

## **Circulations of the Saints (3)**

### **Growing a Church While Shrinking Others**

One of North America's most prominent religious movements in the last two decades of the 20th century was "effective evangelism." It seeks "to grow" churches by using tools from the fields of management, marketing, psychology, and communications. Its reliance on business methods was lifted to great heights by the "church growth" school movement. Theology gave way to technique. The concern "Will it work?" began to overshadow the question "Is it true?"

#### **CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT**

Many people identify this movement with the late Donald McGavran, a missionary to India, who coined the term "church growth." In 1959 he founded the Institute of Church Growth at Eugene, Oregon, an organization dedicated to enlarging evangelical congregations by means of analyzing successful churches and using the tools of the social sciences. In 1965, the Institute of Church Growth became part of the School of World Missions at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California. McGavran's research led him to the conclusion that the largest and most successful churches are relatively homogeneous congregations, "a section of society in which all members have some characteristics in common." The key to church growth, then, lays in targeting discreet communities of homogeneous individuals. In other words, the church growth movement concentrates on "winnable people." McGavran's pragmatic theories have been embraced by many evangelical leaders who use them to build large and growing congregations, especially in white, middle-class, family-focused, career-centered, baby boomers' suburbs.

#### **THE CUSTOMER IS KING**

The church growth school gives the distinct impression that it is all about techniques, methods, and marketing. Os Guinness points out that megachurches have been built on the philosophical and structural pattern of America's recent shopping malls. He writes that "one-stop-shopping" is a theme common to all megachurches. The biggest churches offer not only spiritual attractions but also features such as movie theatres, weight rooms, and saunas. And in his book, *The Body*, Charles Colson comments, "Church growth has become the hottest business in the religious world today. If 'the customer is king,' then the church has to react as any organization does to consumer demand, which means find the right marketing strategy."

#### **WILLOW CREEK**

Bill Hybels, founder of the Willow Creek Community Church, put the church growth principles into practice. When he decided to start his own church in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, he conducted a door-to-door market survey to determine why

suburbanites stayed away from church. On the basis of his survey he discovered that they were bored by church, that they were put off by traditional religious symbols, and that they preferred to remain anonymous when they attend church. Consequently, he designed a church to overcome their objections.

Since they disliked constantly being asked for money, Hybels made it clear that visitors should consider themselves as guests and not feel any pressure to contribute. "Before entering the ministry," he recounted, "I spent a number of years in the marketplace. My genuine love for business and my kinship with businessmen has motivated me to develop a style of communication that relates well to the 'real world.'"

## **THE SADDLEBACK CHURCH**

The Saddleback Church with its 15,000 weekly attendees, is situated on a 120-acre campus in the hills of southern Orange County, California. Like Hybels, Warren also used church-growth techniques to found his church. His aim was to reach young unchurched families in the fast-growing, upscale communities, which bring in a flood of middle-class arrivals. He attempted to reach a mobile, consumerist culture that adapted easily to a new approach to church. He too knocked on doors and asked what kept people from going to church. Warren says that he built a church from a crowd that initially felt, he says, like "a Kiwanis Club."

Rick Warren, Saddleback's founder and pastor, is well-known for his best-seller, *The Purpose-Driven Church*. Pastors especially pay attention to his methods of church planting. Thousands of them flock to the church's annual Purpose-Driven Ministries conference - 3,800 attended in May 2002. Warren's church-growth methodology even made its way into China. But it did not meet the indigenous experience and realities of the Chinese churches. In January 2003, Shanghai house church leaders told Carol Hamrin, a Chinese affairs consultant and Research Professor at George Mason University: "We've learned from Saddleback's seven-fold growth experience, but help us all learn from our 70-fold growth history."

## **FREE-MARKET APPROACH**

Why is there so much infatuation with technique, surveys, and marketing? I suggest that evangelical church-growth advocates have an uncritical admiration for technology and the methods of modern science. They also tap into the constantly rising expectations of our consumer culture. We live in an age of unprecedented choice. We have more choices than our parents ever had. We have also become fussier and more demanding. In *Mosaic Madness*, Reginald Bibby points out that Canadians today, living in a culture that has been giving increasing attention to individuals and their viewpoints, are taking quite a different approach to religion. They have become highly selective consumers. In other words, people are picking and choosing what they want from religion; they are also inclined to treat truth as a personal preference. They are shopping for a "religion that works for me." An illustration of this consumer approach to religion is Timothy Finley who runs Flight of the Eagle Shamanic Resources in Fredericton, N.B. He claims,

"We have the power at any given moment to choose new beliefs, new interpretations of the world around us." And the emphasis on consumers' choice has also greatly impacted evangelical church growth pastors. Lyle Schaller argues that the more people expect of the church, the greater the advantages and choices for a large congregation. To meet consumers' demands, church growth pastors offer; choices in worship, a surplus of off-street parking, one-story buildings, air-conditioning, paid staff to do what formerly was done by volunteers, visual communication, help in the rearing of children, choices in learning, designated giving, high-quality childcare, marriage enrichment retreats, and relevant training experiences for volunteers. Consequently, a church is no longer viewed as a "religious meeting place, but as a service agency - an entity that exists to satisfy people's needs." This belief leads some to say, "It is critical that we keep in mind a fundamental principle of Christian communication: the audience, not the message, is sovereign."

This philosophy sees the unevangelized as consumers who must have their needs met. And in order to meet those needs, they suggest we must do our utmost to make the services as attractive as possible to suit their taste.

When you read the ads in the religion section in the Saturday papers you quickly note that some churches often cater to this "we will meet your need" mentality. These churches use their newspaper ads to headline a question, "Need help raising your children?" "Looking for answers to your spiritual questions?" "Do you want more out of church than a short nap?" The question is then followed by a brief statement explaining how that congregation can meet your need.

## **COMPETING FOR CHURCH MEMBERS**

This "free-market" Christianity fosters competition for church members. Churches work hard to satisfy spiritual consumers. Competition for church members to make church growth happen has frequently led to "sheep stealing." A very large part of church growth success is growth by transfer, not by conversion. In fact, the body of Christ is not expanding numerically, but only some churches with the attractive programs are growing. Transfer growth simultaneously builds super churches and impoverishes smaller local churches, which do not have the funds or staff. It does not contribute to the overall work of God in a local area. As Jim Petersen of the Navigators said, "Increase of this sort isn't church growth at all. It's just a reshuffling of the same fifty-two cards." A single mom at Willow Creek said before she joined there, "We church-hopped for 17 years."

Consumerism may be good for the economy, but not necessarily good for the soul. It reduces Christianity to a mere belief, to a matter of personal choice and preference, to a level of hobbies or entertainment options or spectator sports. As Os Guinness remarked: "Far from leading to an exodus, modern church growth often uses the ideology and tools of Egypt to make the life of the people of God more comfortable in captivity."

## CONCLUSION

I believe church growth cannot be determined by the market. The market approach with all its "bells and whistles" does draw a crowd. However, it is "so fully adapted to the not-yet-born again" attendees that worship becomes measured by the taste and experience of those who don't yet know why they should be in awe before the Triune God. And this approach lets the unchurched, who know the least about the faith, determine when, where and how to worship. As one church-growth proponent puts it: "The megachurches' entire law is summed up in: 'Find a need and meet it, find a hurt and heal it.'"

In *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God*, Marva Dawn queries: "Are our churches' goals set by slogans of the culture around us or by biblical texts? Do our congregational programs find their source in the way sociology defines the present 'needs' of consumers (should they read 'their wants'?) Or from the Scriptures? What decides the doctrinal content of the worship service - one who is theologically trained or the results of a survey asking people what they want?"

(To be continued)

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