

Contrasting Missional and Church Growth Perspectives

By Gailyn Van Rheen

It has been my privilege to work with five other missions educators (Elmer Towns, Craig Van Gelder, Charles Van Engen, Howard Snyder, and editor Gary McIntosh) to evaluate the Church Growth Movement. The resulting book, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement* (McIntosh, 2004), is part of the Zondervan counterpoints series.

Participating in this dialogue has been especially beneficial to me at this point in life. After 14 years as a cross-cultural church planter in East Africa and 17 years as a professor of missions at Abilene Christian University, I felt God's leading during this final season of life to begin a new ministry called [*Mission Alive*](#), whose focus is to equip evangelists to plant missional churches in North America. Writing a chapter in this text and responding to chapters written by other scholars has clarified my vision for missional church planting

Strengths and Limitations of Church Growth Thinking

My chapter enumerated some significant strengths of Church Growth thinking. Donald McGavran, the father of Church Growth, encouraged missionaries to personally minister among unbelievers rather than attempt to draw people into Western-style mission enclaves or mission stations. He rightly emphasized the missionary nature of the local church and the need for pioneer evangelism among peoples ready to hear the gospel. He called for the incisive evaluation of missions. Above all, he taught us to employ tools from the social sciences to analyze culture and to use this analysis to develop penetrating strategies for reaching both searchers and skeptics with the gospel of Christ.

The seeds of syncretism, however, were rooted in the very principles of cultural analysis and strategy formation employed by this movement. Practitioners succumbed unintentionally to the humanistic suppositions of the Modern Era. Assuming that they could chart their way to success by their ingenuity and creativity, Church Growth practitioners focused on *what humans do* in missions rather than on *what God is doing*. They saw the missional task as setting goals, developing appropriate methodologies, and evaluating what does or does not work rather than seeking God's will based upon biblical and theological reflection. Their thinking segmented the gospel and practice, the human and divine into two compartmentalized worlds, and practice was developed on the basis of "what works" rather than the will and essence of God. Christian leaders placed more emphasis on developing effective strategy than forming communities shaped in the image of God. Although they advocated faithfulness to God, the system they proposed was based on human intelligence and ingenuity.

Analyzing Church Growth in view of epistemological sources, i.e., how knowledge is framed within the human mind, reveals an interesting cognitive mix. Traditionally, two internal sources of knowledge are recognized, logic and intuition, as well as two external

sources, observation and authority. Church Growth, like Modernism, is based primarily on the use of human logic and observation. Paradoxically, the Bible, the Christian source of authority, is secondary. These understandings are significant because *Christian meanings are formed by how sources of knowledge are prioritized and systematized. These thought arrangements, then, shape the practices of missions and evangelism.*

This emphasis on logic and observation is seen in Church Growth research. Social research seeks to observe respondents and systematize these observations in logically coherent ways. This research helps the Church Growth practitioner to determine what people desire from a church, how they hear the gospel, and who is receptive. The research focuses almost exclusively on the social context.

Social research, although beneficial in understanding human culture, is not the foundation of Missiology. All missiological decisions must be rooted, either implicitly or explicitly, in theology so that they mirror the purposes and mind of God. Missions practitioners frequently take the theological foundation of missions for granted. Paul Hiebert writes:

Too often we choose a few themes and from there build a simplistic theology rather than look at the profound theological motifs that flow through the whole of Scripture. Equally disturbing to the foundations of mission is the dangerous potential of shifting from God and his work to the emphasis of what we can do for God by our own knowledge and efforts. We become captive to a modern secular worldview in which human control and technique replace divine leading and human obedience as the basis of mission (1993, 4).

The anthropocentric approach of Church Growth is by its very nature *pragmatic*, asking functional questions like "Does this work?" or "Will this help the church to grow?" Such questions, void of theological reflection, create a dichotomy between strategy and theology. Theology is thought to provide the message of mission; strategy supplies the method by which the message is conveyed to the people. This pragmatic thinking, however, "de-emphasizes theological problems, takes for granted the existence of adequate content, and consequently majors in method" (Escobar 2000, 110).

Methodologies and strategies are never theologically neutral and must be shaped by the gospel itself. Darrell Guder writes:

Christianity has . . . consistently reduced or distorted the gospel. Many of the problems with which non-Western churches struggle have to do with the versions of the gospel that the missionary evangelists brought them, and much of the spiritual health of those churches may be attributed to their willingness to struggle afresh with the basic challenge of the gospel. We simply may not assume that our formulations of the gospel, as familiar and time-tested as they may be, exhaust the fullness and the scope of God's great good news, culminating in the life, death, resurrection, and mission of Jesus Christ. *Every judgment we will make about the methodologies of evangelism will depend upon our answer to the questions: What is the gospel? What is the fullness of the apostolic message? What is salvation? What does the church's gospel mission intend? What is the missio Dei ("mission of God") that defines the identity, purpose, and the way of life of the church?*

(Guder 1994, 148, Italics mine)

The Church Growth model of ministry, therefore, develops forms and functions of ministry without establishing the theological rationale for Christian living and ministry. The central question "What is the gospel?" does not permeate the fabric of missionary life and activity but is merely assumed.

A Missional Alternative

Acknowledging the limitations of Church Growth thinking, however, should not lead to a denial of its strengths. The Church Growth movement has provided significant tools for cultural analysis and strategy formation. These tools, however, must be placed within a new conceptual framework which begins with theological reflection and spiritual formation but takes seriously cultural analysis and strategy formation. I embrace Steuernagel's statement at the Iguassu Missiological Consultation that we must "reposition ourselves and work once again on the agenda" (2000, 127).

I pray that churches will become missional, i.e., theologically-formed, Christ-centered, Spirit-led fellowships who seek to faithfully incarnate the purposes of Christ. Missional churches define themselves as bodies formed by the calling and sending of God and reflecting the redemptive reign of God in Christ. They are unique communities in the world created by God through the Spirit as both holy and human. Missional leaders, likewise, reflect the calling and sending of God. They minister with humility recognizing themselves as "jars of clay" who finitely seek to enter into what God is already doing in his world.

The following chart illustrates the significant contrasts between *Missional* and *Church Growth* perspectives of Christian ministry. The items listed are drawn from my chapter and that of Craig Van Gelder in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement* (Van Gelder, 2004).

	<i>Missional</i>	<i>Church Growth</i>
Orientation/ Perspective	Theocentric	Anthropocentric
	Theological	Practical
	Postmodern	Modern
Theological Focus	<i>Missio Dei</i>	Great Commission
Beginning Question	What is the gospel?	What makes the church grow?
Perspective on Scripture	Narrative of God's purposes	Propositional truth
How does missions happen?	By the Spirit (God's "surprises")	By strategic planning
Nature of community	Inclusiveness, unity of the body of Christ	People groups
Focus of Evangelism	Initiation of people into the kingdom of God; holistic	Differentiation between discipling and perfecting,

	understanding of “making disciples”	individual salvation
Orientation toward Social Action	The Gospel, evangelism, and social action cannot be separated	Priority of evangelism and church planting over social action; Reactive to the Social Gospel

Church Growth thinking begins anthropocentrically. The focus is on strategy development and cultural analysis with biblical passages appropriated to give validity to the perspectives. The Missional movement, on the other hand, begins theologically with the perspectives of the mission and kingdom of God.

The Church Growth movement, emphasizing the human ability to decipher and strategize, reflects Modernity. Missionaries and missions scholars, however, increasingly doubt the ability of human ingenuity to guide the mission enterprise. They recognize the finite nature of human understanding and the need for dependence on the Spirit of God. Post-Modernity provides a more favorable cultural environment for Christian leaders to understand missions as authored and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Deciding the primacy and ordering of questions determines the missiological focus. Church Growth begins with the question “Why do some churches grow and others do not?” The central concern of the Missional movement, on the other hand, is “What is the gospel?” The gospel is thought to intersect with every question of theology and strategy. Because it is the essence of the Christian faith, the gospel cannot be relegated to the periphery, even when formulating practical issues of strategy.

The Church Growth movement focuses on truth as proposition. Christianity is reduced to culturally-defined categories and communicated based upon these conceptual groupings. This topic framework of mental referencing is susceptible to syncretism because it is based upon conceptualizations made by Christian leaders attempting to intellectually clarify Christianity in the human cultural categories. The Missional movement maintains that the gospel cannot be contained in a set of propositions. The mission of God must be communicated as the dynamic story of God’s relationship with his creation.

Missional proponents believe that God's mission cannot be predicted by human planning. They point to “God’s surprises” in the book of Acts, resulting from the Holy Spirit going ahead of human messengers and directing them in God’s mission. For example, Acts 10 describes the Spirit of God going ahead of Peter, teaching him of God’s acceptance of the Gentiles, and leading him to household of Cornelius. The story is one of God working through his people for his purposes. While the Church Growth heritage has emphasized the mighty workings of God and the Holy Spirit due to the emphasis in such writings as Roland Allen's *Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*, the major focus has been on human ingenuity in decision-making. Elmer Towns, for instance, has great trust in human creativity. He believes that Church Growth thinking is leading missionary practitioners into a period of unprecedented growth by intentionally applying the scientific method to evangelism and church planting (2004, 39-40). The tension between

the sovereignty of God, on the one hand, and the creativity of evangelists and church planters to strategize for success is the most significant difference between Missional and Church Growth thinking. A balance is needed between these two perspectives. God does miraculously lead us forward in His mission. He, nevertheless, calls us to minister intentionality. Paul, for instance, viewed himself as “an expert builder” laying the “foundation of Jesus Christ” and encouraged other ministers to “be careful” how they built (1 Cor. 3:10-11).

The Church Growth movement has focused on the uniqueness and distinctiveness of people groups and the contextualization of the Gospel among the *ethne* of the world. The Missional movement, on the other hand, believes that the gospel breaks socio-economic and ethnic divisions between peoples so that all become one in Christ.

The Missional orientation does not dichotomize evangelism and social action, discipling and perfecting, but views God's mission holistically. Church Growth adherents, reacting to the Social Gospel, argue that the primary task of missions is evangelism and incorporating new believers into the body of Christ. Evangelism and church planting, therefore, take priority over social action. They point to the existence of many social programs, which share loaves and fishes without the gospel.

The Church Growth and Missional movements represent two very different emphases. The Missional perspective accentuates theological reflection and historical perspective and the Church Growth movement cultural analysis and strategy formation. Each movement has much to learn from the other. Those of a Missional heritage can learn from Church Growth how to study culture beyond the general impressionistic level and be more intentional in strategy formation. Church Growth practitioners can learn to rethink their discipline in integrative theological categories and to study culture, interpret history, and develop strategy through the lens of Christian theology.

The Missional Helix

The limitations of Church Growth that have been discussed--the anthropocentric focus, pragmatics and the segmentation of theology and praxis, the theological level of inquiry, and the focus on growth--suggest the need for a new model of missions. This new paradigm would maintain the strengths of the Church Growth model--a focus on identificational ministry, belief in the missionary nature of the church, critical understandings of culture, and incisive evaluation--while broadening its theological horizons. The model, termed *missional*, is rooted in an understanding that a missionary theology should permeate both theology and missiology. Kirk writes:

All true theology is, by definition, missionary theology, for it has as its object the study of the ways of a God who is by nature missionary and a foundational text written by and for missionaries. Mission as a discipline is not, then, the roof of a building that completes the whole structure, already constructed by blocks that stand on their own, but both the foundation and the mortar in the joints, which cements together everything else. Theology should not be pursued as a set of isolated disciplines. It assumes a model of cross-cultural communication, for its

subject matter both stands over against culture and relates closely to it. Therefore, it must be interdisciplinary and interactive.

(Kirk 1997, 50)

[The Missional Helix](#) visualizes such an "interdisciplinary and interactive" approach to the practice of ministry and provides a corrective to traditional Church Growth perspectives. It images the intertwining, inseparable nature of **theological reflection, cultural analysis, historical perspective, and strategy formation** within the context of the practice of ministry.

The helix begins with **theologies**, such as *Missio Dei*, the kingdom of God, incarnation, and crucifixion, which focus and form our perspectives of culture and the practice of ministry. **Cultural analysis** forms the second element of the helix. Cultural awareness enables church planters and Christian leaders to define types of peoples within a cultural context, to understand the social construction of their reality, to perceive how they are socially related to one another, and to explain how the Christian message intersects with every aspect of culture (birth rites, coming of age rituals, weddings, funerals, etc). The spiral then considers **historical perspective**, how things came to be as they are based upon the interrelated stories of the particular nation, lineage, the church, and God's mission. Finally the spiral considers incisive contextual **strategies**, which are based upon theological reflection, cultural analysis, and historical perspective, for the practice of ministry. This process of ministry formation must occur within an environment of **spiritual formation** in which the soul is being nurtured through a personal walk with God and a continual seeking of direction from God where God is sought for direction.

The Missional Helix is a spiral because the missionary returns time and time again to reflect theologically, culturally, historically, and strategically in order to develop contextual ministry. Theology, social understandings, history of missions, and strategy all work together and interpenetrate each other. Thus theology shapes praxis, which in turn influences theology within the context of on-going ministry. The helix also infers growth as the practitioners spiral to higher levels of maturity and ministry effectiveness.

The Missional Helix is useful in at least two ways. First and foremost, it provides the Christian practitioner with a model of decision-making. Church planters, evangelists, and pastors seek theological understandings, cultural analysis, historical perspective, and strategy formation in the process of developing patterns for ministry. Second, the Missional Helix could be used as a model for theological education. Equipping for ministry should not place high emphasis on some elements and give little consideration to others. Rather, it should provide an intentional, integrated model of ministry formation.

Conclusion

I embrace Steuernagel's belief: "As we move into a new century, . . . we need to reposition ourselves and to work once again on the agenda" (2000, 127). The Church Growth model is inadequate. By beginning with anthropology rather than theology and segmenting theology and practice, Church Growth advocates assume that their model

reflects the nature of God. In other words, church growth determines effective practice and then seeks to validate this practice by the use of Scripture. The movement emphasizes growth rather than faithful proclamation of the gospel and faithful living of the gospel.

I advocate an adapted missional model, one which begins with and always returns to theological reflection while taking seriously cultural analysis, historical perspective, and strategy formation.

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