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The Church Growth Movement: A Word of Caution

Glenn Huebel

The Church Growth Institute of America recently made its predictions of the fastest growing denominations of the next decade. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod was in the top ten of that elite group. One of the reasons for this confidence in the LCMS was stated as our synod's enthusiastic integration of the principles of the church growth movement. Clearly, a rapidly growing interest in the church growth movement is evident in the LCMS. Many of our districts are participating in well orchestrated church growth programs, and a great and growing number of our pastors and leaders are trained in the fundamentals of the movement. A movement so enthusiastically embraced and which exercises such a profound influence upon the thinking and strategy of the LCMS deserves to be well scrutinized.

Having recently participated in a two-year Texas District church growth project led by the Church Growth Institute of America, I have found much to be commended in the movement. The principles taught are generally very practical and helpful in guiding and structuring the congregation and its ministry. The outreach mindset which characterizes every aspect of the movement is certainly a healthy and needed influence in the LCMS. The tools developed by the leaders of this movement are easy to use and very relevant and practical aids to the congregation. I cannot agree with those who find nothing good in the movement.

With so many things to commend about the program, it is certainly tempting to embrace every aspect of the popular movement without question or careful evaluation. Yet a word of caution is in order, especially at this time in which church growth enthusiasm has reached almost a fevered pitch in the LCMS. It is not my intention to expose and castigate every doctrinally flawed statement in the mass of church growth literature. In fact, the movement studiously avoids any distinctive theology which might limit its universal appeal. For that reason very few theologians of any denomination will find the expressed theology of the movement particularly offensive. Realization of this was the seed of my own cautious attitude. A movement which finds universal appeal across denominations must be based on some other foundation than theology. Indeed, the ecumenical movement has demonstrated that

theology is a stumbling block to the outward union of denominations and, therefore, must be diluted before institutional unity can be achieved. The great weakness of the ecumenical movement (on the outward plane) is that it fails to offer an exciting substitute for theology. By contrast, the church growth movement finds eager and growing acceptance in a great number of denominations because it does offer a positive rallying point. The great strength and universal appeal of the church growth movement is centered in its sociological insights as they are specifically applied to religious institutions.

This combination of shallow, "bare-bones" theology together with a well packaged, pragmatic sociology causes me concern. Will the church's priorities change? Will the church begin to seek its growth from the promising seed of applied sociology rather than the biblical seed of the Word? Are church growth principles and standards becoming, in the minds of our people, the marks of the vital church? Will pure, careful, and precise theology become obsolete, an historical relic in the modern church, supplanted by much more effective and "practical" church growth principles? These are my concerns.

Of course, a church growth enthusiast will label these concerns as totally unfounded. They will object that church growth principles are designed to complement our theology, not to replace it. I believe that the intent is sincere, but what will happen in practice? It is generally implied that those who balk or have concerns about the movement are not prioritizing "growth" as they should. Objections and cautions are often labeled as "non-growth excuses." In many cases this assessment is probably accurate. In fact, even as I write I must accept and consider this challenge to my motivation. The best way to state my concern, therefore, is to challenge the church growth movement on the basis of the great commission itself. It is from a desire to see the lost gathered into the kingdom of grace that I share these concerns and cautions. It is my fear that the church growth movement may, indeed, unwittingly hinder true church growth by leading us subtly away from the only source that generates that growth—the Word and the sacraments. I wish to measure the church growth movement against the great commission on three fronts: (1.) The goal of the church growth movement is sociological rather than theological.

(2.) The standards of measurement of the church growth movement are sociological rather than theological. (3.) The means employed by the church growth movement are sociological rather than theological.

I. The Goal

First, we may measure the goal of the church growth movement against the standard of the great commission. The goals of the church growth movement and of the great commission of Christ are stated in exactly the same words: "to make disciples of all nations." C. Peter Wagner, a leading spokesman for the church growth movement, states: "Those who have chosen to identify with McGavran's movement, and I include myself among them, have chosen as their biblical rallying point, Jesus' Great Commission to 'go and make disciples of all the nations.'"¹

As faithful, confessional Lutherans we must, however, ask whether the Scriptures and the church growth leaders mean the same thing with these words. In theory and profession, perhaps they do. In practice, however, I think not. To be sure, church growth leaders state (sincerely, I believe) that it is essential for discipleship that one be a true believer in Christ and His vicarious atonement. But faith itself is not measurable. "The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, the Lord knoweth them that are His" (1 Tim 2:19). "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation" (Luke 17:20). This places the kingdom of grace on a plane beyond the reach of scientific investigation. Nevertheless, faith does bear fruit. In fact, as faithful Lutherans we say that faith always and inevitably bears fruit. Church growth practitioners attempt to measure the fruits of faith. The chief fruit upon which the church growth movement focuses is stated in Wagner's words: "The fruit the church growth movement has selected as the validating criterion for discipleship is responsible church membership."²

Many have accused the church growth movement of "playing a numbers game," meaning that they do not care what statistics really mean. In reality, church growth researchers carefully question what numbers signify. Wagner again states:

As I see it, those who object to numbers are usually trying to avoid superficiality in Christian commitment. I agree with this. I am not interested in names on church rolls. There are already too many nominal, inactive and non-resident church members in American. I am not interested in churches which are religious social clubs. I am not interested in decisions for Christ totaled up as people raise their hands or come forward after a crusade. I am not interested in Christians who profess Christ but do not demonstrate it in their lives. These numbers are unimportant.³

What is Wagner's interest, then? Converts? Yes, but only *indirectly* as they are measured by "responsible church membership." The numbers are valid for Wagner only as they indicate "responsible church members." Responsible church membership is variously defined, according to each denominational emphasis. In practice, a "responsible church member" is one who is incorporated into the institutional life and activity of the congregation and who manifests in one degree or another those "fruits" which are valued by the particular theology of the congregation (speaking in tongues, praying, regular church attendance, giving, etc.). Responsible church membership is, therefore, in practice, defined in outward, institutional, behavioral terms, with little attention given to motive or source of power.

The practical focus of the church growth "great commission" is the outward incorporation of a person into a congregational institution and the production of a Christian lifestyle (witnessing, praying, attendance, service, etc.). The church growth movement, by its own admission, sets its target on the outward "fruits of faith" rather than on faith itself. What is wrong with this shift in focus? If every true Christian bears fruit (a statement with which we would agree), then why not turn our focus to the inevitable fruit which verifies faith? Unfortunately, the outward "fruit" can be artificially produced. People can be behaviorally "changed" or "reformed" by outward manipulation of one form or another. People can be drawn into and become active members of an institution—even a religious institution—through other motives than faith in Christ and by other means than His voice. For instance, people can become regular, active members of a congregation because their "belonging needs" are satisfied. (This motive is, incidently, identified and stressed by church growth principles.) People can be motivated to "give" through fear or guilt or hope

of reward. People can be manipulated sociologically or psychologically to conform to practically any outward standard. The cults of our day amply prove this point. By making "responsible church congregation membership" the goal of the great commission, church growth teachers are reducing the mission of the church to the sociologically defined and measurable "*form of godliness*." It should be noted at this point that I am *not* entering upon the "quality versus quantity" argument against church growth. I am convinced that church growth principles foster even "quality" church members as that term describes outward behavior. As history and as the cults prove, however, even "quality" or "responsible church members" can be sociologically or psychologically produced.

Against this procedure we must uphold the true great commission of Christ, which is to "make disciples of all nations." A "disciple" is not merely one who outwardly behaves as a Christian, or even one who with his lips confesses Christ, but rather one who, in his heart, repents of his sins and believes in the forgiveness merited by the substitutionary work of Christ. The great commission, as defined in Scripture, focuses essentially upon the heart of man, not merely on his behavior, his outward fellowship with Christians, or any other outward fruit, as important as these may be. The great commission is concerned not with a sociological or psychological conversion, but with the theological conversion of the sinner, an inward turning from sin to grace worked by the power of the Holy Spirit, a resurrection from spiritual death to spiritual life. In summary, the great commission is the commission of Christ to build the church, not merely to incorporate people into outward fellowship or membership of a congregation. Christian "fruit" is a necessary result of conversion, but it should never become the focus of the great commission for the reasons stated above. Francis Peiper clearly distinguishes the difference between these two things in his *Christian Dogmatics*:

The Christian Church is composed of all those and only those in whom the Holy Spirit has worked faith that for the sake of Christ's vicarious satisfaction their sins are forgiven. Nothing else makes one a member of the church, neither holding membership in a church body, nor outward use of the means of grace, nor profession of the Christian faith, nor filling an office of the church, nor zeal for a moral life in imitation of Christ, nor any immediate regeneration or

submergence in God of which the “enthusiasts” of all shades talk⁴

Since man by nature is inclined to imagine that mere outward affiliation with the church secures his salvation, the great practical importance of ever defining the church as the communion of believers or saints, and not as an institution, an outward polity, is manifest.⁵

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession clearly describes the nature of the church and thereby directs us to the real goal of the great commission in these words:

For it is necessary to understand what it is that principally makes us members, and that, living members, of the Church. If we will define the Church only as an outward polity of the good and wicked, men will not understand that the kingdom of Christ is righteousness of heart and the gift of the Holy Ghost [that the kingdom of Christ is spiritual, as nevertheless it is; that therein Christ inwardly rules, strengthens, and comforts hearts, and imparts the Holy Ghost and various spiritual gifts], but they will judge that it is only the outward observance of certain forms of worship and rites. Likewise, what difference will there be between people of the Law and the Church if the Church is an outward polity? But Paul distinguishes the Church from the people of the Law, thus, that the Church is a spiritual people, i.e., that it has been distinguished from the heathen not by civil rites [not in polity and civil affairs], but that it is the true people of God, regenerated by the Holy Ghost.⁶

In summary, the goal of the church growth movement is to make “responsible church members,” which is a goal pragmatically defined in institutional, measurable, behavioral terms. Though the leaders agree that a “rebirth” is necessary, the *practical* target of the movement is the outward building of a religious institution. The real goal of the great commission however, is, and must always remain the conversion of sinners from unbelief to faith in Christ. The fact that we cannot see or measure this enterprise should not tempt us to shift our focus. It should humble us to realize that only God is able to build His church.

II. The Standards

The second problem which we should observe in the church growth movement concerns its standards of evaluation. The standards of evaluation used by the church growth movement are perfectly consistent with its goal—organizational, sociological growth. The standards by which the church growth movement measures and evaluates the health of a congregation are almost exclusively sociological in nature. The church growth process always begins with a careful evaluation of the congregation's present condition. This evaluation is necessary to identify problem areas and plan workable solutions. (Church growth principles are custom-fitted to each congregation's needs.) The two-year church growth project in the Texas District began in each participating congregation with the task of gathering a vast amount of statistics. This was the data base upon which the congregation's health and vitality was evaluated by church growth experts. The statistics which we were requested to gather and chart included worship attendance, Sunday school attendance, number of visitors (separated into first-, second-, and third-time visitors), age distribution of members, number of small groups in the congregation, membership growth or decline (categorized into baptism, transfer, and conversion), demographic information on the surrounding community, and much more. No questions were asked concerning the content of doctrine or preaching, nor was it necessary to find out how many members were diligently involved in a study of the Word (with the exception of worship service and Sunday school statistics). The data considered statistically relevant was that which would give an accurate picture of the life of the congregation as a social organism. It was data which was primarily, almost exclusively, sociological in nature. The problem areas identified were sociological problems, and the solutions suggested were sociological solutions (more about this matter in Part III). I am certainly not criticizing the collection of this data, nor the accuracy or relevance of the evaluation. I too found it to be helpful in the performance of my ministry. I am simply identifying it as a sociological evaluation of the congregation's life.

This approach, nevertheless, is problematic because the kingdom of grace (the true object of the great commission) is not necessarily flourishing in every healthy, vibrant, growing religious social unit or congregation. Organizational health is certainly an important consideration which we cannot neglect, but we can-

not identify organizational health with the health and vitality of the kingdom of God. In other words, church growth measurements may lead to wrong conclusions, dangerously wrong conclusions. Not every "growing" church is successfully fulfilling Christ's great commission. Not even every church incorporating previously unchurched people is successfully fulfilling the great commission. Some religious groups are extremely healthy, vital, growing organizations which fulfill many needs of their members and the community, but are, nevertheless, not "making disciples" in the real sense of that concept.

Jesus commented that the Pharisees were very active evangelists in a broad sense of that word, and they were "successful" in building the visible church: "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, you make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves" (Matthew 23:15). The same may be said today of the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses, which by the outward measurements of church growth criteria are vital, healthy, growing religious bodies, but are not "making disciples" because they lack the Gospel. The church growth movement does not include non-Christian cults in its studies, nor do its leaders uphold the cults as positive examples of growth. Nevertheless, many of the churches included in the church growth literature as examples of healthy, vibrant churches grossly distort the Gospel and incorrectly divide Law and Gospel. Among these are the legalistic Pentecostals, Assemblies of God, and Nazarenes, who tend to substitute Law for Gospel. Unfortunately, they may be far healthier than most of our Lutheran congregations from an organizational standpoint, and they may be drawing more people into their realm of influence. But how does the kingdom of God fare among them?

Mere sociological evaluation of a congregation's or church body's health may be deceptive. In Lutheran and confessional theology the health and vitality of the church is correlated only with the means of grace. Article VII of the Augsburg Confession states: "The church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is rightly administered." Similarly we confess in the Apology:

The church is not only the fellowship of outward objects and rites, as other governments, but is originally a fellowship of faith and of the Holy Ghost in hearts. [The Christian church consists not alone in fellowship of outward signs, but it consists especially in inward communion of eternal blessings in the heart. . .], which fellowship nevertheless has outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ. [Namely, where God's Word is pure, and the Sacraments are administered in conformity with the same, there certainly is the Church, and there are Christians.] And this church alone is called the body of Christ, which Christ renews. . . '8

The purely taught Gospel and the sacraments as instituted by Christ are the only marks of the church. The vitality of the church is correlated with the purity of the means of grace operating within it. Any other mark can be counterfeited and is therefore misleading.

Obviously, an error in standard generates an error in conclusion or evaluation. Congregations which church growth principles applaud may, indeed, be adding nothing and, in some cases, even undermining the kingdom. Church growth standards have no way to distinguish the real temple of God from the wood, hay, and stubble which will be burned on the last day (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). It should be noted at this point that the church growth movement has found no correlation between the content of doctrine and the ability of a church to grow and flourish. In fact, the church growth movement has declared that pluralism in doctrine is a blessing of God which allows everyone to find a church suitable to his own tastes.

But why should we, as confessional Lutherans, be concerned about this faulty standard of measurement? Since we have pure doctrine, what difference does it make? It can potentially make a great deal of difference. People and organizations tend to emphasize and produce what their accepted standards of measurement approve. If we embrace and accept these standards without realizing their inherent flaws, our priorities as a church will be changed accordingly. Historically we have emphasized the pure means of grace because they were the standard by which we evaluated the church. If we now accept another standard of

measurement, particularly one which finds no value in the pure means of grace, our most precious treasure may be lost and traded for glittering trinkets. Satan is successfully tempting us with the glory of a worldly kingdom if we give up or pay less attention to the cross. Especially is this caution necessary in the LCMS at the present time, considering our doctrinal crisis. The leaven of false doctrine has penetrated the loaf and is working its corruption within. In order to avoid confrontation and maintain outward peace, the organizational image is being emphasized. Some among us are contending that doctrine is not really important, after all. And now we have embraced enthusiastically the church growth movement. What a temptation! Here a new standard is offered which commends doctrinal pluralism in the name of the great commission! What more pious reason could there be to lay aside our differences? Satan is a wily foe, indeed.

Some are thinking, perhaps, that our synod will never wholly accept the shallow standards of the church growth movement in place of the true marks of the church as identified in our confessions. Will we always consider pure teaching the vital, essential mark, the precious treasure of our church body, the very *seed* of the church of God? Or will the maintenance of pure doctrine one day be considered an unnecessary nuisance? Doctrinal controversy, even necessary and healthy controversy, wreaks havoc on the outward institution. It projects a negative image to the public and thereby diminishes, sometimes substantially, the appeal of the organization to outsiders. Nevertheless, history has demonstrated that Satan will never allow pure doctrine to remain in the church without strife and warfare. Will the preservation of the pure teaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments one day be considered too costly, too destructive, too much of a hindrance or a danger to the institutional health of the church? Will the maintenance of pure preaching and pastoral practice ever cease being an asset and become a liability in our hearts and minds? In a recent Bible study a district leader emphatically expressed the idea that our "concern for pure doctrine" was a sinful hindrance to our fulfilling of the great commission. Is it possible to fulfill the great commission without pure doctrine? According to church growth standards, the necessary costs of maintaining truth may, indeed, hinder and diminish our "health" and "vitality" as an institution. According to the confessions, pure doctrine, the church, and therefore the great commission are inseparably and wonderfully united.

III. The Means

A final caution regarding the church growth movement is that the means it employs to accomplish the great commission are shallow. Again they are consistent with the goal desired and are sociological rather than theological. We have noted above that, by church growth standards, doctrine is not a vital ingredient of a growing, flourishing church. In consequence, churches of all denominations from one end of the theological spectrum to the other can grow and flourish by applying the principles of the church growth movement. Doctrine is a variable. Church growth principles are the constants of growing churches. And what are these vital principles that keep a church "going and growing"? A review of church growth literature reveals that they are pragmatic, organizational principles, many of which are patterned after the business model. The church growth way to keep a church going and growing is largely applied sociology, including an understanding of group dynamics. The growing church has well organized infrastructure of cell groups and a careful procedure of incorporating new members into these cells. The growing church is keenly aware of saturation points in a group, even pinpointing the saturation point of worship attendance at eighty percent of seating capacity. Growing churches recognize and use the homogeneous unit principle, realizing that people enjoy being with those who have similar cultural backgrounds. Growing churches pay special attention to the convenience of the worshipper, providing adequate parking space and special parking for visitors. Growing churches recognize the importance of making a good first impression, focusing special attention on the first-time visitors. Church growth theory recommends certain leadership styles as an important ingredient to church growth. Growing churches carefully analyze the demographics of their communities and target their efforts and message to particular groups and classes of people. All of this activity is helpful and very practical, but it is also primarily sociology.

The Bible is frequently used and quoted in church growth materials. I have observed two primary ways in which the Bible is used in the program. First, it is used to defend the priority of the great commission. However, vital elements in the great commission, such as the theology of conversion, the vicarious atonement, the church, and the means of grace, are not treated at length. Secondly, the Bible is used as a sociology textbook of sorts. It

is used to demonstrate the presence of certain sociological principles at work in the early church and its growth process. In other words, the Bible seems to be used in a very superficial way to defend and support the principles of the church growth movement.

Whereas these sociological phenomena are, indeed, evident in the growth of the early church, it is interesting to note that important biblical data concerning church growth is not generally included in the church growth materials. For example, the Bible does not leave it to us to determine the causes of growth, but clearly identifies these causes. The Bible itself ascribes the growth of the church, not to the application of certain "principles," but to the living and abiding Word of God. Church growth teachers can find the *oikos* or "household" evangelism principle at work in the New Testament to defend their "web evangelism" principle. This is a valid observation. Why do they not also emphasize what is abundantly more evident in the New Testament, that the growth of the church is specifically attributed, not to the *oikos* principle, but to the Word and sacraments? It was the word preached by Peter which "pricked the hearts" of hearers on the first Pentecost. "They that gladly received His word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). The church growth teachers find abundant statistics in the Book of Acts to justify their insistence upon keeping accurate records and counting people. This is a valid observation. Why do they not also stress the means of grace, which receives more emphasis in the Book of Acts than keeping statistics? The prayer of the church recorded in Acts 4:29-30 is a prayer for boldness to speak the word. In Acts 6:7 Luke tells us the source of the church's vitality: "And the Word of God increased: and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly." In Acts 8:4 we are told that the Christians were scattered and went everywhere "preaching the word." It was the Word of Christ preached by Peter which converted the house of Cornelius. The Word is the source of all the growth we see in the Book of Acts.

Paul, the great missionary of the Book of Acts, reveals in His epistles where the power and success of his great-commission ministry is found. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:17). Again, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Romans 10:17). To the Colossians Paul writes, "All over the world this Gospel is producing fruit and growing. . ."

(Colossians 1:6). When Paul instructs Timothy as a pastor and teacher of the church, he does not give him a course in applied sociology (*oikos*, receptive fields, etc.) but directs him to the pure doctrine of God's Word: "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them, for in so doing thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee" (1 Timothy 4:16).

In the gospels, the same source of church growth is clearly emphasized. The parable of the sower is often used by church growth leaders to demonstrate the principle of receptiveness. How is it that they do not emphasize what is so emphatic in that parable, that the kingdom of God is derived from the proclaiming and hearing of the Word? Again, Jesus says that "the kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field" (Matthew 13:24). This seed is the Word of God. There is also the great commission of Matthew 28:19-20, the "biblical rallying point" of the church growth movement. How is it that church growth leaders use this passage to emphasize the priority of the command to make disciples (verse 19), without also emphasizing the priority of the means (verse 20) by which disciple-making is accomplished? Jesus not only commands the making of disciples but also immediately adds, "baptizing and teaching."

Clearly, the unique role of the Gospel and the sacraments as means of grace is stated as emphatically in Scripture as the great commission itself. The expansion of the kingdom (true church growth) is a function of the Word. Sociological principles can be effective means to build a successful visible church, but have no power whatsoever to build the kingdom. Only the pure Gospel and sacraments can accomplish this task. The Lutheran confessors understood well the connection between the expansion of the kingdom and the means of grace as they included Article V in the Augsburg Confession:

That we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel. . ."

The Brief Statement also emphasizes the means of grace as the only means of growth in the kingdom of God:

Churches at home should never forget that there is no other way of winning souls for the Church and keeping them with it than the faithful and diligent use of the divinely ordained means of grace. Whatever activities do not either directly apply the Word of God or subserve such application we condemn as "new methods," unchurchly activities which do not build, but harm, the Church!⁰

Again, why should this matter be a concern to the LCMS since we have the pure Gospel and the sacraments? I believe that we must beware of a subtle inversion of our priorities. Inversion is one of Satan's most successful methods of deception. He tempts us to place meat which perishes over meat which endures, sight over faith, law over gospel, the kingdom of the world over the kingdom of God. To emphasize church growth principles (law) over the means of grace (Gospel) would be a serious and fatal mistake. But such an inversion is not easily detected.

Never would we blatantly and openly substitute church growth principles for the means of grace, yet subtly, in our minds and hearts, this substitution, in fact, may happen. It may be happening. What are we trusting as a synod—the means of grace or applied practical sociology? If enthusiasm is a barometer, it appears that the church growth principles have an edge over pure doctrine. The synod has enthusiastically embraced church growth principles. Great numbers of our pastors have been trained at Fuller Theological Seminary in California. Many districts, including my own, are emphasizing and integrating church growth principles. Lyle Schaller has rated the church growth movement as the most influential development of the 1970's. It is becoming a tidal wave in our synod at the present time. Enthusiasm for church growth principles is quite evident. Does the synod express the same eagerness to preserve our doctrinal unity and purity? Do we have theological conferences across our synod for the express purpose of resolving evident doctrinal problems? It seems that enthusiasm for doctrinal purity and unity is waning. Another possible indicator of the synod's changing priorities is the seminary curriculum. Currently our seminaries still emphasize classical Lutheran theology. But rumblings are now being heard, and many are expressing the "need" to change that emphasis toward a more "practical" curriculum. Could this desire be translated into the production of religious sociologists and religious psychologists rather than practical theologians? There

is also the commonly heard statement that we can “plug our doctrine into church growth principles.” But this statement itself betrays an inversion of priorities. Should we not, rather, plug church growth principles into our doctrine, since the Word, rather than principles, builds the true church?

I fear that the emphasis in the synod may well change by popular demand from the means of grace to pragmatic principles, from theology to religious sociology, from the kingdom of God to a religious kingdom of the world. It seems that this is not my fear only. Recent comments by President Ralph Bohlmann indicate that he has seen a potential threat to the kingdom of God among us:

The church can be tempted to substitute stones for bread, Bohlmann said. If “stones,” such as reliance merely on organizational and institutional techniques, are substituted for the bread of God’s Word, the Synod will be left without power from God to accomplish what it sets out to do.

And like Jesus being tempted in the wilderness to worship Satan in exchange for worldly power, the church can be tempted to look at the world, its splendor and authority, and be tempted to think it would be helpful for the church to be like the world, Bohlmann said. He added that the Synod must remember Jesus’ words to Satan, “Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.”¹¹

The means offered by the church growth movement to build the church are shallow and have no power in themselves to build the kingdom of God.

Closing Remarks

The church is a great deal more than a visible social organization. If we ever lose sight of that fact, the kingdom of God may be taken from us as it was taken from the Jews. The doctrine we confess as a church must remain the treasure of our hearts and the central emphasis of our synod. C. F. W. Walther stated it well in one of his letters:

Our treasure is not our size but rather our unity in doctrine and that both in pastoral as well as in ecclesiastical practice. Should our synod lose this treasure, then it will be ruined. . .¹²

W. A. Baepler expressed the same thought in his essay, "Doctrine, True and False":

Pure doctrine is the greatest blessing man can receive. The Lutheran Church is the church of the pure Word and unadulterated Sacraments. Not the number of her adherents, not her organizations, not her charitable and other institutions, not her beautiful customs and liturgical forms, but the precious truths entrusted to her constitute her true beauty and richest treasure.¹³

The danger of the church growth movement is that its principles, on an outward plane, work with or without the Word. The means of grace are not an essential part of the system. Unless we remain conscious at all times of the severe limitations of these principles, that they in themselves build only an outward institution, we may be deceived into trading our precious treasure for worthless trinkets.

In this essay, I have been largely critical of the church growth movement—many will think, unfairly so. I feel compelled to add, lest I be misunderstood, that church growth principles can be a positive aid to our synod. First of all, the movement has pointedly reminded us that there are lost souls to be reached, that God loves them in Christ, and that efforts to reach them have often been less than enthusiastic. I know that for me this confrontation is necessary. I need to repent of lovelessness with respect to lost souls. Secondly, the movement has "lifted the fog," so to speak, and exposed "religious busy-ness" and "institutional maintenance" as an empty veneer and evasion of our chief mission in the world. Christ certainly did focus great effort upon the "sinners." He did meet them where they were and spent time with them in the interest of their souls. So also must we leave the comforts of our Christian fellowship in search of the lost. Finally, the church growth movement has given us some practical and useful tools and insights. We must organize our efforts if we are to be effective in the mission which our Lord has given us. It is here that church growth principles can help us. These principles teach us to be wise managers and communicators. There is nothing wrong with pressing sociology or any other discipling into the *service* of the Gospel. In fact, the Lord urges us to employ the wisdom of this world to spiritual ends (Luke 16:8,9).

The virtues of church growth have been widely acclaimed in the promotion of the movement. This essay has been weighted toward "caution" simply because I have not heard such caution widely expressed. Lutherans can certainly learn from church growth principles, but Lutherans should not become so mesmerized with the outward glory of the church that they lose sight of the far more precious—indeed, priceless—gift entrusted by grace to us, the pure means of grace. Through these alone Christ builds His church, "even when steeples are falling."

Endnotes

1. C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1984), p. 13.
2. Wagner, p. 21.
3. Wagner, p. 23.
4. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), III, p. 397.
5. Pieper, III, p. 400.
6. *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 231.
7. *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 47.
8. *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 227.
9. *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 45.
10. *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1932), p. 11.
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The Rev. Glenn Huebel is pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church in Keller, Texas.