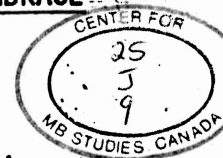


BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES OF CHURCH GROWTH THAT MENNONITE BRETHREN SHOULD EMBRACE

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I believe there are three paths available to understanding the impact of the Church Growth Movement (CGM) on Mennonite Brethren churches. The first path was chosen by brother Kopp. It is to read the available literature, analyze it both theologically and sociologically, and draw one's conclusions. Brother Kopp walks this path well. As such, he raises the issues in a fair and comprehensive manner. The analysis and information is there for discussion.

But there are two more paths that remain to be explored to understand how the CGM impacts biblical perspectives that are near and dear to MB's. They are, firstly, the Church Growth seminar material, and, secondly, trial and error in the use of the "tools". The CGM specialists are indeed pragmatists, and as such, you can't really understand the tools they have to offer until you've sat through their conventions, heard from the practitioners, and then gone home and learned the hard way what was good and bad about their advice.

Allow me to illustrate how the latter two paths may lead to some different conclusions.

A key criticism of the CGM as addressed in the paper by brother Kopp, is that it too narrowly defines evangelism. He outlines the "Wagnerian" summary of evangelistic approaches, as consisting of "Presence", "Proclamation", and "Persuasion". The CGM's stated philosophy is that of Persuasion. He summarizes by saying that CGM leaders "forthrightly reject a notion of 'holistic' evangelism", and that the CGM moves onto shaky ground "when it sets

one word of Jesus(the Great Commandment, Matthew 28:19-20) over another word of Jesus(the Great Commandment, Luke 10:25ff)". Although I'm not sure you can defend those statements with a footnote, for the sake of argument, let's pretend that Wagner or McGavran actually said them. If you spend any time at Church Growth conferences, and evaluate the tools they offer, you quickly discover that it is an organization with a target. I've never been left with the impression that its proponents seek to provide all the answers regarding evangelism. They want to see churches evangelize for the purpose of conversion and responsible church membership(almost sounds anabaptist!). It's right in their name. They are about Church Growth. Don't para-church organizations exist precisely because the church is so concerned with having a complete theology that it sometimes completes nothing in particular? If churches and pastors choose to narrowly define their own purpose as only that of persuasion, that's their problem. As such, you can hardly blame Peter Wagner for being too narrow. He's honest about what he's up to. The more troubling reality is pastors and churches who think you either have to buy all or nothing of what a para-church organization has to sell. On the one hand, when pastors(who have very few objective criteria by which to evaluate ministry) use Church Growth as their one and only method of evaluation, they quickly become idolaters at the altar of numerical success. On the other hand, when they reject the sociological truths that impact evangelism, they become disobedient to the Great Commission. We must reject both extremes.

Secondly, any exposure to CGM leaders will quickly indicate that although they exist to help churches grow, they are not necessarily narrow in their methods. In fact, some of the most recent assistance the CGM has offered to churches applies directly to meeting the needs of the whole person. A "tool" that it is marketing effectively now has to do with small group philosophy. Within the philosophy is implied the assumption that if you want to minister Christ to the whole person, you must know what the persons needs are. In the modern context you will not know those needs until you have a mechanism that provides accountability. To quote Jim Dethmer (Conference on Assimilation, Toronto, 1991), "The church of tomorrow will not have small groups, it will be small groups". Whether or not you agree, he is forthright about his mechanism for accountability. There are, of course, other approaches available to the church. The CGM is simply marketing a tool that it feels best fits our culture in helping churches move from talking about "holistic" evangelism, to actually doing it (which is what I'm sure we are all interested in!?).

Thirdly, consider the CGM's "pragmatism". Its assertions regarding both pastor and congregation being willing to pay the price for growth, as well as getting rid of that which does not work, are in my mind, its most helpful contributions. Such pragmatism is threatening, both theologically and experientially, until you realize the underlying assumption. This is not a model for persons who simply love success. It's actually a model for those who are willing to fail in their desire to see people

converted to Christ. At a recent CGM conference, the speaker suggested that in urban settings, for every four ideas we try, three will fail. For people with rural roots that sounds strange (My father would have been a "lousy" farmer if for every three peach trees he planted, only one lived). Yet, in cities, trial and error must be part of our strategy. If we are indeed, a "Christ centered", God Conscious", "bible reading movement", those risks serve as no threat to our theology.

In truth, we need as many self evaluative tools as we can get. We are all notorious for seeing ourselves as we want to be seen, not necessarily as we are. For too long we have seen ourselves as a denomination that is a "missionary movement". Such self-appraisal "warms the heart". But, the CGM would simply ask: Are you sure its not really heart burn you're feeling? It may be fine to say that we have been a missionary movement, but it would ask-relative to whom? And by whose definition of missionary activity? Can a denomination that is barely exceeding biological growth really put in black and white that it is a missionary movement? How long can we live on our history in India and Zaire? What about Los Angeles?, What about Toronto? What about any urban centre where MB ethnic immigration has not been a part of our story? The CGM asks us an amazingly simple question (Which we are tempted to complicate in study conferences): Are we willing to pay the price for urban mission in North America? True, such pragmatism is not the "entire story". But it may be that part of the story we need to hear. To attend a CGM conference and sit with leaders and pastors from other

denominations, and discover that churches of all shapes and colors experience stress at numerical barriers like 200 and 500, might even help us to understand why so many of our churches and pastors offer up, or become, sacrificial lambs at precisely those points. It is in urban evangelism where we as a denomination don't necessarily need the entire story, as much as we need some of the building blocks over which we frequently stumble.

These additional reflections from the other "two paths" ought not to be seen as a blanket statement of support for the CGM. Every human movement has weaknesses. Let me address one that I think brother Kopp missed. As I see it, the critical weakness in the CGM is its lack of sensitivity to how its methodology affects the people (mainly pastors) who "buy its product". The CGM must bear greater responsibility for helping its listeners discern where methodology becomes theology and suddenly attacks a pastors psychology. Bill Hull, in his excellent book, "The Disciple Making Pastor", describes the greatest danger of a theological idea which is sold as a method. The method is to bring in resource people, who represent the "cream of the crop", the top 5% of pastors in North America. They, in turn, create expectations which the other 95% will never pull off, simply because they do not have the gift mix. It's not that different from Madison Avenue selling a product by raising the expectations of what it will do for the buyer. When General Motors sells a Corvette under the guise of sex appeal, it simply creates an expectation that will seldom be realized (In real showrooms the girl doesn't come with the car). And in the case of

the CGM, in real churches, the growth doesn't come with the binder. Real pastors have to eventually work with real people to permit God the opportunity to build His church. The solution is not to stay away from the conferences and seminars. Let's face it; most pastors need more tools than they can ever possibly create on their own. The solution is expensive in time and money. Pastors should not be permitted to attend these seminars alone, without key lay leaders at their side. These brothers and sisters can ensure that their pastor does not fade between delusions of grandeur and suicidal tendencies in the course of high powered lectures. Furthermore, the CGM movement can be very helpful if lay leaders catch the vision and become the ones who begin to use the new tools alongside their "average" pastor(who might dream of becoming the next Bill Hybels, if only his board would get out of the way). If ever a priesthood of believers is needed, it's in sharing together as pastors and lay leaders a new strategy for evangelism in our cities. I suggest this will not happen as long as the Church Growth education is directed at one person, who in all honesty went into the ministry because he had a shepherd's heart, only to realize that he needs to become a rancher. When that person comes home alone with new tools, the responsibility and likelihood of selling them to people who don't even know they exist, rests on that one person finding either the wisdom of Solomon, or dumb luck. The statistics aren't good in the final analysis. The other option is to see Church Growth as a shared leadership task. I suggest that our results can only improve!

QUESTIONS ON BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES OF CHURCH GROWTH

- 1. How do we keep from becoming single purpose churches?**
- 2. How do we avoid becoming churches with no purpose?**
- 3. How do we avoid turning methodology into theology without realizing that it has happened?**
- 4. How can we stay dependant upon the Spirit when using the tools of sociology?**
- 5. When does Church Growth theory create idolatry in the pastorate?**