churches of Christ have been already far too long in this business of pinning people's ears back. It is high time for us to realize that the Lord God of heaven sends us forth to win souls, not arguments.

Dynamic Christ-centered Bible-based gospel preaching is the main thing that we need to reach the lost, involve the members, and help Christians grow spiritually. If the churches of Christ can have that kind of preaching and start doing the work that is needed, we can reverse the declining growth trend of the past 15 years and get the church growing once again in the way we can and should be growing. We can preach the gospel to every person on earth before the end of this century. We have the manpower. We have the brain power. We have the financial power. We have the communication power. What is most important: we have the gospel power. All that we lack is the will power.