



RESPONSE  
to  
THE CHURCH GROWTH THEORY AND MENNONITE BRETHREN POLITY  
by  
Marvin Hein

Basic to the conclusions in J. B. Toews' paper, "The Church Growth Theory and Mennonite Brethren Polity," is the contention that Mennonite Brethren believe and should practice a modified Presbyterian form of church government, which includes the idea that the primary church unit is the conference, not the local congregation. It is refreshing to hear Toews state that, contrary to what we've heard so often, we are not congregational in polity.

Whether or not we see the conference as the primary church unit is debatable. Our recent inability to change the conference name reveals that we are not agreed on whether we are "a single covenant community rather than a loosely bound association of local churches." (1990 General Conference Yearbook, p. 108) What is clear is that there is a growing tendency among us to emphasize the local church.

In our move toward local autonomy, we have probably done so not for theological reasons, but because we have breathed so deeply from a culture that virtually deifies free choice and independence. The "me-generation" may well have caused us to think in terms of "me-churches" rather than giving priority to the conference. Assuming we do believe that the conference is the primary church unit (and I share that belief), it becomes obvious that we need an aggressive teaching program instructing us in the biblical basis for the form of governance espoused by Toews.

To persuade our people that the conference is prior to the local church will be difficult. If George Barna's analysis, along with others, of our culture is correct in The Frog in the Kettle, we would certainly be going against-stream in promoting loyalty to a once-removed, larger-sphere church (conference). Toews gives us helpful hints at the biblical rationale and I want to believe him. I need help, however, and certainly many others would need equally compelling

arguments to understand this view. If both the Bible and our rich heritage support the view that the local church is part of an organism that is larger than and prior to the local church (and I am willing to believe they do), then we need instruction both at a pastoral and grassroots level. There is no doubt that our spiritual forbears made the conference the prior church unit. What we might ask is if our forefathers did so because of biblical precedent or if it was a practice resulting from the accretion of church policies in Europe and Russia, not very critically evaluated on biblical bases. Or did they need the "clout" of the larger body?

An illustration of our move toward local autonomy can be seen in what I perceive to be a movement among us with respect to ordination. In the United States (perhaps Canada, too) district conferences have become less involved in ordinations. In study conferences we have heard repeated calls for ordination not to be restricted to pastoral roles, but that we should lay hands on all local church workers. Without arguing the biblicity of that idea, it does give another example of moving with our polity to local churches rather than to the conference.

Frankly, I see little in the Church Growth Movement, with its emphasis on size, success, numbers and strong leadership that holds promise for giving the conference priority. The more powerful and successful the leader becomes, the more powerful the congregation is apt to grow. The more powerful the church becomes, the less need it has for a conference and may, indeed, become a conference unto itself, existing separately from the conference.

More basic to our discussion, perhaps, is the emphasis of the Church Growth Movement on a leadership pattern centered in the pastor rather than in corporate congregational leadership. As Toews has so aptly pointed out, the language of Church Growth adherents with respect to pastors as commanders (even ignoring the military language construed by some as unbecoming to Mennonite Brethren) hardly agrees with our understanding of the servant-leadership style. A leadership model that is blatantly promoted as highly centralized and autocratic, in

my mind, does not blend with leadership styles exemplified in Christ's life or modeled in the Early Church. We may have to ask, however, if it is possible to function as a large super-church without employing the corporate model of governance. Perhaps this consultation should be provided illustrations of churches that are large and growing and still led by servant-style leaders.

What the paper does not ask is whether or not the leaders working under a highly centralized and authoritative polity can, indeed, be shepherds. How does the shepherding image inform us on our practice today when we turn to management styles of leadership? The shepherd image hardly allows for leaders being "bosses" and manhandling the sheep.

Brother Toews cites several illustrations to point out that the Church Growth Movement, with its stress on centralized leadership, builds quantitatively but lacks quality. While he suggests that the jury is still out on the overall impact of the Church Growth Movement, it would seem possible to cite illustrations of other churches led by low-profile pastors who fail as well in qualitative churchmanship. Is it really true that smaller, less evangelism-oriented churches with less autocratic leadership necessarily produce more "quality" persons? I can think of a few Mennonite Brethren congregations who, void of much evangelism, have, by their congregational failures, shown us that quality does not necessarily come from leadership that is shared or from congregations that remain small.

And how do you determine "qualitative" growth? The more recently publicized pastoral scandals have indeed usually involved "super-pastors." I suggest, however, that many other pastors in smaller churches, not enamored with Church Growth theories, have fallen to the same sins. Perhaps the key to most such moral failures is that leaders, in small and large churches, using or ignoring Church Growth principles, did fall more easily because they took advantage of power as leaders. So perhaps there is a word of warning in the emphasis on strong, autocratic leadership that is prone to think that it is not accountable to others.

If J. B. Toews' illustrations of serious repercussions in churches preoccupied with growth are valid, we would have to ask: is a successful emphasis on outreach incompatible with longterm qualitative growth? Can highly centralized leadership also be servant-leadership? Can church growth centered in the pastor build strong, stable and enduring churches? Can churches majoring in numerical growth also maintain a corporate leadership style?

It is clear that we want both strong and shared leadership. Both are biblical. Both, when drawn to extremes, are dangerous. Strong leadership easily becomes corrupt. Shared leadership with strong congregational involvement easily succumbs to so much processing that little is accomplished. A danger of the Church Growth stress on a highly centralized polity is that heavy-handed leadership tends to reproduce itself. In some instances well-meaning elders, mentored by strong pastors, become autocratic and remain oblivious to how the congregation perceives their abuse of power. Moreover, heavy-handed leadership more often majors on kingdom-building (their own!) than it does in building community. If the covenant community idea remains one of our cherished principles, then we do well to examine any system or polity that de-emphasizes congregational participation and highlights the power of leadership.

In a good word George Barna suggests we may have to redefine "success." He combines quality and quantity in his redefinition. Typically, he says, we define success by counting----counting attendance, counting members, counting dollars. He suggests we emphasize quality in order to come to quantity:

"Perhaps the 90's will enable us to examine quality, rather than quantity, as a better indicator of success and church growth. If the experience of many of today's growing churches is any indication, the best means to gaining quantity is through quality: Americans are irresistibly drawn to those organizations that ooze quality. Given our shifting values, and the peaking interest in excellence and high standards, churches which evoke a sense of quality will be more attractive than those that simply continue to perform their usual routine, oblivious to standards." (The Frog in the Kettle. p. 150)

## QUESTIONS

1. Assuming that applying Church Growth principles would result in large congregations numbering one or two thousand or more, is it possible to govern such churches without employing the corporate model of church polity? How would you process congregationally matters that could more easily and more efficiently be resolved by a smaller group or even simply the pastoral staff? Do we know of examples of "super-churches" where the congregation (at the grass-roots level) genuinely feels they have a voice in governance?
2. Given the proneness for power to corrupt, what are some cautions or suggestions we might give to pastoral staffs, elder boards, etc. to prevent the excesses sometimes associated with strong leadership?
3. With respect to quality versus quantity, if we examine the prime "Exhibit A" churches successfully using Church Growth principles, are they congregations with minimal or maximal membership requirements? Are large, growing churches easy to join, or are they basically conservative congregations with high moral expectations?
4. What are some elements within the Church Growth Movement that would enable a congregation to recruit large numbers of people and still maintain a standard or lifestyle consistent with what Jesus taught (loving your enemies, feeding and clothing the poor, fidelity in marriage, working for justice, etc.)?
5. Did Jesus ever intend the church to be a large, multiplying organism? Or did He anticipate a smaller, more dynamic, close-knit church where the principles He espoused could be carried out more faithfully (examples: commitment, covenant, discipline, etc.)?
6. Can we reconcile the "success" emphasis in the Church Growth Movement with the life of Jesus who seems to have majored in "smallness" rather than in "largeness?" Moreover, would Jesus, who certainly was not nearly always "successful," accept the bent for numbers and success?
7. Do you think that following Church Growth Movement methodology will cause us to increase the movement away from a modified Presbyterian polity toward a strictly locally autonomous church polity?