



One Reason Churches Grow | BY NATHAN BROWN

Why churches grow is one of the mysterious quests of pastors, evangelists, church administrators, and many concerned church members. The allure and elusiveness of a key, catchall ingredient is evidenced by the multiplicity of books and seminars claiming to offer the answer. Many of these are well intentioned but limited in their credibility and applicability, and, of course, as with any marketing opportunity to ardent customers a variety of snake oil salesmen are always ready to promote their products and programs.

So it is refreshing to find a carefully researched and Adventist-specific study of this question. Monte Sahlin, director of research and special projects for the Ohio Conference, has spent most of the past decade asking the questions about why churches grow, primarily focused in urban and suburban areas. As part of this, he has surveyed all 647 Adventist churches in the northeastern United States megametro-politan area, stretching from Boston to Washington, D.C. Sahlin's research has previously been blogged about by Ryan Bell and Marcel Schwantes and has now been published as *Mission in Metropolis: The Adventist Movement in an Urban World* (Center for Creative Ministry).

Without wanting to dismiss or discourage traditional evangelism, Sahlin concludes that "there is no correlation between the number of Bible seminars [conducted by local churches] and soul-winning." This does not mean public evangelism is necessarily ineffective, but that such programs are run as regularly by churches that do not grow as by churches that do.

By contrast, Sahlin's research found that the strongest correlation with church growth was engaging with the community in active service. And, sadly, Sahlin concludes, "very few Adventist churches are involved in the types of programs that have the

Books discussed in this Article:

Peter H. Ballis. *In and Out of the World: Seventh-day Adventists in New Zealand*. Portland, Oreg.: International Specialized Book Services, 1986.

Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2006.

Monte Sahlin. *Mission in Metropolis: The Adventist Movement in an Urban World*. Center for Creative Ministry, 2007.

This article originally appeared on the *Spectrum Blog* <<http://spectrummagazine.typepad.com>>, September 25, 2007

strongest correlation with church growth."

Perhaps not surprisingly, the significance of community involvement for church growth is not a new suggestion. In the book he edited to mark the centenary of Seventh-day Adventists in New Zealand, sociologist Peter H. Ballis comments on the significance of involvement in real social and political issues in the founding and early dramatic growth of the Church in New Zealand. He notes how "Adventists found themselves joining committees, speaking before audiences that under different circumstances would have been inaccessible to them, and, at times, co-operating with clergy of other denominations. All this has the effect of creating a favourable image of the Church. . . . Such interaction with the public served to acquaint Adventists with large numbers in the community."

Ballis cites membership figures that show a doubling in church membership in New Zealand during this period

(1911–21). “It is tempting to conclude that it was the Church’s involvement in New Zealand’s social issues that brought about this unprecedented growth rate,” he reflects.

Of course, churches grow for more than one reason. But it seems that community service works in at least two ways: attracting those benefited by the Church’s community service and those considering joining a faith community that is making a difference.

Sahlin argues that community involvement is key to gaining credibility within the community to which the Church ministers. “A church that is invisible and largely absent from the public arena will not be taken seriously by educated citizens who care about their communities,” he urges.

But such activism is also vital for those within the Church. In her survey of growing mainline Protestant churches, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Diana Butler Bass quotes one of her interviewees: “People are looking for a place that will enable and encourage meaningful service in the community, a way to live out the faith they hope to espouse.”

And that is the challenge for all levels of the Church. In one sense, engaging with the community is simple: whenever one walks out the front door or out the church driveway, we are involved in the community. But for this to be both meaningful and useful is not always so straightforward. Church leaders—from local church ministry leaders to the most senior administrators—must create and encourage opportunities for real community involvement and service.

And this begins with learning to listen to our communities. Sahlin points out “there is little evidence that the community service activities carried on in most cases have anything to do with the need of the community as viewed by local residents and civic leaders.”

As a church, we need to work together to find creative, authentic, practical, and ongoing ways to serve our communities. As Peter urged the early church, “Live an exemplary life among the natives so that your actions will refute their prejudices. Then they’ll be won over to God’s side and be there to join in the celebration when he arrives” (1 Pet. 2:12, *The Message*). ■

Nathan Brown edits the Australian edition of the *Signs of the Times*.

FEEDBACK

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however, is, are they realistic enough in their analysis? Have they seriously wrestled with the oppressive and inevitable realities of processes of capital accumulation and corporate globalization? Have they offered theologically grounded principles for a distinctly Christian engagement with the inequality and exploitation that accompany corporate markets? Or have they, in fact, encouraged us to subscribe to the latest version of a familiar millenarian myth—the myth of Progress?

Any call for policies to challenge structural inequalities and benefit the poorest members of society should certainly be welcomed by socially conscious believers. But the implication that poverty can be “eradicated” and the world redeemed through sufficiently chastened capitalist mechanisms and the policy prescriptions of globalization enthusiasts and World Bank technocrats surely betrays a misplaced religious idealism.

RONALD OSBORN
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I AM GLAD TO SEE someone tackle this issue (James Walters and David Kim, “What Is a Christian to Make of Our Flat New World?”). I thought the authors presented a very balanced viewpoint. I liked the idea of responsibilities; too frequently we only hear about our rights.

As a capitalist and generally a libertarian, I believe that nothing is truly free, and that the desire to make a profit (which is a right) contains the responsibility of appropriate stewardship. Hopefully, this article will lead others, especially business leaders in our community and universities, to expand on this in future issues of *Spectrum*.

LARRY M. POWELL
via the Internet

Author’s query: For a biography of Arthur Grosvenor Daniells, I am searching for correspondence and other pertinent materials held outside of Adventist archives. Please contact Benjamin McArthur, Department of History, Southern Adventist University, PO Box 370, Collegedale, Tenn. 37315, or bmcarthr@southern.edu