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Managing For Growth: Church Growth and the Independent Christian Church

PAUL S. WILLIAMS

When I was a child I was proud to live in Akron, Ohio, the fourth largest city in the Buckeye State, and the Rubber Capital of the World. We had a special pride about our international standing, and were grateful to Goodyear, Firestone, Goodrich and General Tire. Workers from all four companies were members of the Noble Avenue Church of Christ, the congregation my father served as minister.

Our church was average in size for Christian Churches/Churches of Christ—a couple hundred people. Few asked about the attendance of any other church. If they did, the answer was usually the same—“A couple hundred people.” I envisioned thousands of Christian Churches all across America with a “couple hundred people.”

Every now and again we traveled to Canton, Ohio, a shrine of sorts, where the First Christian Church was listed every Sunday in *The Lookout* magazine as having a Sunday school attendance over 1,000. There was a similar church in California, but we took no trips there. And besides, they had never had what Canton had, P. H. Welshimer, a certifiable ministry celebrity.

The churches I experienced in Northeastern Ohio had a number of other elements in common beyond the requisite “couple hundred” people. They had a single minister with a Bible college degree. Most churches had a decidedly conservative take on everything from church doctrine to American politics. They had a prejudice against “liberal” churches, particularly the Disciples of Christ and their feared United Christian Missionary Society. Having failed at creating a unity movement, the Christian Churches remained isolated and self-referential.

The Christian Church today is a very different movement, no longer set apart from the evangelical community, and well within the radar of every other religious denomination. The Glenmary Research Center’s study of growth within American denominations in the 1990s¹ recorded the increased standing of Independent Christian Churches, reporting that among religious fellowships over one million in size, the Christian Churches grew faster than any other group, with 18.5% total growth.

Through observation of Christian Churches across the United States, I would suggest at least seven significant elements are having a major impact on the methods of growth and management utilized by Christian Churches today.

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES ARE INCREASINGLY ADOPTING THE PRACTICES OF THE AMERICAN MARKET ECONOMY

From the time of Rome no church has avoided identification with the culture in which it develops. Early Restoration Movement church polity looked suspiciously like American forms of government. The ministry staff served as the executive branch. Church trustees functioned as the judicial branch. Elders and deacons functioned as both houses of Congress. The fact that deacons held no such position within the New Testament church was conveniently overlooked.

1. Glenmary Research Center. *Religious Congregations & Membership*, Cincinnati, OH, 2000, www.glenmary.org.

Since movements adapt to the culture of which they are a part, we should not be surprised that churches are currently enamored with the American marketplace. The pulse of America can be taken on Wall Street as easily as on Pennsylvania Avenue. We are a nation frightened by large government, but not yet frightened by big business. Consumers want more goods at less cost, while maintaining their comfortable lifestyles. Should we be surprised when Christian Churches mirror such a culture?

Christian Churches and parachurch organizations focus heavily on measuring growth by numbers, particularly in the areas of attendance and per capita giving. In many annual reports the phrase “people baptized” could be replaced with “units sold” almost seamlessly. While on the surface this would appear to create few problems (after all, who would argue with baptizing people?) it avoids dealing with the darker side of measuring by numbers.

Measurement by numbers has been a standard practice of the church since the first century, from counting those in attendance at Jesus’ miracles to those baptized when Peter preached his first gospel message.² In the current environment, however, measurement by numbers is often the only standard employed. Measuring the quality of relationships, or some other valid standard, is not even considered.

The biggest problem of our adoption of the methods of the market economy is the over-simplification of the gospel. Whatever the factor is, be it love, faithfulness, kindness or gentleness, if it cannot be measured it is treated as though it is not important, or worse yet, it does not exist. The Christian leader sounds quite like the child of the Modern Age in such a scenario. The only important truth is measurable truth, not incarnate truth. The major problem with such simplification is that it moves other valid areas of concern to a second tier, such as service to the poor, concern for all the creation (including the environment), and other areas of equal importance.

Christian Churches have also borrowed American corporate leadership styles. Over the past several decades leadership of congregations has been gradually transferred from the eldership to the professional staff, led by the senior pastor, who often acts as the chief executive officer of the church.

Along with a commitment to American corporate leadership principles comes a dedication to advertising the church via Madison Avenue techniques. New churches are frequently begun with a five-postcard sequence mailed to 50,000 homes.³ Senior pastors talk about the “refrigerator factor.” The first few postcards are thrown away, but a card that arrives later in the sequence might well end up behind a magnet on a refrigerator, waiting for that Sunday morning when it “feels right” to go to church.

New church pastors carefully monitor per capita giving. Early offerings averaging \$5.00 per capita indicate a largely “unchurched” audience. Offerings in the \$15.00 range indicate a “church-hopping” audience. Numbers are measured carefully and often.

This shift to American-style corporate leadership has been most evident in growing suburban congregations, though its adoption is increasingly evident in urban and rural areas as well. If the adoption of such practices is accompanied by a rigorous debate, then few long-lasting problems are likely to develop. If they are blindly adopted without much thought, however, then we are likely to find ourselves just as captive to our age as the Crusaders were to theirs.

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES ARE INCREASINGLY IDENTIFYING WITH THE EVANGELICAL COMMUNITY AT LARGE

While Independent Christian Churches have historically seen themselves as more aligned with New Testament Christianity than Reformation theology, today’s practice brings that into question. The arrival of the megachurch has changed the landscape.

Thousands of churches in America embraced the *40 Days of Purpose* campaign initiated by Rick Warren and Saddleback Valley Community Church. Christian Church leaders pour into seminars led by Andy

2. Mark 6.44 and Acts 2.41.

3. See current new church marketing possibilities at www.passion4planting.org.

Stanley of Northpoint Church in Atlanta and Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church, among others. These churches have an international following, and are well within the evangelical camp.

While the seminars offered by these influential churches are usually focused on practical matters pertaining to church growth, everything taught is filtered through their theological belief systems, and some Christian Church leaders appropriate much of it with an increasing disregard for their own theological positions.

Consider just one example. Some large churches and several new churches are jettisoning the Lord's Supper from the main worship gathering of their weekend services.⁴ Ironically, the majority of attendees in these congregations are former Roman Catholics, who usually have little difficulty grasping the significance of weekly observance of the Lord's Supper. It would appear these churches are taking their cues from the current evangelical environment more than historical Restoration understandings.

Growing Christian Churches also tend to look like their evangelical counterparts in their political leanings. They have joined in the focus on a rather narrow social agenda, with two leading areas of concern, abortion and homosexuality. Little is heard about the unequal distribution of wealth, or issues related to the environment, or other areas of scriptural concern. And too often their views on abortion and homosexuality are ill-informed and lacking compassion.

LARGER CONGREGATIONS ARE INCREASINGLY HIRING STAFF MEMBERS FROM WITHIN

Megachurches have begun hiring many ministry staff members from within the congregation. There are several good reasons for the practice. Those volunteers who commit extraordinary time and energy to the church are likely to be highly motivated workers who already understand the culture of the congregation.

While this practice has been helpful, it does have at least one significant weakness. Many of those being ordained into ministry have had little formal theological training. Most have received their instruction through the "101" through "401" courses offered by the congregations they serve. Such education seldom provides extensive in-depth study of the scriptures, and it does not include a significant understanding of the history or nature of the church.

Another interesting element of hiring from within is that many of those brought into ministry positions are at "halftime" in their lives. The majority bring significant American corporate understanding with them. They use those abilities to help the church grow exponentially. This corporate expertise allows them to continually re-engineer the internal mechanisms of the church so that growth may continue to occur.

While these abilities allow many churches to grow significantly, there is a shadow side to this considerable corporate prowess. It might be fairly easy for such individuals to replace the phrase "units sold" with the phrase "converts made," without thinking deeply about the potential significance of those thought processes.

The faith commitment of these individuals is unquestioned. Many have given up high incomes to serve in the local church. Any problems that do exist are more the issues of those who bring these individuals on board without adequate thought to theological formation.

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES ARE INCREASINGLY ADOPTING A POLITY THAT LEAVES "MEANS" TO STAFF AND "ENDS" TO THE ELDERSHIP

Many churches have adopted some form of William Carver's Policy Board Governance.⁵ Under Policy Governance the board of the organization (elders in the life of most churches) determines the "ends" of the congregation. (What is our purpose for existence? Where are we going?) The senior pastor, as one of the elders, is also integrally involved in setting the "ends" of the church.

4. The first large church of influence to do so was Central Christian Church in Las Vegas, Nevada.

5. John Carver and Miriam Mayhew Carver, *Carver Guide: Basic Principles of Policy Governance* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996).

Under Policy Governance the “means” of the congregation are left to the church staff. The elders have determined where the church is going; the staff determines how the church is going to get there. The elders have little control over the “means” of the church, other than through executive limitations placed on the senior minister. While executive limitations look good on paper, in far too many churches boundaries are never established for the senior minister. This is especially true when the senior minister also serves as the founding pastor of the church.

Many churches adopted Policy Board Governance in the late 1990s, but are making adjustments to it today. While they continue to use Policy Governance as a guide, they are setting executive limitations more often, and are increasing board and elder involvement in the “means” of the church.

THE RAPID PACE OF MODERN CULTURE AND INCREASING USE OF THE INTERNET EXACERBATE CHURCH LEADERSHIP ISSUES

The Internet encyclopedia Wikipedia is a fitting example of one of the problems with current Western trends. Wikipedia is an open system, with content on any and all subjects at the mercy of those who add information to the topics they access. While there is a self-policing system and some monitoring for accuracy, a cursory view of any subject on which a person knows a good bit will show the inherent weakness of the system. A lot of inaccurate information is posted.

Wikipedia is a quick search away, however, and it provides information on a plethora of subjects. Its ease of use increases its influence on the Internet, whether or not the information provided is always accurate. We Americans are simply too harried to do our due diligence.

The same problem exists in the church. For Baby Boomers, Willow Creek and Saddleback have served as a sort of “Wikipedia” for the church. They provide information quickly, most of it reliable and helpful. For thirty-something church leaders, Mars Hill Church, Mosaic Los Angeles, or the Emergent Church Movement are favored sources for creativity and content. With so much demanded of ministry staff, church leaders rarely take the time to cross-reference the teachings of these churches against traditional Restoration understandings.

THE OVERALL LOSS OF INFLUENCE AMONG DENOMINATIONS HAS IMPACTED CHRISTIAN CHURCHES.

While the Independent Christian Churches have never formed a denomination, in many ways they certainly have functioned as one. The North American Christian Convention, Christian colleges affiliated with the Independent Christian Churches, Standard Publishing Company, and several strong parachurch ministries have all served as credentialing entities. The tight cooperation that has been one of the hallmarks of Christian Churches also protected against wandering far from the doctrinal fold.

In the current environment those institutions have seen their influence decline. While Christian colleges continue to be the rallying point for smaller churches in a region, the churches in and around major cities are increasingly looking to the megachurch for inspiration and guidance. The same is true of most new churches.

Many megachurches function as denominations unto themselves. They do not need the assistance of parachurch ministries or denominational publishing houses. In fact, they often do not even form close ties with other megachurches.

While this has not hindered the growth of the largest churches, it has had an impact on smaller congregations and on the Movement at large, as fewer rallying points exist for all Christian Churches.

MEGACHURCHES HAVE BEEN STEADILY INCREASING THEIR INFLUENCE AMONG ALL CONGREGATIONS, URBAN, SUBURBAN, AND RURAL

While leadership of the Christian Churches was once firmly in the hands of educators and editors, within the last two decades leadership has firmly transferred to the megachurch senior pastors.

While megachurches have their weaknesses, they are in large measure the reason for the phenomenal growth of Christian Churches in the last decade. It is also true that many elements for which they are taken to task are in fact healthy indicators of strong Christian community.

Those opposed to large churches often call for a return to the small integrated community, concerned about the whole person and the whole culture, from feeding the hungry to taking care of the environment. And where might one find sterling examples of such community? In the megachurch, where it is far easier for members with common interests to find one another in small group settings.

Megachurches have discovered at least one good leadership principle from the playbook of Jack Welch during his General Electric days. They have mastered the art of decentralization. Programs within the church have great autonomy, creating healthy particularity within the larger environment. With the recent advent of multiple campuses, even more opportunities for varying themes have emerged.

Megachurches also continue to be the first environment in which most unchurched individuals in America are introduced to Christianity. They are sensitive to many types of seekers, from those who would classify themselves as "believers with a lot of questions," to those who are "questioners with a few beliefs." Worship is designed for Christians, but always with a deep sensitivity to those who are early on their spiritual journey.

WHAT ABOUT THE EMERGENT CHURCH?

During the 1990s a movement developed among some evangelicals that became known as the Emergent Church. Early proponents referred to the Movement as a "conversation," since there were no designated leaders or leadership organization to provide a sharper identity. Nevertheless, the Emergent Church Movement did quickly credential a group of leaders, whether they desired it or not.

Brian McLaren's book, *A New Kind of Christian*, took the twenty- and thirty-something world by storm when it was published in 2001, and firmly placed McLaren in the middle of the Emergent Church leadership. Other leaders of the movement include Mark Driscoll, founding minister of Mars Hill Church in Seattle; Leonard Sweet at Drew University; Erwin McManus, founding minister of Mosaic Los Angeles; and Rob Bell, a megachurch minister in Michigan and author of the very popular book, *Velvet Elvis*.

The Emergent Church has focused attention on authenticity in worship, service opportunities and small group life, as it seeks to be understood in a postmodern environment. Another focus of the Movement is on missional living, a focus on taking the gospel outside the walls of the church and into the life of the broader community. Preaching and teaching tend to be narrative rather than didactic. While the scriptures are revered, a greater focus is placed on the person of Jesus Christ.

Much of what they espouse was earlier suggested in Lesslie Newbigin's 1989 book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.⁶ In that work Newbigin suggested six marks for the coming church:

1. A community of praise and thanksgiving
2. Seeking truth
3. Not living for itself, but for the concerns of the neighborhood
4. Where people are prepared for and sustained in priesthood
5. A community of mutual responsibility
6. A community of hope

6. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel In A Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989).

Churches that identify themselves with the Emergent Movement come in all shapes and sizes. Many wondered if the Emergent Church would be a collection of smaller congregations, a new kind of megachurch, or a combination of both. Early evidence suggests the latter.

On a practical level Emergent Churches place a high value on creative approaches to worship and spiritual reflection, from "Country and Western" services to a renewed interest in liturgy. They keep organizational structures simple and focus on the journey of faith, with a special emphasis on the importance of community in developing a healthy spirituality.

In New York City, a new church in Park Slope, Brooklyn, began as a micro-enterprise, a coffee shop. The church has been quite focused on serving its community from that intimate base. While they have Sunday services in a separate facility, much of their work emanates from their storefront shop. They have slowly become accepted in their highly diverse neighborhood as they serve and listen first, before presenting their own doctrinal understandings.

Across the river in Stuyvesant Town on Manhattan's East Side, Forefront Christian Church, another church that has adopted many Emergent Church practices, has employed the marketing expertise of the megachurch to catapult itself to a first Sunday with over 400 in attendance.⁷ While one congregation has espoused traditional church growth marketing and another has rejected that approach, both types of congregations are seen as viable and healthy in an Emergent Church world. Health is now measured by size, but also (and with greater difficulty) by quality of relationships.

These young leaders understand that as recently as 1970, thirty churches of fifty members each brought as many people to Christ as one church of 1,500 members. While they know those statistics changed drastically to favor large churches by the mid-90s, they also realize the time might be just around the corner when Americans again prefer smaller congregations.⁸ They are prepared for either eventuality.

Those Emergent Churches that do employ Madison Avenue marketing techniques have adapted to America's new fixation with "citizen branding." Corporations have learned that to advertise effectively to twenty-somethings, they must show that their product is not just something to be consumed, but serves the larger goal of creating a better community.⁹

Christian Churches have been very active in the Emergent Church Movement. Community Christian Church in Naperville, Illinois, has been one of the leading congregations. Many new churches in the north-eastern United States have also effectively adopted an Emergent Church focus.

Although it is a growing Movement, a red flag has been raised about the Emergent Church. Some more conservative members of the evangelical community feel the Movement is abandoning its evangelical roots. A group of well-known conservative leaders recently convened to discuss possible responses to what they see as a move away from "scriptural truth." At least one Christian Church megachurch has been involved in these discussions. They feel the Emergent Church Movement embraces a multiplicity of scriptural interpretations instead of a single valid interpretation. They believe the Movement is too flexible on individual differences in belief and morality, and too casual in its continual re-examination of theology.

As it relates to Independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, those concerns are understandable. Young leaders enamored with the Emergent Church frequent affiliated Web sites like theooze.com, emergentvillage.com, or ginkworld.net far more often than they frequent sites affiliated with the Christian Church Movement.

While it is still early in the life of the Emergent Church Movement, it has already exerted enough influence to demonstrate that it is more than a fad. Whether or not it becomes a long-lasting trend in the life of the Christian Churches remains to be seen.

7. Link to both churches through www.orchardgroup.org.

8. While it is too soon to draw conclusions, early indications are that those twenty-somethings migrate to larger congregations as they marry and begin having children.

9. A good summary of this trend is in *Citizen Brand* by Marc Gobe (New York: Allworth Press, 2002).

A BRIGHT FUTURE?

While the Independent Christian Church wing of the Restoration Movement is enjoying unprecedented growth, a healthy future is not guaranteed. The Movement could be in danger of losing its identity in the broader evangelical environment.

Only a handful of congregations are downplaying the ordinances of the church, but with so many programs being adapted from evangelical churches, it may only be a matter of time before the positions of the Movement become blurred. In such an environment it would be difficult to maintain identity on heritage alone.

On the other hand, many of the newest and fastest growing Independent Christian Churches are proud of their heritage and diligent in informing their members of the fellowship of which they are a part. They understand the value of a network of churches that work well together without the intrusion of denominational control, and they feel that our devotion to being "not the only Christians, but Christians only," is a goal worthy of these hopeful times. It will be interesting to see which attitude prevails over the coming decades.

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