



CHURCH GROWTH LEADERSHIP THEORY AND MENNONITE BRETHREN THEOLOGY:

A Response to James Nikkel

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Introduction

I want to express my appreciation to James Nikkel for his friendship and for introducing us to the subject under discussion. James is passionate about his views and beliefs regarding church growth. He also loves the church. He has attempted to do a balancing act between expressing his love for the church and his passion for church growth. What follows is my response to his paper. It is intended to help the discussion of the issues that James has raised.

The leadership model in church growth theory is based on the management model in an enterprize. An enterprize is an undertaking or a project. Lawrence Richards and Clyde Hoeldtke say that a project or undertaking involves an orderly relating of people, facilities, money, and materials to accomplish a task (Richards and Hoeldtke, A Theology of Church Leadership, 148). The ^{leadership} task, according to church growth theory is "the effective implementation of God's commission to 'make disciples of all nations' (Matt. 28:19)" (Nikkel, 1).

As I see it, there are several assumptions behind the theory as articulated in the paper. First, while an appropriate reference is made to the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith (Article VII) and to the primary task of making disciples of all nations, the assumption is that the pastors' role is primarily a

leadership role whose challenge is to demonstrate the growth of the church. The pastoral task, in fact, is much larger. In addition to leading, it includes worship, teaching, caring, admonishing, guiding, restoring, assisting people in and through all of the stages of individual and family life cycles, etc. The recent Vision Statement adopted by our Conference has four components, namely, a vision for renewal and ethical faithfulness, a vision for confessional integrity, a vision for missionary engagement, and a vision for structural coherence. Senior pastors in particular, in Mennonite Brethren churches, cannot be as single-minded in their approach to leadership as the church growth theorists advocate. They must lead the church in the direction of the total vision of the Conference.

Second, there is an assumption that we can move easily from the image of a shepherd to the image of a rancher. This has two problems. One is theological. It creates a hierarchy in which the pastors put most of their time and energy into resourcing and supervising people in middle management roles rather than dealing directly with people in the congregation. The shepherd imagery keeps leaders in personal contact with individuals. The other problem is sociological. For the most part, Mennonite Brethren people live in cities, far removed from ranches. It would be easier to bring theological issues into focus if more familiar images were used to describe the pastoral task. Urban centers know about entrepreneurs or receptionists at shelters for battered wives. The latter image is closer to the biblical image of shepherding than the entrepreneur.

Third, there is an assumption that bigger is better. I find the preoccupation with breaking numerical barriers troublesome. It may be a mute point, but I find the language of Ezekiel more helpful. "...seek the lost, ...bring back the strayed, ... bind up the crippled, ...strengthen the weak, ...watch over the fat and strong, ...lead them in justice" (34:16). This is a more personal approach than the preoccupation with numbers suggests.

Fourth, there is an assumption that large churches are more effective in bringing people to Jesus. Elmer Towns, in a chapter under the title "The Great Commission and Church Planting," makes the observation that the most efficient way of reaching lost people for Jesus is through planting new churches (Wagner, 142-149). James Engle and H. Wilbert Norton say that "it is a demonstrated principle of church growth that Christianity gains in a society only to the extent that the number of existing churches is multiplied. Multiplication of new congregations of believers, then, is the normal and expected output of a healthy body" (Engel, 143, 144).

Fifth, there is an unspoken assumption that the cathedral is the model for the center of life and worship of the church. The paper gives no consideration for leadership in at least one New Testament church type, namely, the house church. I will stand by my statement as cited in the paper, "Quite possibly the small church in which the pastor functions as an enabler among the people is the optimum size for a church when theological considerations are taken into account" (10).

The church growth leadership theory is based on having people at the head who have the power to lead. Without

centralized power, the system cannot work. This is inconsistent with the example of Jesus in John 13, Philipians 2, and 1 Corinthians 8:9. In conversation with his disciples, Jesus made the point that in the kingdom of God, it is inappropriate to aspire to positions of power (Luke 22:24-27).

From a sociological point of view, I find the large church attractive and appealing. Large churches provide more anonymity for seekers. They provide more program options for consumer oriented people. They are more visible. They have a better fit in an upward mobile culture. They offer more cultural events. They can sponsor more activities and show more leadership among other churches. And, they offer more prestige for persons in pastoral offices.

My personal preference is to be in a growing church. The size is secondary. As a Mennonite Brethren Conference, however, we must guard against placing a higher value on growing churches than on churches that don't grow. Many churches in our country are located in declining population areas. People in these communities are entitled to the best pastoral services that we can offer. We must be careful to include them when we make plans and establish growth strategies.

In conclusion, for churches and leaders who have become complacent about their vision for missionary engagement, church growth leadership theory offers a carefully researched method of renewal. While I have identified some of its shortcomings for the Mennonite Brethren Church, I want to recognize it as an important corrective for us when we lose our vision for missionary engagement.

Reference List

- Wagner, C. Peter, ed. Church Growth: State of the Art. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers Inc. 1988.
- Engel, James F. and H. Wilbert Norton. What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest? A communication Strategy for the Church and World Evangelism. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975.
- Richards, Lawrence O. and Clyde Hoeldtke. A Theology of Church Leadership. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are appropriate theological images for pastors that allow them to lead churches in communities with either declining populations or increasing populations?
2. What is it about Mennonite Brethren leadership that prevents churches from growing?
3. How can churches transfer the energy that is spent in preventing them from splitting over leadership issues into enterprises that will result in bringing lost people to Jesus?
4. What is the role of denominational pastoral education in training leaders to provide a holistic approach to leadership?