

number one and three. They do, however, together constitute a pillar and deserve to be studied as such.

2. Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald), pp. 301ff.

3. *Gospel Workers*, p. 300.

4. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church*, vol. 4 (Mountain View: Pacific Press), p. 67.

5. *Gospel Workers*, p. 301.

6. From manuscript 8a, 1888, as printed in A. V. Olson, *Through Crisis to Victory, 1888-1901* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1966), pp. 273, 274.

7. The most significant Hebrew terms for these categories of people — besides *'am* (for God's own people) and *goy* (for those of other religions) — are: *'eret*, a descriptive term for a people-group in its geocultural context (language, customs, social struc-

ture, traditions, area), *lashon*, which stands for a language group, and *mishpachah*, which highlights kinship, family and marriage relations as the binding factors of the group, such as tribe or lineage or kindred or clan. Though the New Testament terms to describe the world as the object of God's mission are more comprehensive, they, too, emphasize that the world is in essence a "mosaic of people groups" which are distinct from each other in respect of culture, ethnic background, kinship, language and social structure.

8. See especially, D. A. McGavran: *Bridges of God* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955); *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers in Mission* (1959); and *Understanding Church Growth* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

# Anatomy of the Church Growth Movement

by Jon Dybdahl

Evangelism is the lifeblood of the Christian church and Seventh-day Adventists have traditionally made it a central part of their mission. However, as W. B. Quigley recently said in *The Ministry*, Adventists face a crisis in that we no longer seem as excited about evangelism as we once were. Quigley goes so far as to say that this is more significant, indeed, than recent theological controversy and financial fiasco.<sup>1</sup> One response to a crisis like this is the development of Adventist evangelism models — metaphors or images that suggest a comprehensive approach both to the rationale for evangelism and the methods of the evangelistic enterprise.

The present lack of comprehensive models

splinters our approach to evangelism. On the one hand, some are primarily interested in methods. It is easy for these practitioners to ignore basic questions about the nature of mission in their search for the "right" or "efficient" way to accomplish evangelism. On the other hand, some think constantly about the nature of the mission and message of the church but have disdain for "hands on" evangelism. They may not like present evangelistic methods, but often fail to substitute new ways in place of the old ones.

The function of a model as a comprehensive metaphor is to bring these two concerns together — as they should be. Both — what the mission is and the method used in carrying it out — must be examined in light of true biblical theology and ethics. Only when these two vital parts of the totality of evangelism are joined in a model can the wholeness needed in evangelism be attained.

In the following, I examine such a model,

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one that over the past few years has become quite influential within Adventism: the church-growth model of evangelism. I will explain the background and main motifs of this model and subject it to brief evaluation. We need to look at it thoughtfully, asking ourselves how much we can or should allow it to influence our evangelism.

The church-growth movement traces its roots to Dr. Donald A. McGavran.<sup>2</sup> He was born in 1897 of missionary parents in India; after study (including a B.D. from Yale), he was ordained and returned to India in 1923, remaining until 1955. During 1929-1931, a study was conducted in India of 145 mission complexes. One hundred thirty-four had a percentage growth of less than the population. In nine others the growth in adult conversions was 200 percent. McGavran became fascinated and wondered why those nine missions prospered so well.

In 1933, J. Waskom Pickett published *Christian Mass Movements in India*. Pickett directed attention to what we now call a "people movement," or a rapid growth of the church in one ethnic or social group. Subsequently, Pickett and McGavran, with the support of John R. Mott, worked on a study of Christian growth in India.

In 1955, McGavran published *The Bridges of God*, a bombshell for missionaries.<sup>3</sup> In this book, he traced the history of people movements from the New Testament to the present and argued that most of the church's growth has not been by individual conversion but by group conversion in people movements. Later the term was changed to "multi-individual" conversion due to the objections individualistic westerners have to focus upon groups. McGavran then began research for his church (Disciples of Christ) and lectured in various colleges and seminaries. In 1960, he set up the Institute of Church Growth at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon. Then in 1965, McGavran, with what was to be the core of his faculty, set up the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary, which has become the brain center for the church-growth center.

Until 1972, the main thrust of the school was the training of cross-cultural workers,

but many in the United States began to see that the principles used cross-culturally could also often be applied in this country. The movement has since grown tremendously in the American environment through books, seminars, and institutes held all over the country. At present, the "church growth" movement operates, besides its own school at Fuller, a magazine, a press, and various ancillary organizations. It is extremely influential in both cross-cultural and North American evangelism.

The basic conviction of the church-growth school is that it is God's will that His church find the lost and grow.<sup>4</sup> This basic concept has been buttressed by extensive biblical study to show the pervasiveness of this growth theme in the Old, and especially the New, Testaments. In connection with the growth concept, there is the conviction of the Lordship of Christ, who leads His church into growth, and the responsibility of man who is steward. Both Christ and man are active in mission.

Other notions of the church-growth movement are related to three conceptual contributions of McGavran.<sup>5</sup> The first is the notion of the people movement. Since research has shown that people tend to be responsive in groups, McGavran says this type of movement should be actively encouraged. The Western emphasis on evangelism as winning individuals is a problem. An emphasis on individualistic conversion makes us blind to the fact that man is *social* and likes to do things together. The emphasis in evangelism, then, should not be simply on individual decisions but on the winning of groups to Christ. This social group could be a village subgroup or even a tribe. The evangelistic task is not finished with a few individual decisions. The evangelist must *plan* on reaching the *whole* group and *winning* people in groups.

The second main notion is that of the evangelistic opportunity. This idea sees God at work in history leading into growth and could be connected to the Wesleyan concept of prevenient grace in which the Spirit goes before and opens the way. McGavran sees

myriads of evangelistic opportunities today. Some are being taken advantage of, but many are not. He speaks of developing "church-growth eyes," so that these God-given openings may be taken advantage of for God's glory.

This means that to be good stewards of God's gifts, we must formulate clear objectives (i.e., church-growth objectives) that enable us to take advantage of these opportunities. All phases of a church's missions program should be ruthlessly evaluated to see whether or not they are fulfilling their objectives. Anything not contributing to church growth is to be scrapped. As a result of such views, church-growth people often clash with stodgy mission boards.

Further, sound strategy must be developed which will enable the church to take advantage of the evangelistic opportunities God has made available. This strategy must include careful study of all disciplines that would enable us to see these opportunities and devise effective strategies to turn them into church growth. Certainly, anthropology, sociology and psychology help us understand how people and societies operate and, especially, how they are subject to change. Careful research is needed to find out how the church has grown in the past and where, why and how it is growing today. All these methods are needed to penetrate the pious fog and spiritual jargon which so often surround ill-devised evangelistic strategies. Peoples resistant to the gospel are not abandoned, but persons and resources are concentrated on segments of society which God has already made receptive to the gospel.

The third key concept is the difference between discipling and perfecting. These are seen as two basic steps in the process of growth. The first, discipling, refers to a man's turning from his old gods and ways to the true God. It implies a definite step in changing religions, even if understanding is limited. The second step, perfecting, refers to the Christian growth involved after the discipling and this refers to education, nurture and such concepts.

McGavran divides discipling or first-step growth into biological, transfer, and conversion growth. Biological growth refers to

growth through birth into Christian families, while transfer growth comes when people who are already Christians move to a new area. Conversion growth is most crucial to church-growth people. Unless a church is manifesting quite a large measure of conversion growth, it is not healthy. The church-growth school believes all these types are right and necessary. McGavran, however, claims that many concepts of missions emphasize the "perfecting" stage because they have theological biases against "discipling" or *convincing* people to join the church. On the other hand, some churches which point to their growth may be growing only "biologically" or by "transfer" growth, and are thus not really making progress among nonbelievers.

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The church-growth concept has been progressively widened. It now includes attempts at a reinterpretation of church history, pointing out that church history has been written most often with two biases: an extreme western emphasis and an overstress on theological history and development. Church history, they say, can also be seen as a progressive unfolding of God's worldwide purpose of growth for His church.

A new branch of theology, ethnotheology, has also been developed.<sup>6</sup> This discipline attempts to marry theology and anthropology. One goal of ethnotheology is to examine basic formulation of Christian theology to discover just which formulations represent something which should be communicated cross-culturally and which are so culturally bound that they should not be used or communicated.

The whole mood of the church growth movement is one of optimism, i.e., the

world can and will be won for Christ. The positive approach is definitely upbeat and catching.

Besides giving us an example of what an evangelism model should look like, there are two other reasons I think it is important to look at the church-growth model. First, it has a wide influence which is constantly growing. A majority of books on missions found in evangelical bookstores and used in seminaries to teach missions originate from this school of thought. The scholarly American Society of Missiology, which is now a member society of the Council on the Study of Religion, along with its journal, *Missiology*, have heavy contingents of “church growth” advocates. Hundreds of graduate degrees in missiology have been given in the last 15 years by the School of World Missions and Institute of Church Growth of Fuller Theological Seminary. The church-growth movement is the force to be reckoned with on the evangelical mission scene.

The second reason is that Seventh-day Adventists are subject to a growing influence from the church-growth school, although this influence is often unnoticed or unacknowledged. Long-range programs of evangelism such as those of the Far Eastern Division and the North Pacific Union Conference are examples of this. The doctor of ministry program at Andrews University under the directorship of Arnold Kurtz, who has studied this movement, incorporates many church-growth concepts. The current evangelistic programs of our church which emphasize varied long-range programs are, I suspect, derivatives (perhaps second- or third-hand) of the church-growth movement. Some of the leaders and planners of evangelistic outreach in America have studied the church-growth model and its concepts.

Passages which deal with mission strategy and planning in Gottfried Oosterwal's influential book, *Mission: Possible*, echo in many places church-growth terminology and concepts. Examples of this are his emphasis on growth percentages and figures and his distinctions between biological and conversion

growth.<sup>7</sup> His concern with establishing priorities and then the hint that probably more money should be sent to benefit the many in those “ripe” areas where the Holy Spirit is at work, rather than in distributing money to all areas evenly, are illustrations of the same practice.<sup>8</sup> These ideas sound much like the church-growth ideas of the evangelistic opportunity and the setting of specific goals based on population responsiveness.

Since it is influencing Adventist thought, the strengths and weaknesses of the church-growth movement should be examined. One of the valuable emphases in the church-growth model is its attempt to develop a truly bibliothological model which can be practically applied. Part of its impact, I believe, stems from its comprehensive approach which first builds a biblical and theological rationale and then proceeds to spell out in detail what this means in practical evangelistic methodology. Whether we agree completely with what has been done or not, we can at least notice that an attempt has been made to develop a model which deals with the wholeness of evangelism and missions. We, as Adventists, must ask ourselves if we have made the same attempt.

A second contribution of the movement has been the valuable practical insight into the impact on the field of overseas missions endeavors. *Bridges of God* and subsequent works virtually demolished, in many areas, the old “mission station approach” which gathered individual converts into missionary dominated enclaves and isolated them from society at large. Missionaries gained courage to reach out to whole social groups and villages and to try to win them as groups. Church-growth research has also caused many evangelical mission organizations to seriously evaluate their programs and methods and to avoid some of the old methods and mythologies surrounding missions. It is now doing the same in America.

A third area where church growth can be given bouquets is its influence in stirring up interest in and enthusiasm for the church's mission, both here and abroad. This comes at a time when commitment to overseas missions has definitely been waning on the part

of many mainline Protestants. Overseas missionaries are on the decline in these churches. Departments of mission in many prestigious schools are either tottering or have fallen. By contrast, the church-growth movements, standing in direct opposition to this declining commitment to overseas missions, have been growing rapidly in the number of teachers devoted to it and students under its influence.

Another positive impact of the movement has been its readiness to make use of research in the social sciences. Anthropology and sociology, in particular, have been harnessed to help guide the mission enterprise. Church-growth people do not hesitate to do sociological research to find out how, where, and why churches grow and to use concepts of social change to help them understand conversion. Such an endeavor may go too far at times, but it has, I think, been a useful enterprise and opened the eyes of the church to new possibilities.

There are, on the other hand, certain things I question about the church-growth movement. I certainly wonder if the concept of growth is a legitimate theological center. Even though growth is certainly a part of biblical teaching, I think the motif of the kingdom of God is a much more central concept in the teaching of Jesus. Wouldn't such a concept also be useable in a model for evangelism? Where does the concept of growth ultimately lead? What kind of eschatology does the church-growth movement espouse? McGavran does not say a lot about these questions, but one gets the impression that ultimately the church will grow to include *all* and that a happy millennial reign of peace will hold sway here. This is hardly an acceptable view to Adventists!

One must also question the two-stage process of "Christianizing." Is not a certain part of discipling the perfecting process? Does the one who comes to Christ come blind to all ethical and rational implications? The two-stage concept seems to be at odds with the

wholeness of biblical anthropology and perhaps makes it easier to accept a painless, pale shadow of the gospel in order to disciple people easily.

Because of its very practical and methodological nature, the movement faces another danger. It seems very possible (and indeed it has happened) that people take over practical, anthropological, and sociological insights from the church-growth movement and use them as a "spiritual technology" without a real understanding of the context out of which they grew and the theological guidelines needed for their use. The whole endeavor then degenerates into simply a more sophisticated technique for getting "souls" into institutional churches. At this point, the church-growth model becomes merely church-growth methodology and thus loses its distinctive character as Christian. It could just as well be a methodology for Elk's Lodge growth as for church growth.

One final question about the church-growth movement has to do with its importation into North America. I wonder if the transfer of concepts from the cross-cultural endeavors in Asia and elsewhere to the United States has been completely successful. For example, the idea of a people movement, which was discussed earlier, can be fairly easily visualized as taking place in, say, a subcaste in India, but in highly individualistic, mobile American society it does not seem quite so insightful. Most of the original church-growth thinkers are primarily cross-cultural missionaries. I don't think those who have transplanted the concepts of these men to western society have been able to translate all the movement's key insights in a meaningful way.

We have found the church-growth model helpful in certain ways and inadequate in others. Perhaps this evaluation can also serve as a plea for further effort in constructing other models, ones truly adequate to Adventist theology and practice and able to inspire us anew in our missionary task.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. W. B. Quigley, "One Thousand Days of Reaping," *Ministry* (Feb., 1982), 8.
2. A good summary of both McGavran's life and missiological thought is found in the first four chapters of a Festschrift written in his honor — A. R. Tippett, ed., *God, Man, and Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973). Much of the historical part of this essay can be documented there.
3. Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Mission* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955).
4. Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 31-33.
5. A. R. Tippett, "Portrait of a Missiologist by His Colleague," in *God, Man, and Church Growth*, p. 20ff.
6. Charles H. Kraft, "Towards a Christian Ethnotheology," in *God, Man, and Church Growth*, pp. 109-126.
7. Gottfried Oosterwal, *Mission: Possible* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1972), pp. 46, 47, 54, 55.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 48; see also p. 59ff.

# With All Deliberate Speed: A Study of Pace in Mission

by Bill Knott

*"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."*<sup>1</sup>

Few passages of Scripture are as central to the consciousness and mission of the Christian church as is Matthew 28:18-20. Within Christianity, there is indeed virtual unanimity in the belief that these few lines, often called "The Great Commission," constitute the authentic will of Jesus for His church. The thesis of this essay is that these lines — particularly the phrase translated "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" — have significant implications for the

task of the Adventist church in the world and for the pace at which that mission should proceed.

One of the dilemmas confronting the missionary church concerns what we might term the "temporal" dimension of Christ's commission to His disciples. All work in this world must be accomplished in a framework of time: the length of time allotted to a task inevitably shapes the character of the working and the form of the product produced. A major task demanded in a quarter-hour will probably be wrongly-paced and poorly done. A 15-minute job spread over half a day will invite shoddiness of work and a leisurely attitude on the part of the laborer. Similar points hold for Christian mission. This mission must proceed, not only from the divine word of command, but also at a divinely-appointed pace in keeping with the character of the task given by the Lord.

A brief survey of Christian thought about mission reveals at least two contrasting views of the relationship of mission to time, and

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