

Evaluating Church Growth

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They say you can't ignore it. Essay after essay in the Seminary's Essay File make the statement that the Church Growth Movement is something we cannot and should not ignore. This is true in at least one sense. We simply cannot ignore this movement because it is all around us. Church growth principles and methodology dominate the field, especially in the area of missions and evangelism. Because we are rightly interested in missions and evangelism, Church Growth theology and methodology are a presence difficult to ignore.

The rather large amount of material written on the Church Growth Movement¹ among Lutherans suggest that it is not being ignored. Evaluations of CG have been presented to several pastoral conferences in the past 20 years. Books have been written, both for the adoption (or adaptation) and for the rejection of CG methods and theories. Some church bodies have even issued statements evaluating the movement and offering suggestions.

Another way in which CG is not being ignored is in those congregations where CG principles or methods have been employed. Many pastors have not ignored it, reading books from a variety of sources. In some cases, those pastors have found many valuable insights in these books and made use of them in their congregations. While this kind of use is less documented as the written sources above, it shows that CG is a force that demands attention. Because of the nature of CG, it is also a force that demands constant evaluation.

Time and space will not permit another review of CG history, principles, methods. This paper is intended to simply consider those evaluations that have been offered. More specifically, it will consider those sections that ask the question, "What can we take from the CGM?" There are different ways of answering that question and most will be represented here.

In David Valleskey's essay evaluating CG, he points out four possible answers to the question, "What do we do with the Church Growth Movement?"² Richard Krause summarizes these four options:

The first three he rejects: (1) Accept uncritically everything that the CGM offers and become a part of the Movement; (2) Reject the CGM and everything about it; (3) Identify oneself with the CGM, but attempt to be a Lutheran voice in the Movement, e.g., Kent Hunter of the LCMS. The fourth option he calls "spoiling the Egyptians."³

The fourth option is the one Valleskey suggests. It means to "be selective, utilizing what is good and helpful, while at the same time refraining from identifying ourselves directly with the Movement."⁴ Every WELS (and almost every LCMS) evaluation reviewed for this paper maintained that this is the only real option for confessional Lutherans.⁵

¹ From here on, abbreviated CGM or CG.

² David Valleskey, *The Church Growth Movement: An Evaluation* (WLS Essay File, 1990), 18.

³ Richard Krause, *All Things to All Men: Where is the Limit?* (WLS Essay File, 1995), 9.

⁴ Valleskey, 19.

⁵ Because of this, this paper will not deal with the works of Kent Hunter or David Luecke. It will also not deal with those who follow options 1 or 2.

Of course, there is a degree of subjectivity for those who follow this method of making use of CG ideas. Some will be more selective than others. Some may disagree about what is “good and helpful.” While most Lutheran evaluations of the CGM agree that CG has good things to offer, but must be used discerningly, these evaluations differ quite a bit.

Most evaluations begin with a brief history of the Movement, spending time talking about Donald McGavran and C. Peter Wagner. They will mention Fuller Theological School and Win Arn’s Institute for American Church Growth. They will take note of the theological background of these men and mention how their theology affects the way they think about CG. The evaluations usually continue by considering the different principles of CG, namely: the Harvest Principle, Receptive People, Testing the Soil, Homogeneous Units, and New Church Planting. In some way or another, the evaluations usually demonstrate at least some weakness with each principle. In some cases, valuable insights are shared. Finally, the author comes to a conclusion about how to make use of it.

At one end of the spectrum are those evaluations that have very few good things to say about the CGM. Kurt Marquardt’s book easily falls on this side.⁶ Some may even contend that this work falls into the category of those who reject CGM wholesale. In general, Marquardt really doesn’t deal with the question at all. He only mentions aspects of CG that are contrary to Lutheran doctrine or practice. Those he naturally rejects. He simply doesn’t mention those aspects of CG that many Lutherans would welcome. He does concentrate on the theology of CG principles and concludes:

Enough! “Church Growth” is a mission paradigm shaped by a theology which as a whole does not square with the Lutheran understanding of the Gospel. I chose four “flash-points” of conflict for detailed examination in this essay. The Gospel is at stake in all of them.”⁷

A more recent LCMS evaluation can be found in Rodney Zwonitzer’s book.⁸ Zwonitzer is a second career LCMS pastor who evaluates CG on the basis of its origins in the business world. He strongly makes the point that the work of the corporation and the work of the Church do not work under the same principles. In fact, he says the two sets of principles are diametrically opposed to each other.

⁶ Kurt Marquardt, *“Church Growth” As Mission Paradigm: A Lutheran Assessment* (Houston, TX: Our Savior Lutheran Church, 1994).

⁷ Marquardt, 139.

⁸ Rodney E. Zwonitzer, *Testing the Claims of Church Growth* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002).

The solutions are strikingly opposed. CG says change over to the CG paradigm or perish. Confessionalists declare that the church of Christ will survive by proclaiming the true Gospel without sociological, marketing, or management measures. The Gospel needs no supplements. It saves without any help from cultural trendiness.⁹

This controversy is about the primary purpose of the church. CG says mission. Confessionalists say pure Gospel. All the rest—barriers to the Gospel, effectiveness or faithfulness, vision and leadership, pastors as divine gifts or everyone a minister—depends on one's paradigm. Which will it be: Lutheran pure and simple or Lutheran mixed with CG?¹⁰

One might expect that Zwonitzer has no room for anything the CGM has to offer. But a chapter earlier in the book he writes:

From CG comes much useful information. There is much we can agree with, from helps in the promotion of the church to common-sense concerns that our facilities and properties be attractive, safe, and inviting to our communities. An unchristian, unlutheran attitude of "take us as we are" or "we don't care if you come or not" is to be discouraged. Away with cold, unfriendly churches where visitors are not greeted warmly. In this we are united.¹¹

This could be described as an example of "spoiling the Egyptians." He notes those things which are helpful to us—things that also fit our theology. In many ways he separates these things from the principles and theology of CG itself.

Robert Koester takes a similar approach as he evaluates the CGM on the basis of law and gospel. He contrasts the Evangelical-Reformed view of the gospel with the scriptural-Lutheran view and then notes how the Reformed view is the view of CG. He then walks through various aspects of CG, focusing primarily on the "felt needs" concept. The overall sense of the book is that the CGM is contradictory to confessional biblical Lutheranism. He does acknowledge that "we may gain good practical suggestions from Church Growth type literature" but in his mind, "the risks for a confessional Lutheran using the Church Growth library are greater than the benefits, in spite of some good practical suggestions."¹²

In 1987, the LCMS published a statement on "Evangelism and Church Growth With Special Reference to the Church Growth Movement." It is a 52 page document that covers much the same ground as other evaluations. It warns against using sociological insights in place of the means of grace, but recognizes that:

⁹ Zwonitzer, 130.

¹⁰ Zwonitzer, 131-132.

¹¹ Zwonitzer, 118.

¹² Robert J. Koester, *Law & Gospel: The Foundation of Lutheran Ministry* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), 204.

Dependent on the promises of God given through the means of grace for growth and on the power of the Holy Spirit who bestows on it His manifold gifts, the church accepts with thanksgiving all methodological insights and wisdom that will enhance and facilitate the proclamation of the Word. In Christian freedom, though with Biblically tested criteria, the church will gladly make use of methods and techniques designed to accomplish this end.¹³

The Lutheran Church of Australia also published a similar statement, but one that is over ten times shorter. It concludes very simply:

There are many positive things which Lutherans can learn from the Church Growth Movement. In planning the adoption or adaptation of Church Growth Movement principles and practices, Lutherans should bear in mind the above factors in order to ensure that what is done in Lutheran congregations is in line with sound biblical and Lutheran theology.¹⁴

Now we turn to essays written by those inside the WELS. Again, we see every essay agreeing that we cannot simply reject or accept the CGM as a whole. We already looked at David Valleskey's statements. Many others speak in the same way. Watch out for error. Use what is good. Perhaps the best summary of that attitude is found in an essay by Wayne Schoch:

¹³ LCMS, *Evangelism and Church Growth with Special Reference to the Church Growth Movement* (<<http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/Evang-011.pdf>>, September 1987), 42-43.

¹⁴ LCA, *A Brief Evaluation of the Church Growth Movement* (<<http://www.lca.org.au/resources/cticr/dsto2revg1.pdf>>. May 1990, Edited August 2001), 4.

Having stated these concerns, how should we proceed? Should we simply throw out anything that hints of Church Growth because it will not benefit us? Should we adopt these principles after trying to Lutheranize them? I am of the opinion that we can use some of the material from the Church Growth movement. Some of it is very helpful. It gives us insights into how we can remove obstacles to proclaiming the Word to non-Christians. It is helpful to get a perspective on what a non-Christian notices in a worship service. It is helpful to see that we can do some things to make visitors feel more welcome in our service as we proclaim to them the life-giving message of the gospel.

The literature also can help us in indirect ways. It can lead us to refresh our memories once again on what our task is. It can remind us to evaluate how we are using our resources based on God's Word. It can lead us to focus our attention on meaningful efforts at sharing the gospel. And it can point out to us that we are to be eager when we look at the challenges and opportunities that God has placed before us, especially since we have such a rich treasure to share in God's Word.

However, we need to be very cautious as to how much we take from these sources. In looking at this movement closely I have found that it would be more helpful to take a long look at the missiological principles set down in God's Word than to spend a lot of time in Church Growth material.¹⁵

There is another group of essays that approach the subject from a different perspective. They, too, note the theological problems with the CGM. They can even put them in a list: "synergism, failure to give place to the means of grace, and a general denigration of the gospel, unionism, anti-credalism, misunderstanding of law and gospel, confusion on the nature of the church, especially on the difference between the visible and invisible church, legalism, and other manifest and easily documented errors in Church Growth literature."¹⁶ Yet in these essays, these trouble spots are not given much space. In fact, at some points as much time is given to defending the CG principles as to pointing out their problems. Paul Kelm points out that much criticism of the homogeneous unit principle is "unjust."¹⁷ Curtis Peterson says that the receptive people principle and soil testing techniques are "unfairly criticized."¹⁸ Ernst Wendland seems to minimize CG errors when he writes "Should we, in other words, condemn an entire movement because of *certain* exaggerated claims and *some* misapplications of Scripture? Can we not make use of some of McGavran's practical suggestions while remaining aloof from *whatever* theories do not agree with our own confessional principles?"¹⁹

This does not mean that these writers are incorrect in their assessments. It is simply an observation regarding the manner of presenting the benefits and dangers of the CGM. This latter

¹⁵ Wayne Schoch, *Concerns About the Church Growth Movement* (WLS Essay File, 1993), 10.

¹⁶ Curtis A. Peterson, *A Second and Third Look at Church Growth Principles* (WLS Essay File, 1993), 11.

¹⁷ Kelm, 5.

¹⁸ Peterson, 7.

¹⁹ Ernst Wendland, *Church Growth Theology* (WLS Essay File), 8. Emphasis mine.

group seems inclined to justify and use as much as possible, except those certain things that contradict our doctrine. The main theses of the three larger works cited earlier²⁰ were that Lutheran theology is really incompatible with the basis for CG. It is only some certain things that we may be able to use. It seems these writers are writing from a different perspective.

They have undertaken to defend certain CG principles. In most cases, they use the arguments of the CGM. One essayist (who is quoted by another) defends the significance of numbers in the church with the fact that “The Lord wants all to be saved.”²¹ CG writers will make that connection. Scripture does not. The same essayist seeks to prove the fact that churches grow because of sociological patterns by the fact that the church grows in one area but not another; that the mission in Malawi is growing but there are few converts in Japan.²² Scripture never commands or encourages us to find out why some are saved and not others. CG writers use sociology to go places that Scripture does not. Another essayist defends the harvest principle, talking about the role the evangelist plays in “harvesting.” He remarks that “God gives the increase, but both planting and watering are roles we are to assume (I Corinthians 3).”²³ In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul is de-emphasizing man’s role in the work of the church and emphasizing God’s activity. He makes a valid point, but in doing so turned a scriptural statement about God’s saving activity (gospel) into one that requires better human activity (law).

Ernst Wendland wrote that “the subject of church growth itself is not one that our Synod will want to ignore.”²⁴ That is true simply because CG thought is all around us. We can’t ignore it. It is also true because CG has several valuable insights to offer. We wouldn’t want to ignore that.

But perhaps we should ignore it. Maybe we need to. Perhaps the attention some have given to it has caused them difficulty in distinguishing scriptural truth from CG principle and methodology. Valleskey wrote that he was confident that pastors in the synod were capable of being discerning.²⁵ Every Lutheran evaluating the CGM certainly believes himself to be a discerning reader. Yet some come out in favor and some against. The truth is that the key to discernment is a thorough foundation in Scripture. In that sense every WELS pastor should be well capable of discernment. But perhaps that foundation gets eroded by constant contact with error (even when read discerningly).

Maybe it is better advice to ignore the CGM—not that we become ignorant of the world around us, or reject every good suggestion that comes from it. But maybe it would be better to avoid too much direct contact. Maybe we could rely on indirect exposure. Maybe others have

²⁰ Marquardt, Koester, and Zwonitzer.

²¹ Peterson, 14.

²² Peterson, 7.

²³ Kelm, 4.

²⁴ Wendland, 8.

²⁵ Valleskey, 20.

already gleaned “the good stuff.” Maybe the Egyptians have already been spoiled and it’s time to leave Egypt (even though it may look attractive at times).

Multiple authors, both in LCMS and WELS, have recommended that we go back to Scripture and get our missiological principles from it. Once we are fully grounded in those we may find that others have good things to say as well. We may also find that we will never tire of hearing Scripture speak to us about what God has done for all people and about the role he has given to us by his grace.

One might say that we already have most of what is good about the CGM. One might say that most of that can be found in the book *We Believe; Therefore We Speak*. Granted, CG analysts will continue to do research and discover new methods and even principles. And we will want to pay attention. But in another sense, we will always want to ignore Church Growth. We will want to ignore it so that we can fix our attention on Scripture, and strengthen the foundation that builds, strengthens, and grows the true Church of God.

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