

Church Movements of the Last Fifty Years in North America

By

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Abstract

Over the last half-century, four major movements have arisen in an effort to stem the tide of decline in church attendance within North America. The Church Renewal Movement, Church Growth Movement, Emerging Church Movement, and Missional Movement have offered different approaches to engaging lost people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This article presents an overview of these major movements and the numerous sub-movements within each, and suggests five insights and seven questions that emerge from their interplay.

Heraclitus once said, “There is nothing permanent except change.” This is certainly apparent when we look at the various movements that have influenced local churches in the United States during the last half-century. Movements keep changing, which is to be expected as the word *movement* implies. Today we are enamored with the Missional Church Movement, but this is only the current trend in a long list of movements that have sought to restore churches to growth and vitality since the 1950s. Thus, the purpose of this article is to provide a short review of the major movements and sub-movements that have shaped churches in North America during the last fifty-plus years, and to note five insights that arise from the interplay of such movements.

Background

The first church planted in North America was a Roman Catholic parish started in Pensacola, Florida during the first Spanish settlement in the years 1559-1562. Shortly after establishment, the settlement was struck by a hurricane, and within two years the settlers, along with the first church started in North America, returned to Spain.

By most accounts the first firmly established church in North America was a Dutch Reformed Church founded in 1628 in New Amsterdam (Manhattan, New York). Since that day the Reformed Church has had a continuous ministry in this country. More importantly, from that day until the early 1960s, most churches and denominations in the United States grew numerically. Hoge and Roozen comment on this in their book,

Understanding Church Growth and Decline:

An unprecedented period in the life of the North American church began in the mid-1960s. For the first time since records allow us to recall, many major denominations actually stopped growing in membership and began to decline, and the growth rate of most others slowed considerably. This period of decline, which came after nearly two centuries of growth, appears especially stark in comparison with the surge of membership and attendance during the so-called religious revival of the 1950s. The reversal caught many denominational leaders by surprise. Why did the declines occur? . . . by 1973 this question had attracted much attention. Denominational leaders began asking earnest questions.¹

By the mid 1960s, the historic churches in the United States had started declining. Church leaders, of course, were unwilling to stand idly by and just watch their churches decline. They began to ask questions, do research, and take action to reverse the slow down in the growth of their churches.

¹ Hoge and Roozen, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline*, 1979:17

Responses to the Challenge

In response to the decline of churches first observed in the 1960s, four movements (so far) developed and influenced churches in North America during the last half-century. Most of these movements continue to impact churches in the first years of the twenty-first century, and are likely to shape ministry for some years to come.

The Church Renewal Movement

The first response to the crisis of church decline during the 1960s and early 1970s was the Church Renewal Movement. This response grew rapidly, and by 1966 over two thousand books on church renewal had been written. Some of the most famous of the church renewal books were *The Taste of New Wine* by Keith Miller (1968), *Journey Inward*, *Journey Outward* by Elizabeth O'Connor (1968), and *Body Life* by Ray Stedman (1972). Another well-known spokesperson for this movement was Howard A. Snyder. His book, *The Problem of Wine Skins* (1975) was well read by advocates of church renewal.

Church renewal was a concept widely used by theologians and clergy to express concern over the decline of the church and a desire to see the church flourish in the future. In actual usage, the concept was often deployed with reference to decline in church membership and worship attendance, but it was also used with reference to spiritual decline in the ongoing life of a church. Other words that were sometimes used in place of the term renewal were revival, restoration, reinvention, and revitalization. We continue to use many of these same words today, but not always with the same meaning.

There were four different sub-movements within the larger concept of church renewal. The first was an *Ecumenical Approach*, as described in *Who's Killing the Church* by Gordon Cosby (1966). Cosby and others suggested that all existing church structures were under judgment and had to be replaced by new structures that would put the church back on mission. However, his concept of mission focused on social welfare with a strong emphasis on witness by deeds rather than words. Cosby made radical suggestions for the time, such as giving up all professional ministries so that every pastor would earn his [her] own living in some secular way, giving up all real estate by the church, giving up all church buildings, and becoming little bands of people on mission.

A second approach to church renewal was the *Laymen's Movement*. More conservative in its emphasis than the ecumenical approach, the Laymen's Movement avoided social concerns and focused on prayer and small groups. This approach led to the use of retreat centers, study conferences; quiet days for meditation, and seminars on spiritual life. Nationwide it resulted in the development of personal groups for worship, study and personal encouragement.

The *Yokefellow Movement* comprised a third approach to church renewal. D. Elton Trueblood, a Quaker philosopher and author, guided the movement, and his wide popularity helped expand small groups of Yokefellows who stressed the daily practice of prayer, scripture reading, proportionate giving of money, and systematic Bible study. Essentially, this sub-movement sought to change churches by renewing the spiritual life of the people in the churches.

The last sub-movement within the church renewal frame of reference was the **Lay Witness Movement**. It had some characteristics in common with the Laymen's Movement, but with more of an evangelistic content. A major spokesperson for the evangelical position was Robert Coleman, famous for *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. Coleman wrote *Dry Bones Can Live Again* (1969) to address the need for revival among God's people. The Lay Witness Movement sought to refocus local churches on the multiplication of Bible study and prayer groups, the development of leadership in student evangelism, the use of great evangelistic crusades, and a concern for Christian mission.

While the Church Renewal Movement, and its sub-movements, provided a needed emphasis on social justice, small groups, home Bible studies, personal holiness, and individual spiritual growth, it failed to stem the tide of declining attendance, particularly among mainline churches and denominations. However, unknown to most pastors a new movement was already in the making on the mission field, which would burst forth in the United States in the early 1970s.

The Church Growth Movement

The modern Church Growth Movement (there have been other movements of church growth throughout church history) was pioneered by Donald A. McGavran. After serving on the mission field in India's Central Provinces for thirty-one years, McGavran spent the next eleven years researching the growth and decline of churches around the world before becoming the founding dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1965. In 1971 McGavran published his influential

Understanding Church Growth. The next year he and C. Peter Wagner taught the first class on church growth to North American pastors. What put church growth on the map, however, was the International Congress on World Evangelization held in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974. Speakers and lecturers at that congress from the Church Growth School of Thought included Donald McGavran, C. Peter Wagner, and Ralph D. Winter. Win Arn was also in attendance showing the first of his church growth films. When the Lausanne Congress closed, the Church Growth Movement was off and running around the world.

The Church Growth Movement employed social and demographic research tools to discover the responsive segments of society and boldly move forward to evangelize them. This was expressed in the most widely accepted definition of church growth— “all that is involved in bringing men and women who do not have a personal relationship to Jesus Christ into fellowship with Him and into responsible church membership.”² Other terms that were often used to mean church growth included evangelism, effective evangelism, missiology, conversion growth, quality growth, organic growth, church planting & multiplication. Throughout the years, the Church Growth Movement has gone through at least four paradigm shifts, as least in its popular public image. During the 1970s, church growth was viewed primarily as a ***Research Paradigm***. From its inception the Church Growth Movement focused on discovering the facts about church growth and decline through research. McGavran sought to answer four key questions: What are the *causes* of church growth? What are the *barriers* to church growth? What

² C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 1976, 12

are the *factors* that can make the Christian faith a movement among some populations? What *principles* of church growth are reproducible? The most influential books during this phase were *Understanding Church Growth* (1971), *Your Church Can Grow* by C. Peter Wagner (1976), and *How To Grow A Church* by Donald McGavran and Win Arn (1974).

As the Church Growth Movement grew, it responded to the real needs of pastors in North America. When pastors started asking for help in strategic planning, setting goals, and improving facilities, the movement slowly turned toward a ***Business Paradigm*** in the 1980s. *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* by Kennon L. Callahan (1983) is a prime example of a book that took more of a business approach to church growth than was found in the earliest church growth literature. Callahan focused on long-range planning to improve a church's financial resources, worship services, leadership, accessibility, parking, seating, objectives, and small groups.

Toward the end of the 1980s, George Barna proposed a ***Marketing Paradigm*** for church growth. *Marketing The Church* was released in 1988 and effectively turned the popular opinion about church growth in a new direction for the 1990s. Barna suggested that the answer to the decline of church attendance was the use of a marketing orientation. By taking the earlier business paradigm to an extreme, Barna began employing marketing approaches as a means to attract and win non-churched people to Christ. This marketing emphasis effectively turned many people away from the popular notion of church growth, and caused a reaction toward a new paradigm of church health in the mid 1990s.

The Church Health Paradigm is commonly viewed as a separate movement, but in truth it is yet another paradigm of the Church Growth Movement. As early as 1974, Donald A McGavran and Win Arn had referenced church health in the movie *How to Grow A Church*. Three popular books that promoted a church health view of church growth are *The Purpose Driven Church* by Rick Warren (1995), *Natural Church Development* by Christian Schwarz (1996), and *Becoming A Healthy Church* by Stephen A, Macchia (1999). A close look at these three books show that they simply restated church growth principles wrapped in a church health package. However, the emphasis on church health has now been eclipsed by a two new movements that began in the mid to late 1990s—The Emerging Church and The Missional Church.

The Emerging/Emergent Movement

The emerging church is (was?) a Christian movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s that crosses a number of theological boundaries. Participants can be described as evangelical, post-evangelical, liberal, post-liberal, charismatic, neocharismatic, and post-charismatic. Participants seek to live their faith in what they believe to be a postmodern society. Proponents of this movement call it a *conversation* to emphasize its developing and decentralized nature, its vast range of standpoints and its commitment to dialogue. What those involved in the conversation mostly agree on is their disillusionment with the organized and institutional church and their support for the deconstruction of modern Christian worship, modern evangelism, and the nature of modern Christian community.

Other terms that are often used to understand this movement are organic, post-modern, and ancient future. There are at least two forms of emerging church thought, but there are likely numerous types of emerging churches.

The ***Emergent Conversation*** tends toward a more liberal, universalist, deconstructionist perspective of the church and salvation. The movement began as a conversation among youth leaders and slowly developed into a nation wide discussion about the future of the church in a post-modern context. While church growth leaders often state that the methods must change but the message should never change, emergent leaders declare that the message also has to change. A key spokesperson for this side of the conversation is Brian McLaren. He has essentially depropositionalized the Bible, preferring to focus on the Bible as narrative, but unfortunately a narrative that appears to have no more authority than any other major religious narrative, leading naturally to universalism.

What might be called the ***Emerging Conversation*** tends toward a more conservative, evangelical, missional perspective. A key leader on this side of the conversation is Dan Kimball. Taking a more conservative view point, Kimball asserts that the influences that are shaping popular culture are no longer aligned with the values of Christianity, thus it takes new forms of church to reach the new generations of people who live their lives outside the church. Essentially, Kimball, and others on this side of the conversation, are employing church growth principles to reach a new generation, even if they do not realize they are doing so. Kimball and others on this side of the conversation have already left the emerging church label behind, preferring the newest

designation—Missional Church. This change of direction most likely is an early indication that the Emerging/Emergent Church Movement is already waning in its appeal.

The Missional Church Movement

Missional is a descriptive word that modifies a noun. Thus a missional church is a church that is on a mission from God. The missional church sees the purpose of God's mission as two fold: to witness to God's loving nature through ministry (social action) and to witness to God's salvific work (evangelism). Other terms often used to mean *missional* are mission, missionary, sending, and sent. Since its beginning in the late 1990s, missional thinking has been espoused by numerous groups from the liberal left to the conservative right. The movement focuses on what it perceives as the *missio dei* (mission of God) in contrast to the *missio ecclesia* (mission of the church). In contrast to the Church Growth Movement, the Missional Church Movement sees social action and evangelism as equal in the plan of God, while the Church Growth Movement has historically held evangelism to have priority over social action in a local congregation.

The current missional movement traces its roots to Lesslie Newbigin. A former missionary to India, Newbigin was shocked to see how much the western world had drifted away from Christianity while he was on the mission field. Overtime he began to see the West as a mission field that needed to be won to Christ again. A group of missiologists in North America took up the challenge of working out the implications of Newbigin's ideas in the late 1990s and formed the Gospel and Our Culture Network. One member, Darrel Guder (author of *The Missional Church*, 1998), understands

missional to convey with an adjective the fundamentally missionary nature of the church. The Gospel and Our Culture Network is primarily a theological discussion of the nature of the church with throw back to the 1960s World Council of Churches (WCC). While it is more evangelical than the old WCC of the 1960s, it seeks to examine the church internally with little emphasis on evangelism. In addition the concept of culture seems to miss the fact that the world is comprised of “cultures” rather than a single culture. While the writings and lectureships arising from this group are deeply interesting, there is little practical help, action, or praxis for local churches to employ.

Other authors have focused on the word *missional*. Charles Van Engen, author of *God's Missionary People* (1991), views *missional* through the classic understanding of mission: that women and men, through personal faith and conversion by the work of the Holy Spirit, will become disciples of Jesus Christ and responsible members of Christ's Church. Francis Dubose used the word *missional* in *God Who Sends* (1983). Rooting his ideas of mission in the 1938 International Missionary Council that was held at Tambaram, Dubose wanted to focus on the church as missionary but deliberately decided not to use that word because it had picked up some baggage regarding its definition. Thus, he used the word *missional* as a replacement for the word missionary. Both Van Engen and Dubose use the word in ways that are highly compatible with the Church Growth Movement's perspectives.

Insights

This overview is certainly short but, while a lot more could be said about each of the movements of the last fifty years, it serves to illustrate several key points.

First, movements come and go as godly people seek to help the church be as vital as possible. These four major movements are just the most recent in a long line of movements that have been spawned throughout Christian history. And, there are likely to be new movements coming in the next fifty years.

Second, movements tend to have a vital lifespan of about fifteen years before giving way to another movement. Historically the length of time that movements have impacted churches has been getting shorter. For example, it took roughly one thousand years (the Dark Ages) from the fall of Rome in 467 A.D. for the Protestant Reformation to jolt the Church in 1517. Yet, it was only two hundred years from that point to the First Great Awakening (1730s-1740s), then one hundred years to the Second Great Awakening (1830s-1890s), then around fifty years to the evangelical movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Since the 1950s, the shelf life of any Church movement seems to be about fifteen to twenty years. Movements continue to influence churches for many years, of course, but new movement arise quickly in today's changing environment.

Third, each movement seeks to balance perceived excesses or misses found in earlier movements. This is clearly seen in the four movements discussed in this article. The Church Renewal Movement was founded on the premise that if God's people who were already in church, were renewed in their faith, they would naturally reach outward in ministry to those outside the churches. This was clearly presented in the book title

Inward Journey, Outward Journey. The only problem was people tended to keep journeying inward and rarely journeyed outward in ministry.

The Church Growth Movement took an opposite approach by focusing churches outward in evangelism. The term *church growth* expressed a bold, active, assertive approach to reaching out to win new people to Christ and assimilate newcomers into local churches. Although the Church Growth Movement arose from principles and ideas developed on the mission fields of the world, in part it was a reaction to the inward focus of the Church Renewal Movement. Research, target group evangelism, long range planning, and even marketing are action-oriented approaches to reaching out to new people with the Gospel of Christ.

To a large number of people, the outward focus of the Church Growth Movement appeared to ignore the inner health of churches. Thus, the Church Health paradigm grew up as a reaction. Church health advocates declared that evangelism was only one aspect of a healthy church, and sought to refocus churches inwardly on the health of the local body. For example, only one of the eight quality characteristics of *Natural Church Development* is outwardly focused, while seven point inward. Only one of the ten characteristics of a healthy church mentioned in *Becoming A Healthy Church* is evangelistic, while all of the rest are concerned with the inner workings of a church.

In reaction to the Church Health paradigm, both the Emerging/Emergent Church Movement and the Missional Church Movement have turned the emphasis of churches back outward. Both of these two movements of the last decade are seeking ways to impact the post-modern secular world that has marginalized the Church in the minds of

many. Both of these movements seek to redefine the church by engaging secular peoples through social action as a means of regaining a hearing among lost people. Predictably, each succeeding movement reacts to the movement before it.

Fourth, each new generation of believers needs to recast old ideas in new language for its own time. There is little difference between the Church Renewal Movement of the 1960s and the Church Health paradigm of the 1990s. In the same way there are common insights found in the Church Growth Movement, the Emerging Church Movement, and the Missional Movement. Yet, in the same manner that our generation's music is rejected by our children's generation, our generation's approach to building a fruitful church is rejected by our children's generation. Each generation must find its own way through the myriad challenges of effective ministry. While there are substantial differences between each of the movements discussed in this article, to some extent they are birthed out of a new generation's need to recast ideas, principles, and insights in their own way. A way that is unique to its own generational DNA.

Fifth, every couple of decades Christian leaders must review three key questions: What is the mission of God (*missio dei*)? What is the mission of the Church (*missio ecclesia*)? How is a church to flow into the mission of God (*missional*), i.e., what is a church actually to do. Each of the major movements reviewed in this article arrived at different conclusions, some major some minor, for each of the above questions. There is room for honest differences and debate. However, it is certain that how a church leader answers these three questions determines the course of his or her ministry trajectory.

From this writer's perspective each movement and sub-movement has surfaced at least one major question that most church leaders will agree is crucial for ministry. The seven questions are . . .

Why are we here?

How are we doing?

Are the lost being found?

Are people becoming more like Jesus?

Are we impacting our community?

Are we getting a hearing for our message?

Are we growing together as God's people?

Each of these questions is emphasized by one of the four major movements or a sub-movement discussed in this article. They are, however, important questions for every church much ask and answer if it hopes to be fruitful in the twenty-first century.

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