

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 2

G. INTERDENOMINATIONAL COOPERATION – CHURCH MOVEMENTS

A brief evaluation of the church growth movement

Adopted by the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations, 26 March 1993.

Edited August 2001.

INTRODUCTION

The Church Growth Movement is not something fixed or static. It is a 'movement'. Consequently, this evaluation mainly studies trends, tendencies, and leanings. It does not offer a detailed examination of specific doctrines, policies, and structures.

This evaluation is not and cannot be comprehensive, for the Church Growth Movement is found in various forms within different churches and groups. So any general evaluation, either positive or negative, inevitably is open to the charge of being inadequate when it is applied to a particular form or expression of the movement.

A. POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS

1. Many principles of the Church Growth Movement are biblically based and have been used with blessing in Christian churches throughout the ages.
2. Many Church Growth Movement principles, although not specifically referred to in the Scriptures, are based on sound common sense in harmony with the Scriptures.
3. Some Church Growth Movement principles and practices are based on valuable insights gained through research in the fields of psychology, sociology, and other sciences. These insights are not in conflict with the Scriptures. They have been found to be useful in helping churches and congregations to carry out their mission responsibilities more effectively.

4. The Church Growth Movement offers a number of helpful emphases which challenge some of the attitudes held within our church. For example:
 - The Movement is critical of the use of the 'little flock' and 'remnant' themes in the Scriptures to justify smallness. Smallness, it is claimed, is a mark of faithfulness. In response, Church Growth writers point out that churches should trust God's promise that his word will not return void. We should, therefore, expect God to bless the faithful preaching of his word by adding also to our number.
 - The Movement points out that some congregations and churches resist growth because they are not prepared to pay the cost of growth. They do not want the congregation or church, as a comfortable, well-related, security-giving society, to undergo change, particularly by the addition of members from a different social stratum.
 - In its pragmatic approach, the Movement calls for greater efficiency in the work of the congregation or church. It stresses the need to be ready to discard old, ineffective methodologies, and to strive for quality in worship and communication.
 - The Movement draws attention to the leadership role of the pastor as a person of vision and optimism and long-term commitment.
 - The Movement draws attention to the important role of the laity in the mission of the church.
 - The Movement identifies members' needs for both small group ministries and large group celebrations.

Clearly, there is much in the Church Growth Movement which is valuable, positive, and challenging, and in accord with sound theology. Many principles and practices can, therefore, be adopted, while others can be adapted for use in Lutheran congregations.

B. SOME THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

Lutherans who are thinking of using Church Growth Movement principles need to bear in mind the following factors in order to ensure that principles and practices are consistent with sound evangelical Lutheran theology.

1. The Church Growth Movement has its origins predominantly in churches of Reformed background. There are, therefore, certain **Reformed leanings** in the theological formulations of the Church Growth Movement. This is evident particularly in the areas of the right relationship between law and gospel, and the sacraments. Lutherans need to be aware of these Reformed tendencies.
 - 1.1 For example, the mission command of Christ in Matthew chapter 28 tends to be made the central pillar and teaching of the Church Growth Movement. The mission command, rather than the article of justification, tends to become the 'article on which the church stands or falls' – or, in Church Growth language, the article by which the church lives or dies. The 'marks of the church' are seen to be the word and sacraments *plus* obedience.

When Lutherans use Church Growth materials they need to ensure that motivation for mission has its source in the atoning and justifying work of Christ, and not in any external pressure to be obedient to the command of Christ.

On the other hand, Lutherans who properly emphasise the gospel will indeed take seriously the great mission command of Christ.

- 1.2 A further example of the influence of Reformed theology is in the area of the **relationship of justification to sanctification**. There is a tendency towards seeing obedience to the mission command as essential to true discipleship. There is also a tendency to regard obedience to Christ's commands as well as trust in Christ's promises as being implicit in accepting Jesus as Lord.

For Lutherans, to believe that Jesus is Lord means to believe that Jesus is Redeemer. The desire to reach out to the lost and to be involved in evangelism is a fruit of saving faith. It must not be made a part of or ground for justification. To do so can cause weak Christians to become uncertain of their salvation.

On the other hand, Lutherans must not allow their emphasis on the distinction between justification and sanctification to cause them to disregard the Church Growth Movement's emphases on growth in discipleship and obedience to the mission command.

2. Some within the Church Growth Movement tend to **absolutise** Church Growth Movement principles in the sense that these principles are thought to reflect the will of God for the church for all time and in all situations. Not to adopt such principles tends to be seen as tantamount to disobedience to God's will, whereas to adopt them is to guarantee spiritual health, growth, and success.

While the Church Growth Movement legitimately identifies factors which are common to growing congregations, Lutherans need to maintain a balanced and moderate view of principles and methods based on these factors.

On the other hand, Lutherans need to be open to new principles and methods which are constantly emerging as the church fulfils its missionary task in a changing society.

3. Together with the tendency to see Church Growth Movement principles as the universal expression of the will of God for all ages, there is also a tendency towards **triumphalism**. Some Church Growth advocates speak of the Movement as being one of the greatest spiritual movements in the history of the church. They say that it will bring to fulfilment in the immediate future the promise of Christ that the gospel will be proclaimed to all the world.

Lutherans need to distinguish between faith in God's promises on the one hand, and triumphal assurances of success through the adoption of certain programs on the other. The preaching of the gospel does in fact meet with opposition. In other words, Lutherans need to distinguish between a theology of the cross and a theology of glory.

On the other hand, Lutherans need also be careful that they do not use a theology of the cross as a cover for weakness of faith, negative thinking, inaction, and contentment with smallness.

4. There is a tendency towards letting missionary **methods** or **means** of communication overshadow the means of grace, and restricting the means of grace to the word. 'Means of communication' here refer to policies and practices which remove barriers to the proclamation of the gospel and put in place structures which promote it, for example, small group ministries, the principle of homogeneity, and so forth.

While good communication is important, even essential, Lutherans must be careful that they do not attribute to means of communication or methodology what can be attributed only to the means of grace, that is, the word and the sacraments. They need to remember that the power to create and nurture faith in Christ does not lie in the means of communication but in the preached gospel and the sacraments.

On the other hand, Lutherans must always remember that for the gospel to be effective it must be a communicated gospel. It is here that Church Growth Movement emphases on research and evaluation, and the professional use of the findings of the sciences of psychology and sociology, are of value.

5. The tendency to let methodology or means of communication overshadow the means of grace has several serious consequences for the life and mission of the church.

- 5.1 A shift takes place in the perception of the **office of the public ministry**. If power for growth and health is seen to lie in methodology, then the central requirement of the spiritual leader (the pastor), is to facilitate, promote, and develop such methodology. The result is a drift in emphasis away from the pastor's central calling to preach and teach the gospel and to administer the sacraments.

There is, however, real value in the Church Growth Movement's emphasis on the crucial role of the pastor as leader, as mission inspirer, as motivator in word and action, and as one who identifies and works with supporting professional and lay ministries. The emphasis of the Church Growth Movement on the role of the laity is one of its most important and positive contributions.

- 5.2 A further consequence of the tendency to attribute power to the means of communication rather than to the means of grace, is a tendency to see **resistance to the gospel** not in terms of the total depravity of the human race but in terms of certain external social or cultural situations which make some people or some communities more open or less open to the gospel. The result is the development of what is called the 'resistance-receptivity axis' and the policy of 'soil testing' based on research into the kind of people within a community or the kind of communities which are most likely to be open to the gospel.

There is, in fact, no scriptural basis for teaching that the degree of openness to the gospel can be measured or predetermined on the basis of research.

On the other hand, it is common sense to use limited resources wisely and to recognise that people may well be more receptive to the gospel at certain critical stages in their lives.

- 5.3. Where means of communication begin to overshadow the means of grace, **worship forms** tend to be unduly influenced by subjective cultural factors and needs rather than by the objective actions of God through the means of grace.

Worship forms must be determined by the content of the gospel and the objectivity of God's action in word and sacrament.

On the other hand, worship forms must take into account appropriate cultural and social factors.

CONCLUSION

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.