

Chapter Five

A Short History of Church Growth Research

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The contemporary literature on church growth develops in two very different cultural worlds and under very different circumstances. Studies of mainline denominations are undertaken by professional social scientists working within academic communities. Their goal is to develop theoretical models that are useful in describing or explaining the membership declines suffered by mainline denominations since the 1960s. "Church growth" researchers, on the other hand, are largely conservative Protestant church professionals who began studying church growth out of the perceived need to "save as many souls" as possible. Their goal is to develop practical and successful techniques for bringing people to church.

As one would expect, given the different purposes and experiences of these two groups of researchers, the problem of church growth is approached from different points of view and out of dissimilar biases. The social scientist tends to show more awareness of the social context of church growth by explicitly considering "contextual factors."¹ Contextual factors are those forces external to the denomination or congregation that shaped its future—such as demographic changes in neighborhoods and falling or rising birth rates among different populations. At the same time, though with less emphasis and a certain reluctance on the part of some, the social scientists also considered "institutional factors" of church growth. Institutional factors are forces within denominations or congregations. They include patterns of organization and structure, the strictness of a group's religious beliefs, church programs, and other characteristics and orientations. Those in the church growth movement emphasize institutional factors of church growth almost exclusively. Their case studies, or case examples, lead them to concentrate on the internal dynamics of congregations rather than the social context. The following summary of

the relationship between contextual and institutional factors provides a useful framework for considering the history of church growth research.

Social Scientific Research

The Kelley Thesis: An Institutional Account of Mainline Membership Decline

The tendency of most social scientists to emphasize contextual explanations of church growth and decline can be understood, at least in part, as a reaction to the first account of membership decline in mainline denominations by Kelley.² In 1972, Kelley argued that the growth of membership in conservative churches and the decline of membership in mainline churches was directly related to different types of religious commitment and organizational structure. Kelley never framed his thesis in institutional or contextual terms, but he clearly argued that the problem of membership decline in mainline churches was a result of their institutional inability to advance a belief system or an organizational ethos that would foster ardent membership commitment. Kelley, in a chapter titled "Traits of a Strong Religion," noted:

Those who are accustomed to the placid and circumspect ways of the mainline Protestant denominations in America today may not think of religion as a strenuous and fateful adventure, catching up men's lives in a surge of significance and purpose, changing the very definition of what it is to be a man worthy of respect, and thus shifting upward a whole society's expectation of human behavior. But religion has often been this kind of movement in the past and will be in the future. (Kelley, 1972:56)

Kelley then set about developing a model of a "strong" religion, which he defined as one for which its members would be willing "to suffer persecution, to sacrifice status, possessions, safety, and life itself for the organization, its convictions, its goals" (1972:57). A strong religion demanded commitment, disciplined control, and missionary zeal (1972:58). Kelley argued that ecumenism and religious strength were incompatible and mutually exclusive. Strong religions were absolutist about beliefs, fanatic in their commitment, and demanding of strict conformity (1972:78). Weak religions were relativistic, accepting of diversity and dialogue, "lukewarm" about "truth," individualistic, and reserved. If a group was to grow, the community must be everything and the individual nothing. As Kelley put it:

The appreciation of individual worth and freedom is one of the highest achievements of modern man, but it does not do much for social strength. If each member is unwilling to give unquestioning obedience (or even much questioning

obedience) to a leader or group, it makes for an atomistic aggregation of individuals rather than a cohesive, deployable organization. (Kelley, 1972:85)

Conservative Religious Belief and Its Relationship to Growth

Kelley's description of weak and strong religions as an explanation for the decline of mainline denominations provoked considerable controversy and generated a whole host of possible hypotheses for social scientists to test. Perhaps because of the title of Kelley's book—*Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*—much of the debate over his thesis focused on conservative versus liberal theological approaches to religion, rather than strict versus more relativistic religious beliefs and organizations. Bibby (1978) was one of the first of the social scientists to dispute the conservative versus liberal hypothesis. Based on his analysis of church membership data from a Canadian national survey, Bibby argued that if births could account for the growth in conservative evangelical congregations, rather than proselytism, then conservative theology per se could not be named as the church growth catalyst. Or, to put it another way, Bibby intended to show that contextual factors (birthrates) were more important to church growth than institutional factors (conservative theology) in explaining church growth. Bibby concluded that "neither the Conservatives nor the Mainliners were very successful in recruiting active followers from outside of the Christian community" (1978:136). Instead, higher birthrates and the willingness of conservative evangelicals to expose their children to more formal and informal religious socialization were the major sources of growth for conservative religious groups.

Bibby may have felt that he successfully disproved Kelley's thesis, but he was not as successful in demonstrating the unimportance of institutional factors in explaining church growth. He pointed directly to the institutional role of religious socialization. Bibby showed that conservative evangelicals were more likely to keep their children from leaving the church through their more effective efforts at socialization. He noted that 65% of the mainline affiliates were exposed regularly to Christian education in childhood, but less than 30% of mainline affiliates with children were "seeing to it that their children had a similar experience" (1978:136).

A similar study by Bourma (1979) compared the membership trends of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and the Reformed Church in America (RCA). He showed that the CRC absorbed the bulk of post-World War II Dutch Reformed immigrants to North America, and it was this immigration, not strong evangelistic efforts, that led to growth. At the same time, Bourma also argued, like Bibby, that the CRC lost fewer of the children it baptized.

As Bouma put it: "The secret of growth of the CRC is to be found not in evangelism, nor in attracting members from other denominations, but in the successful socialization of its young people" (1979:134).

Bouma's finding seems to confirm as much of Kelley's thesis as it disputes. The strict institutional demands of the CRC resulted in fending off losses, if not in producing gains. Bouma argued explicitly that the CRC was very demanding of its young members, strongly encouraging them to attend Christian day schools and church schools and to participate in youth groups and other mechanisms of "theological indoctrination." The result was higher retention of the children it baptized. Perhaps because Kelley's thesis was understood in terms of gains rather than fending off losses, or perhaps because Bouma misunderstood the institutional implications of his own findings on socialization, he concluded that Kelley's thesis was wrong and had, if fact, done great harm. "Policy makers in the church have been very much astir since the publication of Kelley's causal conjecture. It is unfortunate that such a rather shallow piece of social science has been used as a basis for policy decisions" (Bouma, 1979:135).

Hoge and Roozen: Institutional Factors Versus Contextual Factors

In 1979, Dean Hoge and David Roozen edited a volume called *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-1978*. The book was an attempt to pull together a series of social scientific articles on growth and decline. The majority of material concerned the decline of mainline denominations and factors that accounted for the decline. Hoge and Roozen, in pointing to the importance of contextual and institutional factors, were the first to explicitly provide a conceptual framework for understanding church growth and decline.

One of the significant studies of the volume was conducted by Wade Clark Roof and several others (Roof et al., 1979) on church membership change among United Presbyterian congregations. The study was based upon a sample of Presbyterian churches that were declining (30% or more total over a six-year period), those that were "typical" (not more than a 21% loss), and those that were growing the fastest (a 5% or greater gain). A set of questionnaires was distributed to the congregations to be completed by the pastor and a sample of church members.

Hypotheses derived directly from Kelley's thesis pervaded the study. The research also addressed difficult questions that were provoked by Kelley's book. For example, some Presbyterian theologians had begun to argue that church growth was "not the point" (Hudnut, 1975), and that an emphasis on growth might actually stand in the way of achieving other congregational goals. At best, growth was one goal among many. Clark Roof and his associates dealt

with the question through the following hypothesis: "Considering five church goals—numerical growth, level of individuals' religious commitment, level of members' satisfaction and enthusiasm, level of love and care within the membership, and effectiveness of social witness—they are not mutually exclusive, and they do not form a fixed-sum system" (Roof et al., 1979:201).

Alongside the question of whether or not church growth was possible without the sacrifice of other important congregational goals, the Roof study (Roof et al., 1979) also raised the question of the relative explanatory power of contextual versus institutional factors. The author's partiality to context was quite evident in the way the hypotheses were proposed. For example, hypotheses having to do with context were stated outright: "Congregations will tend to grow if the community in which they are located is affluent." The institutional hypotheses, however, all began with the qualifying phrase: "If contextual factors are equal . . . congregations will tend to grow if they have internal harmony and cooperation." Three of the institutional hypotheses reflected Kelley's thesis and were stated conditionally. For example, "If contextual factors are equal, congregations will tend to grow if they maintain a clear sense of doctrinal truth, a clear system of meaning and value, intolerance of inner pluralism or dissent, and a high level of demand on members" (Roof et al., 1979:203).

Despite the contextual qualifications proposed for the institutional hypotheses, both contextual and institutional factors emerged as important. Affluence of the community surrounding the congregation and favorable demographic shifts were named as the two most important contextual factors. It was clear that growing Presbyterian congregations were most successful in communities of affluent, young, middle-class, largely white families. Satisfaction with church worship and program, and congregational cooperation and harmony among members were among the most important institutional factors. The role of the pastor was not directly important unless he or she was a factor in congregational conflict or stood in the way of congregational satisfaction with worship (Roof et al., 1979:222). According to Wade Clark Roof and associates: "Churches that grow are those able to generate high levels of membership satisfaction" (Roof et al., 1979:213).

The hypotheses related to Kelley's thesis were generally dismissed. As Roof put it: "Our data offers only weak support for his argument" (Roof et al., 1979:216). However, the same paragraph states, "we see that demands on members and conservative theology relate positively to growth to a noteworthy degree." In any case, it was clear that both institutional and contextual factors were important in understanding church growth. "In this study of Presbyterian congregations, we find that the two sets of factors are roughly equal in strength" (Roof et al., 1979:222).

After Hoge and Roozen: The Central Role of Context

Throughout the early 1980s the debate over the most appropriate explanation of church growth and decline continued to react to Kelley's initial work. Several studies contributed to the dialogue, sometimes only considering contextual factors and at other times carving out a more central role for the social context. Perry and Hoge (1981) use data gathered from 204 Presbyterian congregations to argue that Kelley's thesis was weak and unsubstantiated. As they put it: "Apparently the arguments about strictness, conservative theology, and evangelism made by Kelley and the Church Growth Movement writers are unimportant. Only their arguments about social action have a bit of relevance for understanding Presbyterian congregations" (1981:231). They continued: "theological tendencies, priority given to evangelism, desire for growth, and compatibility of pastor and laity are not important causes" (1981:231).

In studying the mainline and conservative churches of four SMSAs in the United States, Hadaway (1981:88) emphasized "the predominant impact of population change on church membership" for the growth and decline of mainline churches. In another study of churches in Memphis, Hadaway stated:

Using Memphis as an example, we showed that church growth is quite unlikely in the downtown, inner city, and even in older established neighborhoods. However, as we move outward from the city to the suburbs and to areas where new housing is currently being constructed, membership growth becomes progressively more likely. These findings underscore the tremendous impact of urban location on the church, an impact that cannot be ignored if church planning is to be realistic. (Hadaway, 1982:384)

Both of these studies were concerned with only contextual factors.

In 1983, McKinney and Hoge tried explicitly to pin down the relative influence of contextual and institutional factors. In a study of United Church of Christ congregations, they found that congregations grew when they were in affluent, middle-class, largely white residential neighborhoods with a high percentage of home ownership and few other Protestant churches as competitors. Within the congregations, congregational harmony and cooperation and general laity satisfaction with worship and program were very important. The context, McKinney and Hoge argued, accounted for 50% to 70% of the explained variance in growth, while the institutional variables accounted for 30% to 50% of the variance (1983:64).

Bibby with Brinkerhoff (1983) took on the popularized Kelley's thesis once again in a return trip to twenty Canadian conservative evangelical congrega-

tions first studied in 1971. They classified each of the new members of the congregations as: reaffiliates—those transferring from other churches; offspring—those who had joined the church prior to age ten and had at least one parent who was a member of the congregation; and proselytes—those who had come to the congregations from outside of the conservative evangelical community. Significantly, sixteen of the congregations still existed in 1981, but of the sixteen, five had relocated. As Bibby and Brinkerhoff described it:

All five of the congregations that had moved had originally been in neighborhood locations, nestled in residential communities and in all but one case removed from major roadways. They now, without exception, are located permanently or temporarily in facilities serviced by major arteries, with minimal explicit neighborhood identification. Five of the eleven churches that did not move were either major regional congregations or single denominational churches (i.e., with no city branches). The remaining six are all denominational branch churches bearing neighborhood names. They are also essentially the smallest and probably the most fragile six churches in the sample. (Bibby and Brinkerhoff, 1983:256)

Bibby and Brinkerhoff argued that “the additions to theologically conservative, Protestant churches were primarily geographically mobile evangelicals and members’ children” (1983:259). About 10% to 15% came from outside the evangelical community. At the same time, and as Bibby had argued earlier, it was clear that evangelical congregations held on to their members with considerably more efficiency than did mainline churches. As Bibby and Brinkerhoff then put it, reconsidering Bibby’s earlier thesis and offering some credit to Kelley, “Kelley’s thesis thus appears to have explanatory value in accounting for members and offspring retention, rather than being required to account for a striking level of outreach” (1983:259).

The congregation’s location was clearly, however, another factor in the retention phenomenon. Not all the conservative evangelical congregations were doing well. Those congregations that drew their membership from a wider regional basis were doing better than those congregations with ties to working-class neighborhoods. Those congregations that had moved near major transportation arteries were better off than those that had not. Bibby and Brinkerhoff noted: “It is interesting to observe that the four conservative churches which ceased operations in the 1970s came from the two most vulnerable categories—three were neighborhood Nazarene, Baptist, and Missionary branch congregations, while the fourth is a new independent, single denominational Baptist group” (1983:260).

The Church Growth Movement

Donald McGavran

There is considerable apprehension about the church growth movement among social scientists. More than a small part of this apprehension is due to differences in perspective and levels of methodological sophistication. There is little doubt that McGavran, who is credited with founding the church growth movement, was primarily interested in church growth, not for scientific reasons, but because he sought converts to the Christian faith. Methodologically, church growth proponents typically embrace anecdotal case examples rather than larger, theoretically based empirical surveys of groups of congregations. But even though the church growth movement heavily stressed institutional factors, McGavran's work, in particular, acknowledged the power of the social context.

The contextual question was obvious in McGavran's examinations of missionary efforts around the world (*Understanding Church Growth*). As McGavran put it: "The churchman who would understand the ways in which the Holy Spirit, through establishing thousands of new communities of the redeemed, is spreading abroad the 'sweet savor of Christ,' must ask why evangelism issues in conversions in some populations and not in others" (1970:123).

McGavran's answer to this question was a complicated one. He first dismissed explanations for church growth that he considered "rationalizations" or simple excuses for giving up (1970:136). He attacked the Presbyterian and Congregational missionaries in Japan in the late nineteenth century for defensive thinking, even though he recognized the obstacles they faced. He belittled what he defined as the shared "rationalization" of the time—that the church had "gained a more realistic conception of the task and . . . had entered a more mature stage of its existence." But, on the other hand, and perhaps more significantly, McGavran also dismissed single-minded theological explanations for church growth as one-sided and naive. He quoted a Pentecostal missionary who argued that "joyous abandonment to the Lord and unquestioning obedience to the Bible" were the reasons so many had accepted the Pentecostal faith and added: "one may rejoice that these Christian graces have been found in considerable measure among Pentecostal Christians and yet observe that many environmental factors have played significant roles in their church advance" (1970:137).

McGavran's focus, nevertheless, was itself single-minded. It was church growth. He noted: "the student of church growth cares little about whether a church is credible; he asks how much it has grown. He rates performance

higher than promise" (1970:137). The "salvation of souls" and nothing else gave a church credibility and, therefore, almost any approach that brought converts was good—including the application of the findings of more secular disciplines and studies to the task of saving souls. Once this was understood, the use of case examples to develop techniques for the purposes of evangelism took on its own legitimacy and immediacy; McGavran wrote freely about "indoctrination" as an effective church growth technique. As McGavran (1970:141) put it, referring to the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Peru, "the Church and mission gave prolonged postbaptismal training to Christians and to their children and grandchildren. . . . Dr. Money credits Adventist effectiveness to *systematic postbaptismal indoctrination*" (emphasis added).

Based on a variety of case examples, McGavran outlined twelve "reasons for growth." Many of the twelve reasons emphasized the context of mission work. Conversions, he argued, were the result of the right message being in the right place at the right time, as well as the willingness to abandon old techniques and experiment with new. McGavran listed several "common reasons why churches do or do not grow" (1970:140).

1. Environmental and church factors favorable to church growth appeared at the same time.
2. The gospel was preached to some clearly receptive part of the mosaic.
3. Someone had a particular plan for multiplying churches that fitted his special population.
4. Leaders were chained to existent nonproductive work. Or, church and mission were devoted to a nonproductive pattern, once needed but long since outmoded.
5. Church and mission allowed themselves to remain stuck in an area of low potential.

Finally, McGavran gave credit to the Spirit of God when he referred to "praying Christians filled with the Holy Spirit" as the reason for a revival in Chile.

McGavran was quite convinced that the contextual factors were important to church growth. At the same time he was equally confident that institutions were not, or should not be, victims of their contexts even if this meant abandoning unproductive social environments for new ones. It was this intense desire for expansion, in spite of all circumstances, that set the church growth movement apart.

A More Recent Example of the Church Growth Movement Approach

Because of the vast number of church growth works, it is impossible to adequately review them in detail. A recent work, however, called *To Spread the Power* (Hunter, 1987), serves as an example of the kind of material that is typical of the church growth movement in the United States. As noted earlier, the body of works for the church growth movement is largely based on case examples of congregations. Out of these examples came a collection of techniques aimed exclusively at achieving congregational growth. While most of the techniques focus on the congregation as an institution, the techniques themselves are often designed to encourage congregations to better understand and address the realities of the social context within which they are trying to do ministry.

Hunter argues that one of the most successful strategies for achieving church growth was to use the existing social networks. He (1978:96) referred to these networks as the “bridges of God” (a term borrowed from McGavran). Most people become members of congregations through their personal contacts with other people who were already members. The key, according to Hunter, is to consciously and systematically harvest these social networks. To do this, Hunter offered a number of guidelines (1978:96):

1. Secure the names of all undisciplined persons with the social webs of your active credible Christians. Have some member of your evangelism committee visit, along with each active member, the undisciplined persons he or she has listed.
2. As you win some of those target persons, secure the names of their undisciplined relatives and friends. Have an evangelism committee member visit with them.
3. Survey each member each season to get the names of new undisciplined prospects. This will continually reveal a fertile harvest field for your church—undisciplined persons who are already linked to one or more persons in your congregation.

Once this population of prospects was defined, Hunter encouraged his readers to tailor their message to the needs of the context—to research, market, and promote the church. To do this effectively the old view of personal evangelism, which Hunter described as “a rehearsed authoritarian presentation that claims to be the only way to see things” (1987:101), had to be abandoned. Instead, Hunter insisted on “evangelists” who based their work on six principles:

1. Effective faith sharing is more relational than verbal.
2. The evangelist does much more listening than talking.
3. The evangelist vocalizes suggestions more than propositions.
4. Christianity is more caught than taught.
5. Conversion is almost never instant, but takes some weeks or months from insemination to new birth.
6. The occasions for evangelistic conversations usually arise situationally. The message is seldom a rehearsed theological formula out of a book or a packaged evangelistic program. It is usually specific, tailored to the recipient's felt need, point of openness, search, or pain, and presents the facet of the gospel that is most immediately relevant.

Conservative congregations were urged to give their people what they wanted. Often the best strategy for doing so was to provide a variety of settings for the proclamation of the message—so that almost anyone could find something to their liking. This consumer-oriented approach was related to McGavran's "homogeneous unit" principle. The point was not, at least according to the proponents of church growth, to keep certain kinds of people out, but to provide different types of congregations and/or settings where people could find people like themselves. More units provided members with more options, and as Hunter put it: "as we multiply options for people we are able to include and involve more people" (1987:118).

Finally, Hunter, like many other church growth advocates, referred to building a growing congregation as an "entrepreneurial task" (1987:128). His use of business and marketing language was no accident, and the church growth movement did not apologize for it. They were consciously applying marketing principles to evangelism. Once again, Hunter offered these "nine simple steps to starting new groups in your church" (1987:128):

1. Define the target group of people to minister to.
2. Research the target audience and the kind of ministry that would possibly respond to their particular needs.
3. Find a committed lay person(s) willing to be involved in starting such a new group. The person should be similar to the target group.
4. Train this person in the logistics of starting a new group.
5. Begin the recruiting process prior to the first group session.
6. Find an appropriate meeting place.
7. Stress the importance of the first several months. They are critical to the success of the group.

8. Keep accurate records of the experience for reference in starting later groups.
9. Build in monitoring and evaluation procedures for the first nine months.

Schaller: Church Growth for Everyone

Part of the popularity of the church growth movement literature is clearly due to its practicality. The literature offers clear suggestions to any pastor or church leader who is willing to listen. It does more than imply that even the most difficult of contextual circumstances could be overcome and churches could grow simply by rethinking and reorganizing themselves. The process of rethinking and reorganizing might be difficult, but techniques for doing so were in no short supply. One of the authors who has been most successful at helping pastors and lay members of congregations rethink and reorganize themselves without regard for theological perspectives has been Lyle E. Schaller.

Schaller, a former urban planner, is an engaging writer who has written extensively, with over forty books since 1964. He offers his insights into church growth and strategic planning by telling illustrative stories (about the experiences of a wide variety of pastors) developed from his extensive interviews. Schaller is a proponent of growth as a means through which congregations can "fulfill" their places "in God's plan" (Schaller, 1981:13).

For Schaller, a focus on growth serves several very important functions in the life of a congregation. For example, he argues that growth keeps the goals of a congregation focused by encouraging the congregation to look beyond taking care of the "in" group members to reaching out and serving the needs of the community (1991a:159). This reaching out is so important because it demands that congregations innovate and offer more and more choices. This is the only way to attract "new generations of churchgoers." At the same time, the drive to innovate, more often than not, improves the overall quality of the mission and ministry of the church for all of its current members. In other words, the growing church is driven by the needs of unchurched people rather than the needs of its own members. The growing church is driven by the need to perpetually question the old and bring on the new. Schaller, in characteristic style, asks pastors:

Do you expect new people to come to your church to fill your empty pews, to help support your budget, to contribute to those annual payments on the mortgage, to staff your Sunday school and to accept without question your priorities, policies, traditions and schedules? Or are your leaders willing to change the

shape of the vessel that carries the Good News that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior? (1991b:132)

Discussion and Conclusions

Despite the very different circumstances under which studies of church growth have taken place, there are significant and similar conclusions that can be drawn from this material. Even though social scientists studying church growth may have reacted against Kelley's institutional thesis of mainline decline, they never totally dismiss the importance of institutional factors. In fact, in many cases they affirm the power of these influences. On the other hand, those in the church growth movement who focus almost exclusively on the institutional factors paid repeated homage to the context. From the beginning of the church growth movement, McGavran pointed to the necessity of taking into account the social context, and those who follow him do so every time they talk about the need to adequately understand the social context where congregations operate.

The role of contextual factors in church growth and decline can never be ignored, but "negative" contextual factors cannot, in and of themselves, deal fatal blows to either congregations or denominations. Contextual factors are fatal only if change is resisted. It is clear that congregations cannot control their contexts, but they can control their relationship to their contexts. This is the point that those in the church growth movement make when they argue that a failing congregation has only two choices—to move to a setting where it can be more successful, or to rethink and reshape itself with regard to its existing context. This conclusion is not very different from the conclusions drawn by social scientists like Walrath and Hadaway. In the Hoge and Roozen volume, Walrath noted: "congregations that thrive amid change generally are those that are able to relate effectively to their contexts, maximizing the positive factors, minimizing the negative factors, programming toward the context's future rather than hanging on to a past that sooner or later is bound to vanish" (1979:269). Hadaway, in a 1982 study concluded: "radical change in the identity of the church and new avenues of entry for newcomers are essential if a decline is ever to be halted. Yet most churches do not react in time; they dwindle and die or simply move to new neighborhoods where racial transition is not yet a problem" (1982:374).

The problem for mainline pastors and church leaders is the slow "reaction time" of their congregations. In part, ironically enough, this results from the fact that these congregations are institutionally, if not theologi-

cally, conservative. Hadaway argues that congregations in general are conservative: "the church is a conservative, neighborhood-based organization composed of entrenched social groups" (1982:374). This is rarely the case in new congregations, or in congregations that focus first on growth. These congregations may be theologically conservative, but they are institutionally "liberal" enough to make the inevitable changes that their context demands—and they grow as a result.