

How Did We Get *Here*?

*Examining 70 Years of the
Church Growth Movement*



Todd Wilson

FOREWORD | ROBERT LEWIS

EPILOGUE | J.D. GREAR

How Did We Get Here? Looking Back to Look Forward

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Dedication

*This book is dedicated to the thousands of leaders who faithfully
and sacrificially serve in the local church—yet are asking,
“How did we get here?”*



Special Thanks

To my wife and best friend, Anna—thank you. Your love, patience, and unwavering support have carried me through the long hours, late nights, and quiet moments spent writing this book. You’ve believed in me when the words were slow, and the vision was unclear. Thank you for giving me the space to wrestle with ideas, for listening when I needed to process, and for reminding me of what matters most. This book would not exist without your quiet strength beside me every step of the way.

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To J.D. Greear, my friend and pastor, an evangelistic teacher who passionately contends for the faith, the future, and the next generation, and who represents the Gen X gatekeepers who will equip our future movement-makers. Thank you for doing the Epilogue amid your crazy schedule.

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Brian Mosley, CEO of Right Now Media, for suggesting the title and noting that the book's timing and content answer a critical question that a growing number of church leaders are asking. Right Now Media also designed the book cover.

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Bob Buford, for his relentless pursuit of pouring gas on the movement, and always modeling a posture of "How can I help?"



Foreword

By Robert Lewis

This book is the up-close story of the evangelical Church Growth Movement. And if you love Jesus and His church, and wear an evangelical jersey, this story will include you because it's still ongoing. This story began as a fresh wind of God's Spirit that swept into a generation of restless, spiritually searching young people in the chaotic 1960s. At the time, many were frustrated by what they perceived as a static, non-questioning, overly compliant culture that resisted change. Others were also disillusioned with traditional religion, which seemed stuck in forms and routines that no longer connected with the heart. What erupted at that point suddenly launched one of the great spiritual transformations in American history.

Two cover stories in *Time* magazine featured just how stunning this spiritual turnaround was. In 1966, *Time* magazine posted a stark black-and-white cover page with a simple question in bold red letters: "Is God Dead?" With riots and protests over the Vietnam War raging, drugs and free love flowing, godless communism growing ever stronger, and everything sacred being challenged, this question captured the nation's mood.

But underneath this dark moment, God was already at work.

Soon, new Spirit-filled leaders with fresh ideas and innovations rose to make the simple call to surrender your life to Jesus and to make reaching the world a priority once again. By 1971, attention-grabbing spiritual outbreaks were occurring everywhere. So much so that *Time* answered the "Is God Dead?" question it had asked five years earlier with another cover story. This one

announced the undeniable spiritual changes being seen and felt everywhere. The cover line read, “The Jesus Revolution.”

From this unconventional, grassroots breakout, new churches were planted to accommodate and serve this growing spiritual surge. In many cases, these new churches and their leaders were start-up, independent churches not connected to any denomination. However, over time, a large number of both independent and denominational churches informally unified around common themes: a call to personal evangelism, a call to disciple and serve others, contemporary music, highly relevant and practical biblical preaching and teaching, and innovative expressions that connected with the modern world. As they did, this fledgling evangelical Church Growth Movement took root and then exploded. For over 50 years, this movement has enjoyed a mostly upward trajectory of influence and impact.

Today, however, things are changing. There is a growing feeling that the Church Growth Movement, often characterized as “bigger and better,” has crested and is slowly splintering. It certainly is no longer as unified in its beliefs and practices as it once was.

So now is a good time for those of us who love Jesus and serve His Church to ask some important, reflective questions: *“How did we get here?”* *“What helpful perspectives does looking back on this evangelical church growth era give us?”* *“What ‘musts’ do we need to hold on to . . . or perhaps, more importantly, go back to?”* *“What mistakes were made and why?”* And of course, *“What’s next?”*

Few people I know are more qualified to help us address these important questions than my good friend Todd Wilson. I first met Todd in the late 1990s while serving on the board of Leadership Network, an organization started by business executive Bob Buford. Bob’s mission was to help connect young church leaders and spur innovation and the adoption of best practices within their growing congregations. Todd came to Leadership Network to serve as Bob’s personal strategic advisor. It soon became clear why. He is an extraordinary thinker, planner, entrepreneur, futurist, activator, and researcher. Todd wears all these hats and more extremely well. He has also witnessed much of the church growth era you will read about in this book, both as an eyewitness and as a

participant. He's *lived* this movement! As have I. We have both led churches, planted churches, and served on many church-supporting organizations. We personally know and have served alongside many of the movement's key leaders. It's been an amazing spiritual journey for both of us.

But here in the pages that follow, Todd offers us much more than his personal experience. What follows is a rigorously researched, comprehensive, well-organized, and synthesized analysis of the history of evangelical church growth. Best of all, it's laid out in a way that is both insightful and practical for anyone who loves the local church and wants to see it continue to flourish. What a gift this book is!

So why read *How Did We Get Here?* Let me offer two reasons.

First, understanding how the evangelical Church Growth Movement began and unfolded will give you a fuller, richer perspective on the church. And in some cases, it will provide wise counsel for navigating the moment you are in right now. I've found it's always a mistake to ignore the past, whether it's in your personal life, family life, spiritual beliefs, or church life. The past is a powerful asset for giving helpful clarity and context on why things are the way they are.

As you read through the chapters that lie ahead, you'll find yourself stopping and saying to yourself, "*So that's why!*" These moments of greater understanding, fresh insight, or new awareness are rewards this book seeks to provide. They can be insightful, evoke regret, stir repentance, or offer a fresh commitment to action. Regardless, by providing this broader perspective—drawn from retelling the story of the Church Growth Movement—we can better assess and address our present concern: "*Are we, as a Church, where we need to be?*"

Second, Todd's book provides a spiritual warning we all need to heed. These pages document the ever-present changes that swirl around a fresh and expanding movement of God. You will see (and, at times, experience) the evangelical growth movement be propelled from one new season into the next by innovations, new styles, new leaders, new strategies, and even new beliefs. Change, of course, is inevitable. It's part of life. It's part of church life.

Your journey through the Church Growth Movement will show that loud and clear. But amid new ideas and change (as good as these times have been), we, as God's Church and its leaders, must never stop asking: *"What shouldn't change?"* *What makes up the 'sacred center' from which all authentic spiritual life flows?*

I'm sure Paul had those questions in mind when he warned a self-confident, culturally compromised Corinthian church with these words, "But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3). So throughout this book, keep asking yourself, *"What things should never change?"* If you do, you will see the answers pop up again and again. This is eternal wisdom for any church or church leader to courageously heed, regardless of the current times and changes. Some things should never change. Pure and simple. Todd's right. We must look back to look forward.

So let me confidently recommend Todd's book on the evangelical Church Growth Movement to you. There is much to learn from *How Did We Get Here?* And its insights will make a difference, not only in you but in your church.

Robert Lewis
Pastor and Author



Introduction

This book is not what I initially set out to write. The original book, *Multipliers Dilemma: Understanding the Consumer-Driven Church Operating System*¹, is now the sequel to this one.

My initial burden stemmed from the U.S. church's captivity to a flawed operating system incapable of producing multiplication movements. I set out to name, dissect, and understand the factors that produced the Consumer-Driven Operating System that now powers most of the prevailing models in the 320,000 U.S. churches.

How Did We Get Here? Looking Back to Look Forward emerged from what was intended to be a single chapter in *Multipliers Dilemma*. I naively set out to write that single chapter in a few weeks, revealing just how little I knew and understood about the Church Growth Movement. One chapter became two, then three, and eventually twenty-nine chapters, highlighting the significant scope and history of this movement.

History provides important context for the future. To thoughtfully overcome the captivating power of the Consumer-Driven Operating System, we must first understand the historical context that produced it. The laboratory for this historical discovery is the 70-year history of the modern Church Growth Movement.

I love the local church and want to see it thrive, resulting in disciple-making movements and gospel saturation. I've given my life to that end. After writing the first half of *Multipliers Dilemma*, I couldn't get one question off my mind: "How could so many well-intentioned, strong Christian leaders whom I've personally known and respected produce the flawed Consumer-Driven Operating System that is

so deeply embedded in Western church culture?” Then I realized I was a product of the original Church Growth Movement and even an accomplice in its creation.

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, “History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon.” While my work in this book is not intended to be authoritative or exhaustive, it is intentionally personal, providing a narrative on the evolution of the Church Growth Movement. My perspectives emerge from: extensive book and article reviews; interviews with many of the first-generation founding leaders of the Church Growth Movement^{2,3,4}; serving as Kingdom-driven business entrepreneur Bob Buford’s strategic advisor for nearly 15 years; creating a comprehensive timeline and bibliography of the Church Growth Movement⁵; and reflections on my personal faith story.

As the co-founder and founding CEO of Exponential, one of the largest and most influential future-focused ministries in the United States, I also had a front-row seat to how thousands of churches are implementing the Consumer-Driven Operating System and how this system has become a legacy impact of the Church Growth Movement. The operating system is so deeply embedded in our models and how we do church that it will take intentionality to change. Years later, we now apply this strident pragmatism not to evangelistic efforts with lost people, but to programmatic efforts to see more people attend and join our churches. Further, as we will see later, the financial engine that fuels the church consulting industry remains biased toward fortifying the prevailing operating system from change.

My spiritual roots, salvation story, and vocational calling essentially played out during the heyday of the Church Growth Movement. In contrast, my national ministry leadership and vocational service occurred mainly in the chaotic, transitional years immediately after that era. As a strategic futurist, I am left with a “beauty and ashes” dichotomy. My salvation story, and that of so many family members, finds its context in the shadow of evangelistically driven leaders such as former Willow Creek leader Bill Hybels and Saddleback Church founder Rick Warren. Conversely, my passion for seeing disciple-making and church-planting movements produce gospel saturation leaves me burdened by the limitations of our prevailing Consumer-Driven Operating System in the United States.

If you want to know where God is leading the local church in this next season, let's start by understanding the historical context that has brought us to where we are today. That journey must take us through the Church Growth Movement and its successor waves.

This book explains how the birth, growth, and eventual co-opting of the Church Growth Movement, coupled with the broader Consumerism Movement, set the stage for our prevailing Consumer-Driven Operating System. Understanding the history of these interconnected movements provides the necessary context to look beyond the Church Growth Movement and feel the urgency of releasing the next generation to move beyond our flawed operating system.

Four themes weave through this narrative:

First, the historical account itself. The modern Church Growth Movement can be traced through discernible eras—from McGavran's missionary insights to the Seeker-Sensitive Movement, the Purpose-Driven Era, the megachurch explosion, and the outwardly focused initiatives. Each era builds on the previous, creating a connected story of how American Christianity evolved over seven decades.

Second, the co-opting thesis. McGavran's original principles were evangelistically driven, biblically grounded, and missionary-focused. The gradual co-opting of these principles—though unintentional and well-meaning—slowly produced a Consumer-Driven Operating System that prioritizes attendance over discipleship, programs over relationships, addition over multiplication, and institutional success over Kingdom reproduction. Understanding how this happened is essential for moving forward wisely.

Third, the “Flywheel of Constraint.” Throughout the book, I identify twelve interconnected dilemmas that function as a system, like a flywheel perpetually spinning with each dilemma feeding the next. These dilemmas emerged over time and built on one another, resulting in a deeply entrenched operating system optimized to grow large churches. The twelve dilemmas serve as a framework that helps explain how McGavran's original ideals were unintentionally co-opted over 30+ years, giving us the consumer-driven church operating system we have today. The framework also helps explain why breaking free of our captivity to a

flawed system is so difficult. Ultimately, the collective impact of these dilemmas contributed significantly to the fracturing of evangelicalism.

Finally, hope through disruption. The compound fracturing of evangelicalism during what I call the “Disruption Era” of 2015–2025 was devastating but necessary. Like a forest after wildfire, the clearing away of what couldn’t withstand the flames created the very conditions necessary for authentic renewal. The next movement is already emerging—decentralized, relational, multiplication-focused, and returning to ancient–future patterns that prioritize making disciples who make disciples.

This book is not intended to be an exhaustive academic or scientific account of the past seventy years. For perspective, hundreds of books, papers, and dissertations have been written on the subject. Instead, it provides a higher-level overview of the Church Growth Movement’s evolution and phases. This book aims to answer the question thousands of leaders are now asking: *“How did we get here?”*

You’ll hear directly from the leaders who have shaped the movement. I worked hard not to take sides with either the movement’s proponents or its critics. I’m assuming the truth of the movement’s historical context and impact falls somewhere between the extremes of the arguments. I’m most interested in the contextual co-opting that has occurred over the past 70 years, which has produced what we have today.

Join me for a flyover of the Church Growth Movement’s 70-plus years, from Donald McGavran, widely identified as its founder, to the Seeker-Sensitive Era, the Purpose-Driven Era, the Megachurch Era, the Outwardly Focused Era, and landing on what I believe is our current Disruption Era. We’ll then look forward, not to predict the future, but to consider a wise posture for faithfully stepping into the next movement.

The journey highlights the pivotal roles of leaders and ministries like Donald McGavran, Win Arn, Peter Wagner, Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, Bob Buford, Peter Drucker, the Institute for American Church Growth, the Fuller School of World Mission and its Evangelistic Association, and Leadership Network. Along

the way, I explain how McGavran's original principles and passions have been co-opted to produce our prevailing Consumer-Driven Operating System in the church. While the book covers most key leaders and transitions in the Church Growth Movement, I acknowledge that some significant contributors may have been inadvertently omitted.

Finally, an online "community" version of this document, functioning as an evolving Wiki site, is available for user contribution. In this way, the historical narrative can expand far beyond what I could include in this book, becoming more exhaustive, integrated, and factually accurate. To this end, please visit church-growth.org to suggest additions, clarifications, or corrections to the narrative found in this book. I will give you full credit and acknowledgment for your modifications and additions.

Todd Wilson
Multipliers



SECTION 1

Birthing a Movement

Every significant movement begins with a moment of clarity—a breakthrough insight that challenges conventional thinking and opens new possibilities. For what would become the modern Church Growth Movement, that moment came in the remote villages of India during the 1930s when a young missionary named Donald McGavran encountered a troubling question that would consume the next two decades of his life: Why do some churches grow rapidly while others, just miles away, remain stagnant for years?

This question, born from McGavran’s front-row seat to the successes and failures of missionary work, would eventually revolutionize how American churches understood evangelism, growth, and mission. But the story of how a missiologist’s insights from rural India would reshape the landscape of American Christianity is far more complex and consequential than McGavran himself ever imagined.

Section 1 chronicles the birthing of this movement during the pivotal twenty-year span from 1955 to 1975. These were the foundational years when McGavran’s church growth principles first took root, when the cultural soil of America was being prepared for a new kind of evangelistic vision, and when multiple streams of spiritual renewal began to converge, amplify, and eventually transform McGavran’s original insights.

The Seeds of Revolution

The movement's birth certificate can be dated to 1955 with the publication of McGavran's *Bridges of God*, a book that shifted the fundamental question from "How does an individual become Christian?" to "How does a people become Christian?" This simple reframe contained within it the seeds of revolution. McGavran had spent seventeen years in India, not just as a missionary, but as a researcher, studying why some village churches experienced explosive people movements while others remained isolated and ineffective.

His conclusions challenged the prevailing missionary methods of his day. Rather than focusing on individual conversions that required people to cross significant cultural barriers, McGavran argued for reaching homogeneous units—people groups who could come to Christ within their existing social networks and cultural contexts. He advocated for measuring results, studying demographics, and prioritizing evangelistic effectiveness over the perfecting work that had dominated missionary thinking.

These principles, radical in their original context, would prove even more revolutionary when applied to the American church landscape of the 1960s and 1970s.

Convergent Streams

The birthing of the Church Growth Movement coincided with a remarkable convergence of spiritual and cultural forces in American Christianity. Three distinct streams emerged during this era, providing the energy and context for McGavran's principles to take root and flourish.

The first was the Charismatic Renewal, which brought fresh spiritual vitality and an expectation of supernatural growth to established denominations. The second was the Jesus People Movement, which demonstrated that creative, culturally relevant approaches could reach populations that traditional churches had been unable to touch. The third was the emergence of strategy-driven innovation, as leaders such as Bill Hybels and Rick Warren pioneered new models that would later become the Seeker-Sensitive and Purpose-Driven Movements.

Each of these streams contained elements that resonated with McGavran's core insights on removing barriers, understanding target populations, and measuring evangelistic effectiveness. Yet each also contributed dynamics that would eventually shape—and in some ways co-opt—McGavran's original vision.

The Context of Cultural Upheaval

This birthing occurred during one of the most turbulent periods in American history. The cultural revolution of the 1960s, the questioning of traditional authority, the rise of consumer culture, and the increasing sophistication of marketing and communication created a context in which McGavran's principles would be received and applied in ways he had never anticipated.

The four chapters in this section explore how these foundational elements came together: the historical context that made the movement necessary, the consumer culture that would ultimately shape its expression, McGavran's specific insights and their original missional intent, and the fresh evangelistic winds that provided the energy for widespread adoption.

What emerges is the picture of a movement being born with extraordinary potential and principles that could truly transform the evangelistic effectiveness of American churches. Yet this birth story also contains the seeds of the tensions and challenges that would emerge in later decades, as McGavran's missional insights encountered the realities of American church culture and the dynamics of rapid institutional growth.

The story of how Donald McGavran's breakthrough insights from rural India would eventually reshape American Christianity begins here, in this remarkable season of birthing and convergence.



CHAPTER 1

History Matters

“History is a guide to navigation in perilous times. History is who we are and why we are the way we are.”

- David McCullough, Historian and Author

In recent years, I've become more interested in history. It started with books on America's founding fathers and progressed to my family history. Armed with an Ancestry.com account and other online tools, I managed to trace my family roots back to the 1200s in Scotland.

I enjoyed the investigative process as long as the clues led to discoveries. Just as my interest waned in pursuing dead-end clues, a single discovery renewed my enthusiasm for the hunt. My discoveries within my family line included Vikings, kings, castles, noblemen, and villagers living near St. Andrews when golf was invented in the 1400s; settlers who immigrated to the New World in the 1650s; and pioneers who survived the Oregon Trail.

We each have a unique, collective family narrative going back generations. Each of us plays a small yet critical role in the narrative God has and is writing in our world. While my specific contribution feels less significant than others in my family, I'm profoundly aware of my critical role in bridging my family's history to our future. Without us and the context of our contributions, the future will inevitably play out differently.

As Christians, we are also part of a local and global family through the Church. Just as our biological families have an epic historical timeline, the Church carries

the history of the greatest living story ever told. This history is shaped by its past context and its future God-inspired destiny. The macro story of redemption through the “big C” Church weaves a beautiful mosaic of the micro contributions of millions of disciple-making believers, like you and me, mobilized by the local church body.

While each local church and each of us plays a unique contextual role in God’s plan of redemption, we also play the vital role of bridging the past to the future. Each of us has a unique spiritual family lineage, weaving its way back 2,000 years to Jesus’ handpicked disciples. Picture a giant spiritual ancestry wall chart showing the names of people from generation after generation, from Jesus to you. The gospel message of your salvation is active and alive, passed through living, breathing disciples who bridge the past to the future. If the research were possible, you could identify the names of hundreds of believers, starting with Jesus, in your spiritual lineage. Your name is now included as a bridge to future generations who will trace their roots to knowing Jesus.

The Essential Factor in Our Spiritual Lineage

My calling, burden, and motive for writing this book are directly linked to the simple truths in this spiritual ancestry line. Not one local church that existed 2,000 years ago still stands today. Yet local reproducing disciples and churches provide the necessary continuity for this spiritual lineage to continue. It is the Master’s plan for reaching the world—disciples who make disciples, who plant churches, who plant churches. This *movemental* cycle is always at work and should spin with ever-increasing impact. Globally, it does. Sadly, in America, it does not. We have a problem.

I’ve given my vocational life to championing healthy, reproducing churches. With less than 7% of U.S. churches reproducing, I’m passionate about seeing that number increase to a tipping point of 16% (sociologists predict 16% would be a normative measure of success). But I’m now burdened by the belief that this cannot happen with our current program-driven church operating system.

Reproduction is an essential factor in our spiritual lineage. Yet programs *never* reproduce. Disciples do. We need a new operating system with a different growth engine than the one that thousands of churches embraced in the Church Growth Movement. That's a revolutionary shift. It's hard work. It requires understanding why and how well-intentioned leaders, motivated by a desire to reach lost people, embraced (and continue to embrace) the wrong endgame and growth engine.

My Christian faith story has been and continues to be primarily shaped by the modern Church Growth Movement. If you live in the U.S., yours certainly is, too. Because of this movement, millions, possibly billions, of people will experience a heavenly eternity. We can celebrate its impact while simultaneously calling for a fresh wineskin. And we must.

Experts generally agree that the movement's roots date back to the mid-1950s with Donald McGavran and that it was nearing the end of its fantastic run as early as 2005. The church's performance during this fifty-year run is strikingly like the stock markets': up and to the right. We've relied on the posture, "If you build it, they will come."

Unfortunately, this is no longer true. Even growing ministries are spending more effort to reach fewer people and are generally not pleased with the quality of the disciples they produce. While some churches continue to see increasing attendance, this is largely transfer growth (Christians transferring from one church to another). In our current cultural context, the methods developed over fifty-plus years of the Church Growth Movement have generally lost their momentum. I'm not suggesting our consumer-driven, programmatic growth engines are not still producing the mirage of growth. Rather, I'm saying this programmatic approach is dying before our eyes.

An Old Wineskin

Critical to understanding this seemingly prosperous era is the co-opting of McGavran's original principles to produce the Seeker-Sensitive Movement, the Purpose-Driven Movement, and the Megachurch Movement. Numerous well-

known leaders, such as Dr. Gary McIntosh and Dr. Ed Stetzer, have highlighted this co-opting, noting that the Church Growth Movement has evolved over its fifty-plus-year span. Until researching this book, I mistakenly viewed the combined Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch Movements as the Church Growth Movement. So I realize the average church leader today does not understand this evolutionary historical context or how the co-opting of McGavran's original ideals has produced our current consumer-driven church operating system (if you do, I should have talked to you for this book).

Regardless of the co-opting, our current OS is now an old wineskin incapable of handling the new wine needed to see gospel saturation in our time. Like every outstanding stock that eventually falters, the proven methods and models of the past seventy years have a limited shelf life. While the span of the Church Growth Movement had its roots in revolutionary change in the 1950s, most of its subsequent life was evolutionary, enabling the co-opting. A growing number of leaders are awakening to the need for a more dramatic revolutionary change, like the one that kicked off the Church Growth Movement. Granted, this change will painfully disrupt our current prevailing operating system and be met with resistance. Nonetheless, it is greatly needed.

The leaders I've spoken with continue to say that this discontent is giving way to uncertainty in the church. Record numbers of full-time pastors are struggling, growing numbers of believers are deconstructing their faith and fleeing organized religion, and overall church attendance is declining. I believe the label for this confusing current season, from 2015 to 2025, is the "Disruption Era," which poetically includes the years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Historians will one day look back on this period as a transition from the seemingly prosperous era of the Church Growth Movement to whatever is coming next. I want to believe we're transitioning and not stuck in a long-term state of chaos. I sense God is using this current season to refine our thinking and paradigms. Like wild horses that need breaking, God may be leading us to rediscover His original operating system for the church, rooted in relational disciple-making rather than programmatic, institutional growth. Could we be on the cusp of change and the release from the inherited, deeply embedded operating system that shapes our perceptions of self-worth and church success?

The Next Era

With anxious optimism, many of us (including me) are waiting for the answer to “What’s next?” What label will be placed on the next era of the church in the U.S.? Is it the era of micro-churches led by co-vocational pastors? Or possibly the era of metaverse groups connecting believers through virtual reality? How about missional communities of everyday missionaries seeing the places they work, live, and play as their personal mission fields? Or a faith- and work-driven movement that carries new expressions of the local church into the numerous domains of society?

I don’t claim to be prophetic, but I do know we can look back at history to glean clues about what’s coming. History is our friend. Answering the question, “How did we get here?” can prepare us for what’s next and better position us to cooperate with God where He leads. During this transitional period, we see a church progression from mega to multi to missional to micro and meta. The common thread? Decentralization with increasing reliance on relational disciple-making and the mobilization of the priesthood of all believers for sustainability.

Suppose we plot to slowly, quietly, and methodically overthrow the current Consumer-Driven Operating System, including its institutionally and programmatically driven growth engine. In that case, we’d pray for God to do what we see amidst our current chaos and uncertainty. Change is inevitable, and Christ’s Church wins. Clarity is coming. The question is, “*Are we ready for what’s next?*”

The Church Growth Movement’s fifty-plus years are not a random anomaly. It’s part of a larger narrative we can learn from. Its founders and key influencers were well-intentioned and sought to be used by God. And God used them powerfully. What can we learn from them, and how did God work in and through the movement’s evolution? Understanding this history will help prepare us for the future.

To look forward, we must first look back.

Reflection Questions

Spiritual Lineage & Disciple-Making Reality

Think about the 2-3 people who most shaped your journey with Christ—how did they invest in you through formal programs, organic relationships, or both? Now flip it: How are you currently investing in others, and does your method match how you were discipled, or have you defaulted to programmatic approaches?

Your Church's Actual Operating System

Look at your church's calendar, budget, and staff time over the last month—what percentage goes toward programs and events versus equipping people for relational disciple-making? If someone studied your church like an anthropologist, would they conclude you're built to make disciples or to attract consumers?



CHAPTER 2

Consumer Movement

Our Historical Context

“We must shift America from a needs to a desires culture, people must be trained to desire, to want new things even before the old have been entirely consumed. We must shape a new mentality in America. Man’s desires must overshadow his needs.”¹

~Paul Mazur of Lehman Brothers,
Harvard Business Review, 1927

I don’t remember the first time I heard someone say they were “shopping for a church.” But I remember when I realized what it meant. We’d taken a phrase straight from the consumer marketplace, comparing features, evaluating experiences, choosing the best option for our family, and applied it to the body of Christ without a second thought. It felt completely natural. Of course, you’d shop for a church. You shopped for everything else.

That instinct didn’t come from nowhere. It was shaped by decades of cultural formation that most of us never noticed because we were swimming in it. Before the Church Growth Movement ever gained momentum, an entire generation of Americans had already been trained in a new way of thinking, one that would eventually reshape not just how we buy, but how we do church.

Fertile Soil for Consumerism

Before World War II, most American households relied on newspapers and radio for national news and entertainment. Then consumers purchased 7,000 televisions in 1946, 172,000 in 1948, and over 5 million in 1950. From 1950 to 1960, the percentage of American homes with TVs increased from just under 20% to nearly 90%.²

TV ownership went from rare to normative among the population. This rapid growth in TV purchases in American households unarguably represents a movement's numerical characteristics. We might call this the "TV Movement." However, several similar consumer-focused movements emerged during the same period, suggesting a broader underlying movement.

By the 1970s, our nation was in what sociologists call the modern "Consumer Movement." Consumerism was not new, but the booming post-war economy, the birth of the modern era of mass marketing, the rapid growth and availability of discretionary products and services, and the ready access to on-demand debt via credit cards created the perfect ingredients for birthing this modern movement.

This Consumer Movement quickly came to be characterized by ever-expanding consumption. From 1900 to the present, we see a marked increase in consumer spending beginning in the early 1970s. Our nation's crippling debt soon followed. The trend has never slowed down since.^{3,4} From 1960 to 1990, the percentage of dual-income families more than doubled from 25% to 60%, reflecting both a change in family values and a catalyst for fueling increased consumer spending.⁵

Sociologist Alana Anton writes, "In the 1970s, the values of America had completely changed from 20 years prior. American consumerism was the dominant value system around which all other institutions began to orbit. Religion was no different."⁶ The Jesus People Movement, the Church Growth Movement, the Seeker-Sensitive Movement, and the Megachurch Movement emerged with distinct but interrelated characteristics during this period.

Anton makes a specific connection from American consumerism to religion: “It is no surprise that the successful Baby Boomers coming out of the ’60s with new families, better jobs, higher wages, and more pulls on their leisure time would gravitate toward the savvy marketing of the charismatic men who led the first megachurches. The megachurch applied these [consumer] principles to religion, creating a whole new post-modern form of evangelical Christianity that turned spirituality into a consumable product.”⁷

Words and language serve as a bridge from the past to the future. I’ve been careful in selecting “Consumer-Driven” to describe the prevailing operating system of the church today. While Alton’s conclusions seem unfairly broad and absolute, consumerism is evident in the evolution of church methods since Donald McGavran laid the foundation for the modern Church Growth Movement.

Donald McGavran, widely known as the father of the modern Church Growth Movement, was not motivated by seeing a “movement” of megachurches in the U.S.. Instead, he saw himself as a practitioner, researcher, and teacher burdened by the poor stewardship of mission resources. He was motivated by the fruit of international missionaries becoming more effective, of evangelistic, disciple-making churches growing, and of new churches being birthed.

Let’s pause to define the word “movement,” since it means different things to different people in different contexts. In the most basic form, movement is the act of changing position. Paradoxically, movement is a condition (i.e., a noun) that describes the state of something “moving” or changing position (i.e., a verb).

Understanding the Characteristics of Movements

A Consumer Movement describes the condition of consumers actively consuming or spending—a shift from debt-free living to debt-filled living, or from net *producers* to net *consumers*. This shift took place over many decades, with millions of people participating in ways that perpetuated consumerism.

This shift is not merely anecdotal; the data confirms it. Consumer spending has surged from 57.7% of GDP in 1952 to 69% today, while the personal savings

rate has collapsed from roughly 11% to 4.6%—leaving families with minimal financial cushion.^{8,9} Credit card debt alone now totals \$1.23 trillion, trapping households in a cycle where living has become synonymous with owing.¹⁰

It would take a new movement, characterized by debt-free living, to overcome consumerism. This is the context the future of today's church finds itself in—a culture driven by consumerism.

A movement is a group of people who share values, ideas, and causes, working toward common goals and outcomes. Like a flywheel spinning faster and faster with each turn, or a snowball growing bigger and bigger as it rolls down the hill, movements gain momentum and size as more people embrace the mission and become active champions of the cause. The most effective activist causes in history leveraged their impact through movements. In most cases, the movement is not the goal but the outcome of a growing number of like-minded people unified around a common cause.

Gary McIntosh, one of the premiere current experts on the Church Growth Movement, defines a movement as “a self-perpetuating company of people who are united by a common cause and committed to having a significant impact on their social environment.”¹¹ Thom Rainer, also a leading voice on the Church Growth Movement, defines a movement as “a leader or leaders who have a clear commitment to a distinct and defining cause with a significant number of followers.”¹² Integrating their definitions and adding one additional characteristic, the elements of a movement include the pursuit of a cause, producing a significant impact. The followers of the cause are the primary means by which a movement perpetuates and expands.

What do historical movements look like? Consider Christianity or the original 2,000-year-old “Jesus Movement.” It has a leader named Jesus, a cause rooted in redemption and salvation, billions of followers, an eternal impact, and generational perpetuation and expansion. The Christian narrative embeds all the elements of a movement.

Like McGavran, most leaders don't see themselves as “movement leaders” when they first become activists for a cause. Eventually, they earn that title, possibly

after years of hard work, when the fruit of a movement becomes evident. Using Rainer's definition, McGavran was initially the leader of an initiative to propagate "church growth thinking." The cause was the urgency of evangelism and of reaching people far from God more effectively. Eventually, many leaders and churches embraced and became part of what is now referred to as the modern Church Growth Movement. As thousands of church leaders adopted the teachings, planted churches using them, and taught other leaders to do the same, the movement spread.

The "Church Growth Movement" refers to the expansion and impact resulting from the propagation and widespread embrace of what some historians call "Church Growth Thought" and "Church Growth Science." In this context, "Church Growth Thought" refers to McGavran's original insights and principles derived from research and the front lines of missions in India. This body of content and learning is what initially drove McGavran. He initially wanted it deployed through missionaries returning to their international mission fields. Church growth pioneer Dr. Charles Chaney wrote that McGavran's working philosophy of church growth was "all that is involved in bringing men and women to Christ who do not have a personal relationship with Him into fellowship with Him and responsible church membership."¹³

When the Co-opting Began

"Church Growth Science" generally consists of the practices and strategies for implementing "Church Growth Thought." This is primarily where the "co-opting" (or, as some would say, "hijacking") and critiques of McGavran's work occurred. The "science" continues to advance practices, strategies, and models. However, these advances only make sense within a definition of success. When the definition of success evolves, so do the practices, strategies, and models.

Peter Wagner, known as the elder statesman of the Church Growth Movement after McGavran, reflects on the definition of church growth and the interdependence of Church Growth Thought and Church Growth Science. He explained it as, "the science that investigates the nature, function, and health of

Christian churches as they relate specifically to the effective implementation of God's Commission to 'make disciples of all the nations' (Matt. 28: 19).

Church growth is simultaneously a theological conviction and an applied science, striving to combine the eternal principles of God's Word with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences, employing as its initial frame of reference the foundational work done by Donald McGavran and his colleagues."¹⁴

Elmer Towns, one of the oldest living statesmen of the modern Church Growth Movement (age 91 at the time of this writing), told me that the movement has matured to the point that it's no longer pursued as a science or field of study as it was in the early days. He astutely observed that the application of the principles evolved from the early days of Donald McGavran to produce the Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch Movements.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the specific practices that fueled the Seeker-Sensitive and Purpose-Driven approaches became so widely embraced and firmly entrenched that the continual contextualization of McGavran's original principles became diluted and even lost. These once-successful practices essentially became the prevailing Consumer-Driven Operating System we use today.

While the Church Growth Movement is distinct, it found its American context within the broader societal Consumer Movement. Through the lens of the consumer, what value does the church offer, and how does the church deliver that value? As we will see later, churches embraced strategies to answer these important consumer-focused questions in a contextually relevant way. Unfortunately, instead of helping people overcome their consumerism as fully devoted and surrendered followers of Jesus, the enticing conversion strategies often produced church consumers. This context, together with the practices that fueled the Seeker-Sensitive, the Megachurch, and the Purpose-Driven Movements, contributed to the co-opting of McGavran's Church Growth Thought; an evolution that delivered the consumer-driven church operating system that fuels most of our church models today.

Reflecting on the movement, Thom Rainer makes an important observation. He says, "The Church Growth Movement has become so diverse that it has lost

its unity and synergy that often defines a movement.”¹⁶ Church growth leader Sonny Tucker agrees, noting that a diverse identity began to appear in 1988,¹⁷ and eventually led to several different church growth streams emerging from McGavran’s work.

Unfortunately, most critics lumped all these distinctive streams, divergent from McGavran’s original church-growth thought, into a single category. Eventually, pragmatism and methodology, rather than McGavran’s foundation in biblical and theological correctness, became the unifying element among the divergent streams.¹⁸

It’s difficult to understand the Church Growth Movement’s birth, growth, and evolution without first understanding the Christian cultural context of the time and the other interrelated factors happening in secular society.¹⁹ The convergence of these contextual issues provided fertile soil for God’s work in McGavran’s life and ministry to be co-opted into what I now call the Consumer-Driven Operating System.

As we turn our attention to Donald McGavran, Sonny Tucker provides an excellent thought to guide our journey of discovery: “True historic, McGavran church growth thinking is a viable, Bible-centered missiological approach, whether contextualized to the United States or focused on any people group in the world. It is deeply passionate about a harvest of souls that retains its growth and moves its converts into meaningful church membership. It has a conservative, evangelical theological base and focuses on conversion growth. Anything else is not true historic McGavran church growth.”²⁰

With Tucker’s glimpse into McGavran’s heart, it’s time to meet the man himself and trace how a missionary walking dusty roads in central India planted the seeds of a movement that would reshape the American church.

Reflection Questions

Are You Making Disciples or Attracting Customers?

Look at your church's website, social media, and Sunday announcements from the last month—count how many messages sound like advertising (“Come experience!” “We offer!”) versus messages that sound like Jesus (“Take up your cross,” “Deny yourself”). Which list is longer, and what's one thing you could change this month to shift the balance?

What Does “Success” Mean at Your Church?

Write down the top three things your church counts every week (attendance, baptisms, giving, disciples making disciples), then ask: If you only counted “disciples who made new disciples who started new churches,” would your church still look successful? What would you have to stop doing, and what scares you most about making that change?



CHAPTER 3

The Seeds of a Movement

*Donald McGavran and Church Growth
1955 to 1965*

“A Church Growth principle is a universal truth which, when properly interpreted and applied, contributes significantly to the growth of churches and denominations.”

-Donald McGavran

Donald McGavran did not begin his most important work in a classroom or a conference hall, but in the towns and villages of central India with a notebook in his hand and questions in his heart. As a missionary walking dusty roads in central India, he asked why one little congregation overflowed with new believers while another, just a few miles away, stayed almost unchanged year after year. That simple question refused to leave him alone, and it eventually became a lifelong study that reshaped how churches around the world thought about evangelism and growth.¹

I wish I had known and been able to talk to Donald McGavran for this book. During his years on this earth, he served as a missionary, mission strategist, evangelist, church planter, linguist, administrator, educator, and author, eventually becoming recognized as the catalyst for the modern Church Growth Movement. Fortunately, during my research, I had access to numerous leaders who knew him, served with him, and were impacted by his teaching. I will do my best to give you a glance into his life, mission, and endgame.

While McGavran's original plan was to equip and mobilize international missionaries with his church growth thought and science, the seeds he planted had an impact far beyond what he could see while on the mission field. We need to understand his foundational ideals and principles as they would later shape what became known as the science of church growth.

While on India's mission field in the mid-1950s, the landmark study "Christian Mass Movements in India"², published by J. Waskom Pickett, lit a fire inside him. The study captivated McGavran's thinking. It found that of the 145 mission areas studied, 134 did not grow significantly over the prior decade, compared with 11 that grew by 100%-200%. The contrast was impossible to ignore.

In highlighting Pickett's impact on his thinking, McGavran said, "I neither invented church growth nor am solely responsible for it. Indeed, I owe my interest to a great Methodist Bishop, Jarrell Waskom Pickett. In 1934, he kindled my concern that the church grow. I lit my candle at his fire."³ Adding fuel to his newly lit fire was the deep concern that none of the thirty small village churches under McGavran's supervision were growing.

His passion for evangelism and reaching lost people drove him to answer questions like: "*What causes church growth?*" "*What are the barriers to church growth?*" "*What causes movements among populations?*" and "*What church growth principles are reproducible?*"

With a learner-and-researcher's posture, McGavran spent the next 17 years in the trenches trying to birth what he called a "people movement" in India. This real-life learning lab was critical to the development of his church growth theory and principles. His work in India culminated in the research, writing, and publication of his book *Bridges of God* in 1955. McGavran stirred the mission world by shifting the question from "How does an individual become Christian?" to "How do a 'people' become Christian?"⁴ Many historians see this book as the definitive marker of the start of the Church Growth Movement.

C. Peter Wagner, a missionary student of McGavran's, later a Professor of Church Growth with McGavran, and then the head of Fuller's Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth, was one of the leading interpreters of McGavran's teaching.

Wagner said, “The book [*Bridges of God*] was read and discussed by missionaries and mission executives on all six continents. Its ideas were new and controversial. Four principal points of discussion were raised: a theological issue, an ethical issue, a missiological issue, and a procedural issue.”⁵ Wagner describes each issue:

- *Theological issue*: God’s will that lost people be evangelized, become disciples of Jesus, and be brought into responsible membership in a Christian church.
- *Ethical issue*: stewardship and accountability. Do the resources invested in missions work result in the planting and growth of churches?
- *Missiological issue*: his most controversial, labeled as the “homogeneous unit principle.” McGavran believed that “people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers” and that conversion should occur with minimal social barriers.
- *Procedural issue*: arising from McGavran’s belief that missionaries placed too much emphasis on “perfecting (sanctification) the saints” rather than discipling (evangelizing) the lost.⁶

Risky Steps of Faith

Soon after the book was released, McGavran resigned from his mission post in India and returned to the States to teach other missionaries what he had learned about church growth principles, choosing to focus on international missions. It would be another decade before his thinking would reach U.S. churches. For several years, he continued researching and looking for a seminary to host a church growth institute. Three seminaries turned him down before an offer finally came.

By the time McGavran launched the Institute for Church Growth at Northwest Christian College in 1961, he was already nearing the typical retirement age in America. The Institute was a risky step of faith that would gain traction, expand to U.S. churches and denominations, and eventually be co-opted to shape the Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch Movements. It opened the door for McGavran’s most productive vocational season. He would continue working another twenty years before retiring and earning the title “the father of the

Church Growth Movement.” *Christianity Today* once wrote that McGavran was “a virtual outsider to the evangelical world until he became a senior citizen.”⁷

The new Institute’s first four years were slow, with fewer than sixty missionaries participating. However, the early seasons gave McGavran time to publish and refine his content, improve his research methodology, lead conferences, and assemble case studies. Just as his years in India were a learning laboratory for his content, the Institute for Church Growth provided an essential laboratory for honing the teaching context of his church growth principles and preparing him to leverage his life’s passion.

By 1963, McGavran was considered one of the leaders in the worldwide Church Growth Movement. I find it fascinating that he emphasized world missions with seemingly little interest or focus on U.S. church growth. In 1964, McGavran’s ideas became more widely disseminated, and his name became better known when he served as editor of the *Church Growth Bulletin*, a bimonthly newsletter for over 1,200 prominent missionary leaders.⁸

A Key Connection

Around this time, the senior leaders of the highly regarded Fuller Theological Seminary began planning to launch a School of World Missions. Their founder and well-known evangelist Charles E. Fuller had dreamed that the institute would one day become the “best, highest, truest training department in all the world for missions and evangelism.”⁹ The search committee focused its attention on McGavran and his Institute of Church Growth after a survey of graduates found he was the mission leader most influential in that demographic. Charles Fuller’s son Daniel recalls the following about their pursuit:

“Early in 1965, our attention focused upon Dr. Donald McGavran, who had founded the Institute of Church Growth several years before in connection with the Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon. ...As the committee at Fuller Seminary carried on conversations with missionary leaders, the name of Donald McGavran and the term ‘Church Growth’ kept coming up. *Why shouldn’t a school*

of missions primarily emphasize the question of why churches grow? With such an emphasis in the forefront, a school would be less prone to veer away from the task of evangelism than might be the case if its primary emphasis were, say, linguistics, or anthropology.”^{10,11}

Seeking to become the premier missionary equipping school, Fuller’s leadership made a key connection: they prioritized linking evangelism and church growth. They assumed that a church growth focus would provide built-in accountability for evangelism. What McGavran championed as “effective evangelism” should lead to church growth. I can’t help but wonder whether today’s church leaders don’t see their churches grow because they’re missing the first part of McGavran’s key point and aren’t treating evangelistic efforts as a priority.

In 1965, McGavran was invited to relocate the Institute for Church Growth to Fuller Seminary and to become the founding dean of Fuller’s Department of World Missions and the Institute for Church Growth. If you’re in the second half of your life, don’t miss this: At age 67, McGavran came out of semi-retirement to start a second career.

He spent his first five years in this new role, building a solid staff and structure and integrating church growth principles as a core element in missionary training. He added key hires with international missions experience. His first staff hire was Alan Tippett, an associate professor of anthropology and missions.¹² Tippett was a missionary who had studied under McGavran at the Institute for Church Growth while getting his PhD in the early 1960s. Tippett returned to the mission field but later accepted the call to join McGavran in the new department at Fuller.

Ralph Winter had experience in Guatemala, Charles Kraft had led missions in Nigeria, J. Edwin Orr was an authority on revivals, and C. Peter Wagner brought Bolivian experience.¹³ Winter quickly recognized the need for a publishing platform to help make the school’s research and theses available to a broader audience. The William Carey Library (later renamed William Carey Publishing) was born at Fuller, expanding the distribution capacity of the emerging Church Growth body of knowledge.¹⁴

McGavran's book, *Understanding Church Growth*¹⁵, published in 1970, was another critical catalyst in the Church Growth Movement. Before that, most of McGavran's work and energy focused on international churches and movements, and on equipping missionaries with his insights. The more I study his life and ministry, the more I realize that his heartbeat was to see movements among Indigenous peoples.

I like this McGavran quote: "We cannot say we have evangelized a person until that person can join an indigenous movement in their society."¹⁶ McGavran was passionate about seeing evangelism and conversion lead to reproducing disciples and churches, with collective Kingdom growth as the outcome. But—and here's what I hope you begin to see—McGavran was never about the endgame we've embraced in the Consumer-Driven Operating System that powers most of our churches in America today.

In researching this book, I interviewed and became friends with Gary McIntosh. He is a distinguished church growth scholar who earned a D.Min. in Church Growth Studies and studied in the stream shaped by McGavran and Wagner. He went on to serve as vice president of consulting services for Win Arn's Institute for American Church Growth, has written the definitive, full-length biography of Donald A. McGavran titled *Donald A. McGavran: A Biography of the Twentieth Century's Premier Missiologist*, along with multiple scholarly articles on McGavran's life, and has been recognized with awards such as the Donald A. McGavran Award for Outstanding Leadership in Great Commission Research. I believe McIntosh is the foremost living interpreter of McGavran's life and teachings.

McIntosh notes that McGavran planted only fifteen churches, collectively reaching about 1,000 people. He never led, planted, or pastored a church of more than 100 people.¹⁷ "The heart of McGavran's missiology is not the growth of single churches, but rather the extension of churches into every tribe, clan, caste, family, or kinship group in the world. Church planting and multiplication were the very essence of McGavran's missiological agenda."¹⁸

McGavran championed church-planting, evangelism, and disciple-making. Check out this telling quote from him: "The great campaigns of evangelism are

urgent. They are one way in which the gospel advances. But, campaigns need to be carried on in such fashion that multitudes of new churches are established, and multitudes of new converts do become reliable members of Christ's Body." McGavran then defines a church growth principle as "a truth of God which leads His church to spread His Good News, plant church after church, and increase His Body."¹⁹

From Input to Output

Elmer Towns heard McGavran describe how he came to use the term "church growth." McGavran wanted to shift the emphasis of evangelism from the "input" effort of 'gospelizing' people to the "output" result of seeing the collective Big C church grow.²⁰ Towns says, "To McGavran, evangelism was an 'input' term, meaning first the lost should be evangelized (i.e., 'gospelized'), and when that was done, they would be baptized and brought into the church." As a result, the church should see growth as the "output" of evangelism. Towns explains, "McGavran rationalized: Why not use the term 'church growth' as an output term to give new meaning to the movement of evangelism?"²¹

For McGavran, the endgame was not growing large, sustainable churches filled with lukewarm, cultural Christians or "transfers" looking for better preaching and programs. He focused on real conversions through effective evangelism and church-planting, leading to people movements and gospel saturation. Thom Rainer amplifies this by defining church growth as evangelism that results in fruit-bearing church members.²² The fruit was intended to be the collective Kingdom growth of the "big C" church as a movement among a people group.

Christianity Today wrote that McGavran insisted that "evangelistic efforts be assessed in terms of their success in winning people to Christ."²³ McGavran himself said, "We believe in pragmatically sound methods. We devise methods and policies in light of what God has blessed—and what He has obviously not blessed. Industry calls this 'modifying operation in the light of feedback'. We teach men to be ruthless in regard to method. If it does not work to the glory of God, throw it away and get something which does."²⁴

James Engel, a distinguished professor at Eastern College, described McGavran as a “pioneer in demanding that we evaluate churches on some objective bases. He forced us to differentiate between what is ineffective in the Lord’s work and what is effective.”²⁵ McGavran’s critics saw things differently, expressing concern that his pragmatism and insistence on measurable results left little room for the work of the Holy Spirit. Regardless, his no-nonsense, analytical approach primed the pump for the birth of an entire church-consulting industry that extended far beyond church growth.

Understanding the core assumptions and principles that shaped McGavran is helpful. In his McGavran biography, McIntosh helped distill the essence of McGavran’s core principles of church growth.²⁶ Based on my research, I’ve made some clarifying adaptations in the list below:

- Valuing Biblical Authority: *Do what God commands.*
- Prioritizing Evangelism: *Focus on eternity-impacting activities.*
- Mobilizing the Local Church: *Deploy disciple-makers beyond the church’s walls to evangelize all peoples.*
- Conducting Research: *Collect, analyze, and assess relevant sociological data.*
- Planning for Growth: *Use pragmatic methods and bold plans.*
- Targeting Receptive Peoples: *Apply the Homogeneous Unit Principle.*
- Making Disciples: *Set the bar higher than securing decisions.*
- Planting Multiplying Churches: *Plant the trees; grow the orchards.*
- Counting Results: *Be intentional and accountable for conversions and churches. Measure success not by one church’s size but the collective impact of generational planting.*

Robertson McQuilkin, the president of Columbia Bible College, identified an even more condensed list of primary Church Growth principles from McGavran’s book *Bridges of God*. These included focusing on receptive converts, reaching people via natural bridges into people movements, using research to determine effective evangelistic principles, using the right pragmatic methods, and measuring numerical growth.²⁷

The historians and eyewitnesses I interviewed all affirmed that effective evangelism is central to McGavran's principles and drive. As we will see, the timing of McGavran's emergence on the U.S. scene coincided with a fresh evangelistic wind of the Spirit that swept the country, amplifying his message.

Reflection Questions

What's Your Church's Endgame?

McGavran never pastored a church with more than 100 people, yet he sparked a movement—his endgame was “church-planting and multiplication,” not building one big, sustainable church. What's your church's actual endgame: growing your attendance and programs, or multiplying disciples who plant new churches?

Are You Measuring Input or Output?

McGavran shifted the focus from evangelism “input” (the effort spent on gospelizing) to “output” (actual conversions, baptisms, and new churches planted). List what your church celebrated last month—were you celebrating effort and activity, or were you celebrating measurable Kingdom growth like conversions and new churches planted?



CHAPTER 4

Fresh Evangelistic and Apostolic Wind

1965 to 1975

“The Jesus People Movement, inextricably linked with the Charismatic Renewal Movement, was a key enabler of the Seeker-Sensitive approach as hippies turned into yuppies and suburbia expanded.”

~ Ralph Moore, Movement Leader

It was the late 1960s, and America’s young people were walking away from church in droves. They protested the war, experimented with drugs, rejected their parents’ institutions, and declared organized religion irrelevant. Church leaders wrung their hands. Seminaries debated whether Christianity could survive the counterculture. *Time* magazine asked, “Is God Dead?”

Then something nobody predicted happened. Those same young people started finding Jesus not in the churches they’d rejected, but in coffeehouses, on beaches, in living rooms, and at rock concerts. They brought their long hair, their barefoot honesty, their guitars, and their hunger for something real. And they brought their friends. Within a few years, *Time* would answer its own question with a new cover story: “The Jesus Revolution.”

As the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, a fresh evangelistic wind swept through the American church. Across the country, leaders and laypeople alike were trying

to reach a culture increasingly disillusioned with traditional religion. From this hunger, two distinct streams of influence emerged, each fueling different yet deeply impactful expressions of evangelism and church renewal.

The first was the Charismatic Renewal stream, rooted in supernatural encounters, decentralized discipleship, and bold, Spirit-led innovation. The second stream was strategy-driven, grounded in innovation, mass media, and market-oriented ministry approaches, evolving into the Seeker-Sensitive approach to church. At that time, these streams were not in conflict. They shared a passion for evangelism and new expressions of church life. They emerged side by side, each with the same desire: to bring people far from God into a relationship with Jesus Christ. But they flowed from different sources—and carried different distinctives—one Spirit-led, the other strategy-driven. These streams would shape the Church Growth Movement in complementary yet different ways.

Few people had a better front-row seat to the Jesus Movement and Charismatic Renewal in Southern California than Ralph Moore. Born and raised in Portland, Oregon, Moore moved to California at age 19 to attend college. He describes himself as a “hippie surfer who loved cars” and stumbled into the Jesus Movement at just the right time. His firsthand experiences with Calvary Chapel leaders Chuck Smith and Lonnie Frisbee, and the early waves of charismatic renewal, would shape his ministry philosophy for decades to come.

In 2010, Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird conducted a national review looking for multiplying churches. They published those results in their book *Viral Churches*. Of all the leaders and networks they investigated, they identified Ralph Moore and his Hope Chapel movement as the most viral church in the U.S. Moore’s reflections in this chapter carry deep credibility—not only because of what he saw but also because of what he built. His simple focus on home-based “mini-church” communities, relational disciple-making, and straightforward expository Bible teaching fueled one of the most effective multiplication movements in the modern era. In reflecting on what he now calls their “mini-church” approach, Ralph describes these communities as small groups attached to the main congregation that served as a seedbed for leaders who would go on to plant churches.

Ralph and I have been close friends for many years (which is why, throughout this book, I'm dropping the more formal last-name publishing reference and calling him by his first name). Ralph and I have written books together, partnered through the church-multiplying community Exponential, and sharpened one another's thinking on church health, reproduction, and movement-making. This chapter leans heavily on Ralph's personal story, firsthand experiences, and reflections, both from the moment itself and from his vantage point six decades later. His voice is not just a thread in this chapter—it's a lens through which we can see how the Spirit was moving and how that movement reshaped the story of the Church Growth Movement that followed.

The Charismatic Renewal: A Movement Ignited

The first stream of Pentecostalism had its roots in the 1906 Azusa Street Revival, led by William J. Seymour, at which Spirit baptism, speaking in tongues, and miraculous healing were publicly witnessed. Though marginalized in earlier decades, Pentecostal practices gained broader visibility through mid-century healing revivals and tent crusades led by figures like Oral Roberts and William Branham. These events introduced mass media—especially radio and early television—as tools for evangelistic reach, laying the technological framework that future church growth leaders would later build upon.

The movement accelerated in 1960, when Dennis Bennett, an Episcopal priest in Van Nuys, California, publicly declared that he had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and had begun speaking in tongues. His announcement, covered by *Time* magazine and other national outlets, launched what became known as the Charismatic Movement. This renewal swept through mainline denominations—Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, and eventually Catholics—bringing the supernatural back into the mainstream of church life.

In 1967, a Spirit-filled retreat among Catholic students at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh sparked the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, which would go on to touch millions globally. Ralph recalls how even Catholic communities opened their hearts to what God was doing among Charismatics and Jesus People alike.

As home Bible studies and lay-led worship gatherings multiplied, people found themselves encountering God outside the confines of Sunday services. Ralph recalls, “The Charismatic Renewal began bringing the home back into the life of the church and the church into the cracks and crevices of society. That was an important thing.”

Furthermore, the decentralization of spiritual leadership, combined with a renewed expectation of the miraculous, began to shift how people thought about evangelism, discipleship, and church formation. Young believers found themselves empowered by the Holy Spirit to evangelize, disciple, and lead in ways that bypassed traditional church leadership structures.

The Jesus Movement and Street-Level Revival

Running parallel to the Charismatic Renewal was a youth-inspired awakening now known as the Jesus Movement. Beginning in Southern California, it soon spread across the country. Disillusioned youth—hippies, war protestors, truth seekers—met Jesus in beach baptisms, coffeehouses, and concerts. The gospel took on a new form: less about pews and pulpits, more about music, community, and radical surrender.

Within a year, Billy Graham publicized the movement, prompting substantial national coverage. *Time Magazine* featured “The Jesus Revolution” on its cover in June 1971, and the Associated Press named it one of the Top 10 stories of that year.

The epicenter was Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa, led by Chuck Smith, whose openness to Spirit-led spontaneity and biblical teaching created fertile ground for thousands of conversions. Smith famously welcomed Lonnie Frisbee, a free-spirited, Spirit-filled young evangelist who catalyzed explosive growth among young people. Creative evangelistic expressions followed.

Ralph was there to witness it firsthand. He remembers: “Calvary Chapel was booming in Orange County, built on Chuck’s teaching and a new genre of worship bands.” Deeply embedded in this moment, he recalls personal interactions with

Chuck Smith, describing the first time he heard Smith talk about welcoming Lonnie Frisbee into his home. Smith said Frisbee was “the type of guy you’d want to spread a blanket on the sofa and say, ‘Please, sit down.’” Within two weeks of joining Calvary, Frisbee was leading a youth house bursting with more than forty kids—some inside, some camping on the lawn.

Teenager Greg Laurie had begun organizing evangelistic concerts and eventually founded Harvest Christian Fellowship. Arthur Blessitt carried a cross across America and held Bible studies in nightclubs.

These revival-like times introduced new models of worship, creative outreach, and volunteer-driven leadership. The early seeds of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) were planted by bands such as Love Song, Darrell Mansfield, and Larry Norman. This cultural fusion would eventually shape church worship for decades to come.

Ralph helped distribute thousands of gospel tabloids across high school campuses in partnership with leaders like Duane Pederson, who launched the *Hollywood Free Paper*, a Christian newspaper aimed at countering secular culture. He remembers stuffing lockers, organizing outreach clubs, and mentoring young evangelists—one of whom started a revival ministry in Hawaii that grew to several thousand.

Ralph was also personally shaped by the Christian rock band Love Song. He talks about hearing them at a youth event and being stunned when they shared their home address and invited the crowd to drop by anytime for food or fellowship.

“They were sweet, sweet people telling the crowd to just drop by their house. Come in and stay at our house. We’ll serve you dinner. We try to love everybody the way Jesus loved.”

This radical hospitality—an open door, shared meals, spontaneous prayer—became the DNA of the Jesus Movement. And music played a defining role. From Love Song to Larry Norman, Darrell Mansfield, and Greg Laurie’s early concerts, evangelism and worship fused in unprecedented ways.

Inspired and influenced by this Jesus music, Ralph helped host some of the earliest Jesus music concerts in Los Angeles, sometimes drawing thousands, prefiguring many of the large-scale outreach events that would become staples of megachurch culture. He recalls toilet-flushing services, where teens gave their lives to Jesus and dumped their drugs down the drain as a public sign of repentance.

“We began to figure out, us hippie guys, how to draw big crowds... concerts in different places... invading the Sunset Strip,” Ralph shares. “Large crowds became normative and certainly influenced the scorecard of the Seeker-Sensitive approach.”

In reflecting, Ralph believes the Jesus Movement was an outgrowth of the charismatic renewal movement’s freedoms and focus on the supernatural, combined with the hippie movement’s rebellion of the late 1960s. He sees the Jesus People Movement as a key enabler of the Seeker-Sensitive approach as “hippies turned into yuppies,” and suburbia expanded. I view the Jesus People Movement and the Charismatic Renewal Movement as inextricably linked.

The Birth of Contemporary Christian Music

From this ecosystem, Christian musicians emerged, pioneering what would later become known as Contemporary Christian Music. Its roots were inseparable from the Charismatic Renewal and Jesus Movement. Young people—many of them former hippies and countercultural artists—began expressing their newfound faith through folk, rock, and country music infused with gospel-centered lyrics.

Artists like Larry Norman (often called the “father of Christian rock”), Love Song, Barry McGuire, and Keith Green led the charge. With little institutional support, many produced their own albums or worked with emerging independent labels like Maranatha! Music that grew out of the Calvary Chapel community.

The impact was both spiritual and cultural. These artists created a bridge between popular music and authentic Christian witness, offering a form of worship

and outreach that resonated deeply with the younger generation. Their music normalized guitars, drums, and emotionally expressive worship in settings that had long been dominated by hymns and organs.

“It was Saturday night concerts, Sunday morning for the older crowd, and Sunday nights with the hippies,” Moore remembers, talking about Calvary Chapel. “They knew how to reach everyone—and they built a music machine that traveled.”

This fusion of music and mission gave birth not only to a new genre but to a new expectation of what church could feel like—engaging, accessible, and emotionally resonant. These early concerts and recordings directly influenced the use of music in evangelism, setting the tone for worship-driven services in the decades to come.

The DNA of Seeker-Sensitive worship culture—complete with lighting, bands, and emotionally charged music—can be traced back to these humble, impassioned beginnings. While subsequent decades would see the growth of major Christian music labels, national radio airplay, and industry-level production, it was in this era that music became a mobilizing force for church growth.

While music is an important defining characteristic of each generation, Ralph sees it as inseparable from their evangelistic efforts and critical to setting the context for connecting people in ongoing relational discipleship. In this context, it is easier for me now to look back and understand the evolutionary co-opting that eventually produced programmatic evangelism through excellent Sunday-centric services. And music is a foundational pillar of that growth formula.

Relational Discipleship and Visionary Evangelism

Meanwhile, leaders like Henrietta Mears at Hollywood Presbyterian Church quietly laid the groundwork for effective discipleship and visionary leadership. Mears discipled a generation of young men, including Bill Bright (Campus Crusade) and Billy Graham, whom she helped elevate from tent evangelists to

national figures. Ralph says that Mears was one of the most influential leaders shaping his paradigm and approach to discipleship and evangelism.

“She helped launch Billy Graham from his early days running around the country with a tent when she got behind it,” he says. Mears’ influence on relational disciple-making and visionary evangelism quietly established a framework that Spirit-led and strategy-driven leaders alike would build upon. The grassroots work of leaders like Mears enabled the Charismatic Renewal and Jesus Movement to ripple their impact into the modern Church Growth Movement.

Influencing the Evolving Church Growth Movement

Looking back, it’s clear that the Charismatic Renewal and Jesus Movement stream did more than stir revival; it helped shape the Seeker-Sensitive approach and, ultimately, the modern Church Growth Movement.

Ralph captured this insight plainly: “Without the power of what the Spirit was doing in the Charismatic Renewal... without the power of what was going on in the Jesus Revolution... you just wouldn’t have the Seeker thing accelerate as it did.”

Even the strategic clarity of megachurch leaders was built on this momentum. The small-group model, the worship-centric experience, the use of media, and the emphasis on relevance—all had their roots in these earlier, less-formal movements.

Charismatic/Jesus Movement contribution	Church Growth influence
Evangelistic urgency	Conversion-focused strategies
Organic grassroots culture	Entrepreneurial zeal
Large group gathering capacity	Sunday-centric with gifted communicators
Spirit-led experiences and worship	Emotionally engaging services

Charismatic/Jesus Movement contribution	Church Growth influence
Home-based, relational Bible studies	Small group systems
Music-centered evangelism	Worship Experiences and Contemporary Christian Music
Lay empowerment	Volunteer-driven ministry
Creative media and mass outreach	Marketing, seeker events, media

With this spiritual fire still burning, a second stream was quietly gaining traction—this one not on the fringe but emerging from the heart of suburban culture.

Market-Driven Innovation: The Emerging Second Stream

Another stream emerged in Southern California during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Robert Schuller wasn't just a preacher—he was a branding expert, packaging Christian hope in a way that connected deeply with middle-class America. He built his ministry on the belief that people weren't looking for truth so much as for hope. He encouraged pastors to stop preaching against sin and start preaching the good news of God's love.

During this period, Schuller began hosting his weekly "Hour of Power" television program. With the then-recent "TV movement," the gospel message was now accessible in nearly every home without the need for a friend's relational involvement. Schuller was innovative and evangelistically driven, and technology now opened a new horizon for reaching into homes.

Schuller's first church was in a drive-in movie theater, where attendees could attend services from the comfort of their cars. Building on the message of pastor and best-selling author Norman Vincent Peale on positive thinking, Schuller published several books that were important to the Church Growth Movement. *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*¹ and *Your Church Has Real Possibilities*²

represented the entrepreneurial and innovative thinking of a new breed of apostolically minded church leaders, such as Bill Hybels, John Maxwell, and Rick Warren.

Schuller's approach set the stage for churches to leverage best practices in marketing and business management for numerical growth. By 1980, his Crystal Cathedral, touted as the largest glass building in the world, opened—becoming a symbolic icon of the future Megachurch Movement.

Ralph recalls taking a cue from Robert Schuller's fundraising playbook. Schuller explained to Ralph how he secured land for expansion by enlisting Norman Vincent Peale to write a letter to the Kaiser Corporation. Inspired, Ralph approached W. Clement Stone for help funding 20,000 copies of the evangelistic book *The Cross and the Switchblade*—and Schuller wrote the letter that unlocked the funds.

For better or worse, Schuller pioneered the idea that pastors are not only theologians, but also marketers. He used architecture, psychology, and media to make the gospel more accessible. And in the process, he opened the door to a completely different kind of church experience.

In characterizing his impact on the Seeker-Sensitive church, Christianity Today wrote, "Schuller pioneered the use of marketing techniques to reach the nonchurched. It would not be overreaching to say that without Schuller and the Crystal Cathedral, there would likely be no Willow Creek Community Church, no Saddleback Community Church, or the thousands of other seeker-oriented churches around the country."³

Christianity Today also credits Schuller as the first church leader in the modern era to call his denominational church a community church, his sermons a message, to use non-conventional facilities like a drive-in movie theatre, to conduct door-to-door research, to use modern marketing strategies, and to televise weekly church services.⁴ All of these things were aimed at attracting seekers and helping them feel safe and comfortable.

In reflecting on Schuller's death in 2015, William Vanderbloemen, a top staffing specialist serving megachurches, wrote, "Schuller was the forerunner of the Church Growth Movement of the 1980s and 1990s... He had a profound influence on today's megachurch pastors, such as Warren and Hybels... Schuller's spiritual sons and daughters have planted churches that have redefined the landscape of evangelical Christianity in the United States and have impacted the world forever."⁵

Schuller was known for challenging people to dream bigger than they'd ever dared—a message ideally suited to the emerging era of entrepreneurial, evangelistically minded leaders.

The Rise of the Seeker-Sensitive Church

In God's providential timing, unrelated to McGavran's work, a young leader named Bill Hybels was called to full-time vocational ministry and, in 1971, started an evangelistic, local-church-based youth ministry in Chicago called Son City. Contemporary music, creative skits, fresh multimedia, and relevant language helped bring Bible teaching to life. The ministry grew rapidly, from 25 to 1,200 students in just 3 years.

Hybels' team began dreaming of launching a church with a similar approach. The result was the birth of Willow Creek Community Church in 1975—the beginning of what would come to be known as the Seeker-Sensitive Era. Hybels would eventually be recognized as the movement's most influential leader.

During the same season, a young Rick Warren also sensed a call to full-time ministry. Though initially headed toward the international mission field, Warren would go on to launch Saddleback Church and the Purpose-Driven Movement, deeply shaped by both McGavran's church growth theories and Peter Drucker's management philosophy. Warren would become another icon of both the Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch Movements.

Initially unrelated to McGavran's work, media-savvy marketplace leader Win Arn sought to apply his media communications skills to advance evangelistic

initiatives within his denomination. He was creative and innovative, passionate about evangelism, and gifted in radio broadcasting and filmmaking. His entrepreneurial gift helped him see the distribution potential of big ideas, and he was always looking for opportunities where multimedia and film could help advance evangelistic efforts to win people to Christ. Arn founded the company Christian Communication, which pioneered new concepts for religious films, such as the then-popular “Charlie Churchman” series and short films used as sermon illustrations. Arn was about to discover McGavran’s teaching on church growth and see the possibility of extending awareness and impact into the American church.⁶

As we discovered in chapter 3, McGavran was a passionate evangelist. Peter Wagner said that when he first got to know McGavran, he found himself “irresistibly drawn to him as a man whose burning passion to see the lost won to Jesus Christ had stimulated him to develop what, at that time, were absolutely revolutionary ideas about missions and missiology.”⁷ McGavran was just the right leader at just the right time to be used by God in breathing a fresh wind of evangelism into the U.S. church.

Interest in evangelism in the early 1970s received national attention, creating a solid context for the Americanization of the Church Growth Movement. The Seeker-Sensitive Movement emerged simultaneously, sharing and co-opting some of the same principles and priorities. McGavran’s work stood ready to transform U.S. churches that had only 50 megachurches among their ranks.

Let me pause and highlight a danger in how we view and position McGavran’s influence in history. While he is generally considered the father of the modern Church Growth Movement, his heartbeat was effective evangelism that led to people movements in the international mission field. On the evolutionary co-opting that we will see happen in subsequent eras, Tim Hawks, a long-time, influential megachurch pastor, writes, “Years later, we apply this strident pragmatism focused not on evangelistic efforts with lost people, but to programmatic efforts to see our churches get larger.”

As a considerable publishing, conferencing, and church consulting industry emerged, denominational interest skyrocketed, and the stage was set for

McGavran's principles and approach to be co-opted by an emerging movement, catalyzed by well-meaning evangelistic leaders and ministries. Of course, critics of the Church Growth Movement view it as a manmade movement driven by business practices that yield an abundant harvest of poor crops and employ unorthodox methods, concluding that God is not behind it. Regardless of your personal views, the Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch Movements did explode into the American context. And God did use it to bring many people to faith in Christ (including me).

As we entered the 1970s, exciting possibilities emerged, but a strong, unified voice was lacking to apply McGavran's church growth principles within the U.S. church.

The Broader Convergence: What Comes Next

The 1970s were a convergence zone. Cultural shifts, mass media, growing consumerism, and spiritual hunger all collided. Amidst these many forces, two distinct streams of influence began to shape the future of the American church in particular:

1. The Charismatic Renewal stream, which reinvigorated the Church's imagination through Spirit-led worship, house-based community, lay ministry, and grassroots evangelism.
2. The Strategy or Market-Driven stream, which would evolve into the Seeker-Sensitive approach, was deeply influenced by culture, architecture, media, marketing, systems, and scalability.

This chapter has highlighted the Charismatic Renewal stream and the Jesus Movement, and their enormous, often-overlooked, contribution to the modern Church Growth Movement. In the next section, we'll turn to the Market or Strategy-Driven stream, beginning with an exploration of the explosive rise of Willow Creek and how Bill Hybels' approach to church would reshape how American congregations gather, grow, and measure spiritual effectiveness.

Reflection Questions

Which Stream Shaped Your Ministry DNA?

Think about the last major decision you made about your church's approach to ministry—did you lean toward Spirit-led spontaneity and organic relationships (Charismatic/Jesus Movement stream), or toward strategic planning and demographic research (Strategy/Market-Driven stream)? Which stream has shaped your ministry instincts, and what would it look like to integrate the strengths of both?

Are Your Systems Empowering Multiplication or Just Managing Growth?

Ralph Moore's "mini-church" communities became seedbeds for church planters, not just small groups for spiritual growth. Look at your church's small group system, leadership pipeline, and volunteer structure—are they designed to multiply disciples who plant churches, or are they designed to staff programs and fill weekend services?



SECTION 2

Defining the Movement

From Missionary Insights to American Innovation

The most critical phase in any movement's development occurs when foundational principles encounter new cultural contexts and begin to take on distinctive characteristics. For the Church Growth Movement, this defining moment came during the 1975–1985 decade, when Donald McGavran's missionary insights were translated into uniquely American expressions that would shape the evangelical landscape for generations.

This was the era when the movement shifted from theory to practice, from the mission field to the suburbs, and from academic principles to innovative church models that captured the imagination of a generation of church leaders. During these pivotal ten years, the Church Growth Movement found its American voice and established the patterns that would drive its explosive expansion in the decades to come.

The Great Translation

During this period, the central challenge facing the Church Growth Movement was translation—not of language, but of context. McGavran's principles had been forged in the rural villages of India, tested among people groups with distinct cultural boundaries and social networks. But how would these insights

apply to the increasingly mobile, individualistic, and consumer-oriented culture of suburban America?

The answer came through a remarkable generation of entrepreneurial church leaders who possessed both the evangelistic passion to embrace McGavran's vision and the cultural intuition to adapt his methods to the American context. As I noted in the previous section, chief among these leaders was a young Bill Hybels, whose launch of Willow Creek Community Church in 1975 would become the defining expression of American church growth principles.

Hybels and his team didn't simply implement McGavran's homogeneous unit principle—they reimaged it for a culture where the most significant barriers weren't ethnic or linguistic, but attitudinal and lifestyle-based. They identified "Unchurched Harry" as their target demographic and designed everything from the music to the messaging to remove the cultural barriers that kept suburban Americans away from church.

The Seeker-Sensitive Revolution

What emerged from this translation process was the Seeker-Sensitive Movement, which became the primary vehicle for defining church growth principles in America. The Seeker-Sensitive approach embodied McGavran's core insights about removing barriers and understanding target populations, but expressed them through contemporary music, casual dress, relevant teaching, and professional-quality production values.

This wasn't merely a stylistic shift—it represented a fundamental redefinition of how American churches would approach evangelism and growth. The movement had found its signature methodology, one that could be learned, replicated, and scaled across diverse contexts. Churches across the country began adopting Seeker-Sensitive principles, creating a common vocabulary and shared set of practices that gave the movement coherence and momentum.

Institutional Foundations

Simultaneously, the Seeker-Sensitive Movement was developing the institutional infrastructure necessary to sustain and expand its influence. The Fuller School of World Mission became the intellectual hub, producing a steady stream of graduates trained in church growth principles. Win Arn's Institute for American Church Growth created accessible training programs that brought these insights to thousands of pastors nationwide. The magazine *Church Growth: America* served as a platform for sharing success stories and refining methodologies.

Perhaps most significantly, this era saw the emergence of Leadership Network, founded by Bob Buford in 1984. While initially focused on connecting innovative church leaders, Leadership Network would become the premier platform for identifying, developing, and disseminating innovations for the next generation of church growth.

Cultural Convergence

The defining of the Seeker-Sensitive Movement occurred within a broader cultural context that made American churches increasingly receptive to growth-oriented thinking. The late 1970s and early 1980s marked the intersection of several significant trends: the continued growth of suburbanization, the maturation of television and media culture, the rise of market research and demographic analysis, and the increasing professionalization of nonprofit organizations.

These cultural forces created an environment where McGavran's emphasis on research, growth measurement, and strategic thinking felt both relevant and necessary. Churches began to see themselves not just as spiritual communities, but as organizations that needed to understand their markets, measure their effectiveness, and adapt their methods to reach their target audiences.

In the next four chapters, we'll explore how this defining process unfolded, looking at:

The specific mechanisms that Americanized the Church Growth Movement

The emergence and characteristics of the Seeker-Sensitive Era
The expanding infrastructure of support organizations and resources
The founding of Leadership Network as a catalyst for continued innovation

By 1985, what had begun as one missionary's insights about church growth in India had become a recognizable movement with distinctly American characteristics, proven methodologies, and institutional momentum. The movement had been defined—and in that definition lay both its greatest strengths and the seeds of its future challenges.



CHAPTER 5

Americanizing the Movement

1970 to 1975

In 1971, a seasoned missionary named C. Peter Wagner walked away from sixteen years on the mission field in Bolivia to join Donald McGavran at Fuller Seminary. It was a decision that would help reshape the American church. Wagner had spent those years applying his sharp mind and missiological training on the field rather than in a classroom. He first met McGavran in 1967 while on furlough attending Fuller, where McGavran was quietly assembling a small but strong team around his emerging school of thought.

McGavran invited Wagner to join him in 1968, but Wagner felt an obligation to the mission field. It was not until 1971 that he accepted the invitation. He spent ten years as McGavran's understudy until McGavran retired in 1981, and then continued to serve for an additional 20 years until 2001. He would become the movement's chief spokesperson after McGavran.

While McGavran's work and classes at Fuller focused on international missionaries, leaders in North America began hearing about his ideas on church growth. For pastors watching post-war growth stall and denominational leaders anxious about cultural change, McGavran's research sounded less like distant missions theory and more like a potential lifeline. McIntosh said these leaders encouraged Peter Wagner to apply these ideas to the American church.

In 1972, Wagner and McGavran taught a pilot Church Growth class to pastors and denominational leaders from North America. For the first time, a room that might normally have been filled with missionaries preparing for faraway fields

was instead populated with American pastors and executives wondering whether these same principles could apply to their own congregations. The class became the springboard for beginning the American Church Growth Movement.¹

Among the mix of pastors and denominational executives in that pilot course was a marketing-minded pastor named Win Arn, who instinctively thought in visual terms and practical tools rather than just abstract concepts. Gary McIntosh recalls how Arn immediately recognized the value of applying church-growth principles to evangelism in the American Protestant church. As a class project, Arn designed a church growth media kit that included six two-foot-by-four-foot color posters. The class response was strong, affirming for Arn that he was onto something big.² While this may seem insignificant, multimedia in churches was essentially non-existent at this point. (For perspective, Leadership Network—one of the catalytic ministries fueling church growth in the 1980s and 1990s—was still communicating with churches via weekly fax as late as the mid-1990s.)

In his thesis, “The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement,” pastor David Cook writes that Arn’s visual aids were significant because of his “ability to take an abstract concept and visualize it.” Cook described it as a “marked departure from McGavran and Wagner’s more academic and didactic approaches.”³ When Arn unrolled those oversized posters, church growth moved from the realm of theory to something pastors could literally see, with charts and images that looked like their own congregations.

Arn saw McGavran’s work as a new paradigm for evangelism. By 1973, Arn decided to focus his expertise on communicating McGavran’s church growth principles to pastors and church leaders. He and McGavran collaborated on a book, *How to Grow a Church: Conversations About Church Growth*, which sold 200,000 copies.⁴ Arn also produced the first-ever film on church growth under the same name. The strong response to his early projects convinced Arn that occasional tools were not enough; pastors were asking for a sustained pipeline of training and resources. His vision for training pastors in church growth principles led to the founding of the Institute for American Church Growth in 1974, with McGavran and Wagner on the Board.⁵

While McGavran and Wagner focused on academics and teaching, Arn hit the ground running to broadcast the budding Church Growth Movement to the American church and take training on the road to churches, networks, and denominations. At the Institute's first board meeting in May 1974, Arn reported that he had 30 speaking engagements either completed or scheduled, indicating considerable interest. You can almost picture him arriving with a worn briefcase and a travel-weary calendar, laying out evidence that something significant was stirring. The meeting minutes noted, "The time is right for church growth in America and for the birth of the Institute for American Church Growth."⁶ By the end of 1974, other prominent leaders, such as Elmer Towns and Robert Schuller, publicly endorsed the Institute and allowed their names to be associated with it.

Arn implemented an aggressive strategy to bring church growth training and principles to denominational leaders by traveling across the country and leading the Institute's signature Church Growth Seminar. In December 1975, he reported that in the last six months, he had traveled over 90,000 miles and conducted 655 seminars and training sessions, with over 7,500 in attendance—a pace that reflected both his exhaustion and the explosive demand for what he was teaching.

"The ministry has touched over 1,300 local churches representing twenty different denominations," he shared.⁷

As Arn traveled the country teaching, McGavran put those teachings on paper, bringing them to the church on a mass scale. For pastors and denominational leaders who would never sit in a Fuller classroom or attend an Institute seminar, these books served as paper missionaries, carrying church-growth ideas from study to study and library to library. During these formative years of the Church Growth Movement, a prolific McGavran published the following books:

1970 - *Understanding Church Growth* (one later edition with Wagner)

1973 - *How to Grow Your Church: Conversations About Church Growth* with Win Arn

1977 - *Ten Steps for Church Growth* with Win Arn

1980 - *Church Growth Strategies Work* with George G. Hunter

1981 - *Back to Basics in Church Growth*

Interest was exploding in an untapped U.S. market. In 1975, Wagner and McGavran, both on Arn's board for the institute, saw a huge growth opportunity. As Arn took church growth on the road and McGavran's books spread the ideas in print, Fuller moved to institutionalize the growing demand for it. Under the leadership of John Wimber (before he became the leader of the Vineyard movement), the Fuller Evangelical Association established the Department of Church Growth, which offered consulting services on church growth. As the founding director, Wimber traveled the country, mobilizing denominations and securing contracts for Fuller. His and Arn's collective networking sparked interest in the idea that churches could intentionally grow.

Wimber maintained an intense travel schedule to fuel the fledgling interest in church growth. In 1978, Carl George assumed the role of Director from Wimber. George told me that Wimber had more than twenty denominational contracts in place when he took over Wimber's role. George said he stepped into a whirlwind and could hardly keep up with all the interest.⁸

Let's pause and ask: Why was interest so high in these early years of the Americanization of McGavran's principles? The answer lies in the simple intersection of effective conversion-based evangelism and the pragmatism of measurable church growth. Churches and denominations were drawn to the win-win of fresh evangelistic approaches that led to church growth. For leaders facing cultural upheaval, plateaued congregations, and denominational decline, here was a way to pursue conversions and count tangible results simultaneously. The excitement snowballed into the demand for church growth training.

Fuller launched a new Doctor of Ministry (DMIN) program under Wagner's leadership during the 1970s. Wagner served as the Professor of Church Growth at Fuller for nearly thirty years and became recognized as a leading authority on the Church Growth Movement. He strongly emphasized and integrated church growth principles into the DMIN program and influenced thousands of church leaders like Gary McIntosh, Bob Logan, John Maxwell, and Rick Warren. Warren has said that his dissertation at Fuller significantly influenced his best-selling book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*, published in 1995. Wagner was the principal instructor in the Doctor of Ministry church growth classes, teaching 2,000 students by 1988.⁹ Through this pipeline, church growth language and

categories became part of the standard vocabulary for a generation of American pastors.

Denominational leaders like George Hunter, John Wimber, and Carl George, whose efforts were accelerated by Fuller's, were instrumental not only in spotlighting church growth in the American context but also in creating demand for resources. It's hard to overstate Fuller's impact on the Americanization of the Church Growth Movement. As leaders like John Wimber cycled through Fuller, as staff, conference attendees, and students, they carried the church growth message back into the cracks and crevices of American evangelicalism.

In 1977, as his time at Fuller drew to a close, Wimber started a Calvary Chapel in Orange County, California. Five years later, it separated from Calvary Chapel and became the anchor church of what would become the Vineyard movement. In the early '80s, Wimber assumed leadership of the Vineyard churches and, over the coming decades, planted hundreds of churches.¹⁰ The same instincts that helped him sell church growth consulting to denominations now helped shape the DNA of a new church family that would itself influence how many Americans thought about worship, ministry, and mission.

Like McGavran, Wagner was extremely productive, bringing the message of church growth to many through books, sometimes more than two in a single year. Look at the list of works he published during the 1970s and 1980s as the modern Church Growth Movement was taking off:

1976 – *Your Church Can Grow*

1979 – *Your Church Can Be Healthy*

1979 – *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow*

1979 – *Our Kind of People: The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth in America*

1980 – *Unreached Peoples*

1981 – *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate*

1984 – *Leading Your Church to Growth*

1986 – *Spiritual Power and Church Growth*

1986 – *Church Growth: State of the Art*

1987 – *Strategies for Church Growth*

1990 – *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*

In addition to Fuller's broad impact through Wimber's and Wagner's work, the Institute for American Church Growth, under Arn's leadership, continued to grow and influence the American church landscape well into the 1980s through books, seminars, training, movies, and a regular newsletter/magazine. Arn's vision and work ignited the American Church Growth Movement and set the stage for a new industry to emerge.

George Hunter, an associate of Arn and board member of the Institute, said, "Win did something that (to my knowledge) no one else had ever done. He took an academic school of thought (McGavran's) about how people are reached and, combining the skills of interviewer, field researcher, writer, filmmaker, and entrepreneur, he found ways to transfer and interpret the key perspective and ideas out of the missiological academy and into the life of thousands of churches."¹¹

Similarly, Dr. Elmer Towns said, "The greatest contribution of Win Arn was taking the teachings of Donald McGavran and contextualizing them into the application of church growth principles in the American culture."¹²

Arn made McGavran and Wagner's work more accessible to the average church, just as Rick Warren's Purpose-Driven Principles would make the Seeker-Sensitive Movement more accessible.

Arn's work helped catalyze a new church growth industry in the 1970s and 1980s that included numerous research institutes and advocacy centers, seminaries offering courses and degrees, extensive book publishing, conferences and seminars, and denominations creating new departments and staff positions. By the mid-1970s, three strands had braided together: McGavran's missionary ideas, Fuller's institutional platform, and Arn's entrepreneurial communication.

Interest in church growth skyrocketed. The ideas were now firmly Americanized, the infrastructure was in place, and denominational interest was at an all-time high. Fuller had provided the academic foundation, Win Arn had taken the

principles on the road, and McGavran's books had spread the message into thousands of pastors' studies. But church growth was still largely understood through the lens of seminary classrooms, consulting seminars, and printed resources.

That was about to change dramatically. While all this academic and institutional work was happening, a young youth minister in the Chicago suburbs had been conducting his own experiments in culturally relevant evangelism. What Bill Hybels discovered through trial and error with hundreds of unchurched teenagers would soon become the blueprint for reshaping the American Sunday morning experience. The Seeker-Sensitive Movement was about to take McGavran's principles from the realm of theory and consulting into the lived reality of weekend services in rented movie theaters—and eventually, into thousands of churches across the country.

Reflection Questions

What's Your Church's Actual Scorecard?

Win Arn reported success by counting seminars conducted, and churches touched, not movements launched or churches planted. Write down what your church celebrated publicly in the last quarter—did you celebrate weekend attendance and program participation, or did you celebrate disciples making disciples and churches planting churches? If McGavran visited your church and asked, “Show me the output, not the input,” what evidence would you show him?

Are You Consuming Church Growth Strategies or Multiplying Disciples?

Look at the last three church leadership books you read, conferences you attended, or training programs you completed—how many focused on growing your church bigger (programs, systems, weekend attendance) versus multiplying your church outward (planting churches, releasing leaders, reproducing disciples)? If you could only invest in one approach for the next year, which would have greater Kingdom impact, and what's stopping you from making that shift?



CHAPTER 6

The Seeker-Sensitive Era

1975 to 1985

If you've professed your faith in Jesus, you've most assuredly been impacted by the fallout of the Seeker-Sensitive Movement. You may not realize the depth of the impact, but it's there. Given this movement's huge footprint and evolution, it's inescapable. I didn't know until I started writing this book how deeply my personal story is connected. Yours probably is, too.

My salvation story is directly connected to the Seeker-Sensitive Movement and to my calling to full-time vocational ministry within the Megachurch Movement. I just needed to look back and understand their connection. I've incorrectly assumed that these two movements combined to produce the Church Growth Movement. Instead, the *seeds* planted by the original Church Growth Movement pioneers predate these other movements—and they were intended to produce fruit different from the growth of individual churches.

As Arn's Institute for American Church Growth and Fuller's church growth work rapidly expanded in the U.S., the Seeker-Sensitive Movement was being birthed. While not directly connected to McGavran or Arn's work, the timing makes it difficult to discern the interrelationship. Gary McIntosh sees the relationship as empowering or enabling. He told me the Church Growth Movement empowered but did not birth the Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch Movements."¹

Born in the Shadow of Suburbia and Consumerism

Sparked by the Second Industrial Revolution, most people in the U.S. lived in cities by World War II.² Then, mass migration to suburban areas became a defining feature of American life. As the war ended, just 13% of Americans lived in suburbs, but this increased to over 50% by 1980.³ In essence, suburbia was invented during the consumerism movement.

I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, when the Consumerism Movement was beginning to take shape. I remember sitting with my mother around the TV, watching Neil Armstrong take the first steps on the moon. As a child growing up before the rapid acceleration of two-wage-earner families and the rise of suburbia, I watched these first steps with my mother from our rural home on our black-and-white set.

I remember contentment with used toys, bikes, and cars, and delayed gratification until the day we could pay cash for new things no one else had touched. In an emerging middle-class family, achieving the American dream was within grasp, and our family rode the wave: baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet. I watched the progression from Chevette to Impala to Caprice, from rural to suburbia.

Marketers stood ready to convince us that we needed and could have much more than hot dogs and Chevrolets in our newfound suburban context. The post-World War Boomer generation set their sights on achieving the American dream, and consumerism was the readily accessible, tempting pathway. For the first time, credit cards made it possible to acquire things we couldn't afford. Customer-targeted strategies reached directly into our heads and homes, creating the fear of missing out on things we couldn't afford.

Establishing an affluent and rapidly growing middle class in suburban America represented the perfect mission field for consumerism and the birth of the Seeker-Sensitive church. Amid this season of prosperity and growth, white suburban Americans, in particular, stood ready for what was to come.

Businesses paved the way for fueling consumerism and reaching consumers. Business practices were optimized through demographic research, mass marketing, and customer targeting. Evangelists like Robert Schuller and Bill Hybels started churches using the same business and marketing techniques companies used to reach their customers.

At its core, “Seeker-Sensitive” emerged as an approach characterized by understanding the church’s “customers,” designing programs and services based on their felt needs, and implementing strategies to attract them to the church. For the early pioneers of this movement, the “customer” was the unchurched and/or non-Christian, and the primary mission fields were the communities with the highest growth projections. Suburbia provided the perfect context for both.

A Vision Born in Bill Hybels

I remember hearing Bill Hybels talk about growing up in an entrepreneurial family in the 1960s. His aspirations also included a business career. However, in college in the early 1970s, a lecturer challenged students with a vision for an Acts 2-based church. Hybels became captivated by the vision and redirected his career plans to ministry. In 1971, he and a friend started a youth group called Son City that grew to 1,200 students in just three years. By 1974, Hybels and other leaders had begun dreaming of starting a new church.

Hybels and a few other leaders surveyed their suburban Chicago community to discover why people weren’t attending church. “Church is boring,” people replied. “They’re always asking for money.” “I don’t like being preached down to.” The answers shaped the new Willow Creek Church, which grew from 125 to 2,000 in two years.⁴ Robert Schuller and Rick Warren used similar surveying approaches to start their respective Seeker-Sensitive churches.

Hybels started Willow Creek with the vision for “a weekly seeker service that would provide a safe and informative place where unchurched people could come to investigate Christianity further.”⁵ With a passion for seeing unchurched people become followers of Jesus, Willow Creek designed programs and facilities

accordingly to meet the needs of those seeking to explore Christianity further.⁶ They believed this approach would attract people searching for answers, bring them into a relationship with Christ, and mobilize them to evangelize others. In this context, Seeker-Sensitive was culturally relevant and highly programmatic.⁷

Hybels would become known as a founder of the Seeker-Sensitive church movement.

As Hybels was starting this new church at the Willow Creek movie theater in the Chicago suburbs, my father received a promotion, which granted us middle-class status and moved our family from a rural part of Illinois to the Chicago suburbs, where Hybels was getting started. We found ourselves at the intersection of suburbia and consumerism.

Our home was just down the road from the 90 acres of farmland that Willow Creek purchased in 1977 for its first building. Riding my minibike on that property as a kid, I could not have dreamed of the church that would one day call it home. Willow Creek continued meeting at the movie theater until 1981, when it moved into its new building.

In recalling Willow Creek's history, Hybels tells of a trip to Robert Schuller in the fall of 1976. Hybels explained Willow's vision to reach seekers and asked for advice on their upcoming plans to purchase land for a building.

"If you give God a thimble, perhaps He will choose to fill it," Schuller replied to Hybels. "If you give God a five-gallon bucket, perhaps He will choose to fill that. If you give Him a fifty-gallon drum, perhaps He will choose to do something extraordinary and fill even that. If God chooses to do a miracle, you'd better be ready for it. Don't buy a thimbleful of land. Buy a fifty-gallon drum."⁸

In reflecting, Hybels recalls thinking it was "ridiculous for a ragtag bunch of kids like us to dream even of a thimble."⁹ But within nine months, Robert Schuller spoke at a Willow fundraising banquet for purchasing land. At the time, our family thought the church leaders were crazy for buying ninety acres of remote land. But we also didn't understand their evangelistic hearts for reaching lost people.

Our family never viewed the church and Jesus with hostility, but we also never made them our priority. In the late 1970s, as the Consumerism Movement was in full bloom, our family was the core target customer for the emerging Seeker-Sensitive church movement. Specifically, we were unchurched people open to investigating Christianity in a safe place and context. We also lived just down the road within the target market of the new Willow Creek Community Church. At the time, my mother sensed the need for good influences in her kids' lives. One of her close friends said, "You need to check out this new church meeting in the movie theater. It's different, and your kids will love it." The Seeker-Sensitive posture was working.

For me, finding Jesus was directly connected to this new Seeker-Sensitive approach. As a non-Christian teen in the late 1970s, I first visited Willow Creek in response to an invitation from my mother's friend. As we drove from the movie theater parking lot that day, I told my family, "I'm not sure what that was, but it's definitely not church."

Willow Creek was different in an attractive and curious way. Until that day, my experience of church was limited to infrequent visits to formal buildings with lots of old people and very dry services. As a teen, the church had no perceived value to me. Fortunately, my family was a target customer of Willow Creek. I had no idea how significant Hybels's ministry would be in my life. His approach impacted my faith story, my salvation, my siblings' and children's salvation, and my views on success in vocational ministry. I didn't understand it then, but my experience at Willow planted the seed that church could be attractive and wasn't something to be avoided. I clearly heard the gospel message through Bill's evangelistic, seeker-safe messages. That one visit to a fresh, new, Seeker-Sensitive church created ripples that carried into future generations of my family. I'm eternally grateful.

I'm celebrating what is and praying for what still needs to be.

Reflection Questions

Are You Designing for Customers or Making Disciples?

Bill Hybels surveyed his community to discover why people weren't attending church, then designed Willow Creek to remove those barriers—the church became entertaining, non-threatening, and financially undemanding. Look at your church's recent decisions about worship style, sermon topics, and facility design—are you removing barriers that prevent people from encountering Jesus, or are you removing the cost of discipleship that Jesus said was essential? What's one “customer preference” your church has accommodated that might actually hinder people from becoming reproducing disciples?

What Would McGavran Say About Your Church's Scorecard?

McGavran demanded churches measure output (conversions, baptisms, churches planted), not input (attendance, programs, facilities). If McGavran visited your church and asked to see evidence of Kingdom growth, what would you show him: your weekend attendance trends and program participation rates, or your count of disciples who made disciples who planted churches? If your church stopped counting attendance tomorrow and only counted reproductive disciple-making, would your ministry look successful, or would you need a major restructure?



CHAPTER 7

Beyond Academia

1980 to 1990

“What good is an idea if it remains an idea?”

Simon Sinek

Rick Warren was still a college student in Texas when he first started asking a question that would shape the rest of his life: What kind of church could help people actually grow up in Christ? He wrote to the 100 largest churches in America, spread their replies out before him, and noticed a simple yet profound pattern—strong churches were led by pastors who stayed put for a long time. So he prayed a risky prayer: “Lord, I’m willing to go anywhere in the world if you’ll let me spend my entire life in one place, serving one congregation.”¹

Rick and Kay assumed that meant overseas missions—until, in prayer, he sensed God redirecting them: not to leave America, but to plant a church that would send missionaries rather than go as one. He spent months poring over West Coast census data until one place stood out: Saddleback Valley, the fastest-growing area in the fastest-growing county in the United States between 1970 and 1980. In October 1979, he walked its hills, met with planners and realtors, and then knelt with Kay overlooking the valley, convinced God was saying, “You are to move here and start a church.” Two months later, they packed a U-Haul, drove to Southern California with no building, no members, and almost no money, and on January 25, 1980, seven people gathered in their little condo for

the first service of what would become Saddleback Church—a young planter’s quiet start long before anyone called it “purpose-driven.”²

As Willow Creek transitioned from the movie theater into its first permanent facility in 1981, Rick Warren launched Saddleback Community Church. He was impacted by McGavran’s growth principles and Wagner’s teaching. Like Hybels and Schuller, he would also be affected by business management guru Peter Drucker, whom he considered a mentor.

Warren benefited from being a great communicator, thinking strategically, and understanding the importance of simplicity and reproducibility. Planting a growing church in Southern California got Wagner’s attention. Warren’s longtime friend and associate, Doug Slaybaugh, told me that “Rick Warren was a natural influencer for Kingdom impact, passionate about evangelism and healthy church growth, had a heart for local church pastors, and was a gifted communicator in making things easily accessible and understandable to the average person.”³

In 1983, Fuller organized its first intentional church-planting and growth conference, featuring Peter Wagner, Rick Warren, and Carl George (then director of the Church Growth Department at the Fuller Evangelistic Association). They were expecting 400 attendees; nearly 1,000 people showed up. George told me, “These seminars marked the entry into the more modern Church Growth Movement and catalyzed one of Fuller’s most aggressive decades.”⁴

Slaybaugh, COO of the Fuller Institute at the time, remembers peeking into Warren’s classroom and being amazed that a 29-year-old with just 300 people in his church would fill the room to overflowing.⁵ The scene was a harbinger of the next era. Seeds were being sown for the entrepreneurial teaching pastors of large churches to play a pivotal role in equipping smaller church leaders and fueling the Megachurch Movement.

In his interviews with me, Elmer Towns stressed the significance of these Fuller seminars in catalyzing denominational officials from the executive level down to the state and local levels. He told me that “denominations began establishing church growth director roles and refocused evangelism on planting new churches

instead of simply growing or revitalizing existing churches.”⁶ Many of these denominational leaders also pursued degrees under Wagner in Fuller’s DMIN program.⁷

A New Standard

In 1984, Robert Logan was finishing his Doctor of Ministry at Fuller under Peter Wagner while pastoring a church he had planted, which in turn planted numerous other churches. Logan would go on to publish *The Church Planter’s Toolkit: A Self-Study Resource Kit for Church Planters and Those Who Supervise Them* in 1991.⁸ In it, Logan integrated McGavran’s growth principles into a systematic and organized process for launching new churches. His resources would help systematize the process of planting churches and impact thousands of new churches in the coming decades.

Logan’s toolkit, Hybels’ Seeker-Sensitive principles, and the Purpose-Driven Principles Warren used to launch Saddleback would synergistically influence the next generation of church planters and new churches. Simultaneously, entrepreneurial businessman Bob Buford’s launch of Leadership Network (more on this in chapter 8) would help scale the platforms and influence of large-church apostolic-teaching pastors like Hybels and Warren, producing catalytic momentum for the Megachurch Movement to build on the Seeker-Sensitive Movement.

From Colleges to Consultants and Teaching Churches

Until 1980, academic leaders and institutions, including seminary and college professors, spearheaded the Church Growth Movement. Through their research and work to distill principles, these pioneers played a vital role in the early dissemination of Church Growth thought. For more on this, I went back to Elmer Towns’ observations: “These educators invited pastors to church growth conferences at their institutions, or they had students who learned the principles of church growth and went to churches to apply what they heard,” Towns explained. “Many denominational leaders completed a Doctor of Ministry

degree at Fuller Theological Seminary and then returned to their group to influence the thinking of their denomination about church growth.”⁹

Throughout the 1970s, the Church Growth Movement established its institutional roots. Colleges and seminaries expanded their offerings. The Institute for American Church Growth (led by Win Arn) aggressively ran training seminars nationwide, and the influential magazine *Church Growth: America* began publishing. Numerous books were published that bridged theory and principles to church growth practices and methods. The church growth consulting industry was born with the formation of the Fuller Evangelical Association’s Department of Church Growth under John Wimber’s leadership. The consulting industry continued to expand in the 1980s and 1990s, as Church Growth Thought became the normative philosophy shaping church-planting and operations.

After 1980, the Church Growth Movement’s leadership was shifting from the academic classroom to local churches, spearheaded by practitioners. Interest in the church growth conversation was increasing, moving beyond principles to successful practices and methods. Fast-growing churches led by emerging leaders like Hybels, Warren, John Maxwell, Randy Pope, and Robert Lewis grew large and influential, using evangelistically driven, Seeker-Sensitive methods. Christian publishing and conferences began to tap into these practitioner leaders to write books and speak about their church’s success and growth. Many of these leaders began hosting or speaking at “Church Growth” conferences, attracting large numbers of pastors and leaders.

The Kingdom Impact of Bob Buford

About that time, Bob Buford, a successful Texas businessman, was considering how best to invest his time, talent, and wealth for Kingdom impact.

Buford’s mother had started a family-owned television business with a single ABC affiliate in Tyler, Texas. Upon her untimely death, Bob was thrust into the CEO role at age 32 and quickly grew the business’s profitability. In his words, his objective was to “outgrow all the public companies in this business in percentage

terms.”¹⁰ Over the coming decade, the company grew into a network of national cable systems with 25% annual growth returns.

Fred Smith Jr., Buford’s longtime friend and co-founder of Leadership Network, shared the backstory of Buford’s shift from a successful business entrepreneur to a Kingdom entrepreneur with me. Smith recalls his first connection with Buford in the mid-1970s. As Hybels was starting Willow Creek in 1976, Buford attended a faith-and-work conference organized by the Laity Leadership Institute (founded by Howard E. Butts and Billy Graham). Smith’s father, Fred Smith Sr., was the event’s facilitator. Buford told the elder Smith that at age twelve, he decided that his impact on the Kingdom would not be as a pastor.¹¹

The following year, Buford met with Smith’s son, Fred Smith Jr., to discuss how best to engage. Buford’s first idea was to bring management training to the church. Smith met with business schools to pursue options for a potential endowment to help equip church leaders. Buford concluded the collegiate approach was too institutional and opted for a more hands-on approach. Buford ushered a catalytic invitation to Smith: “Why don’t we work together?”¹² Their work would converge after Buford gained more clarity on strategically engaging in Kingdom work.

In 1984, Buford and Smith Jr. founded Leadership Network. Over time, Buford would quietly impact the Megachurch Movement in profound ways by bringing together strong Kingdom-minded business leaders such as Peter Drucker, Jim Collins, and Ken Blanchard with young emerging church leaders such as Hybels and Warren.

Buford provided encouragement and cheerleading to thousands of Kingdom leaders who shaped the landscape of Christianity in the United States. He maintained a scrapbook of his “Book of Days.” The set of ten-plus books contains thousands of “thank you, Bob” notes from leaders he encouraged and helped. He played an essential role in encouraging, mentoring, and fueling leaders across all domains of society, from athletes to presidents. His depth of influence is hard to describe. And he made this impact quietly, behind the scenes.

Randy Pope, one of the early megachurch pioneers influenced by Buford, said, “Bob Buford perhaps influenced the local Christian church beyond all other people—and all behind the scenes. His vision for the local church and resourcing innovative, mission-minded pastors has brought about kingdom impact beyond measure.”¹³ Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, echoed Pope’s sentiments, “While he was famous to many through his life, books, and organizations, his [Bob’s] influence for good has extended into the leadership of thousands who never met him and don’t know his name. His fingerprints of influence are everywhere, especially in the lives of pastors and the leading churches of this generation.”¹⁴

Reflecting on Buford’s impact after he died in 2018, leading Christian missiologist Ed Stetzer shared: “In a short amount of time, the influence moved from church growth specialists to local church pastors—key teaching churches and their pastors. What you might not know is how that took place behind the scenes. You might not know how these teaching churches and their pastors became the new locus of learning for churches around the world—and how much of it was made possible by Bob Buford. It was his influence that led to the rise of significant teaching churches, which essentially replaced the Church Growth Movement and remapped evangelicalism and beyond. He invested his time to train the trainers.”¹⁵

While Buford was launching Leadership Network in 1984, I was a college student pursuing an engineering degree and being recruited into a career with Admiral Hyman G. Rickover’s Naval Nuclear Propulsion program. Not yet a Christian, I had no inkling of the impact Bob Buford would one day have on my calling and life. His best-selling book, *Halftime: Moving from Success to Significance*¹⁶, was critical in my calling from the marketplace to full-time vocational ministry. Eventually, I served as his personal strategic advisor for nearly fifteen years until his death. His mentoring and personal values became foundational in Exponential, a nonprofit ministry I co-founded to come alongside church planters and multiplying churches.

The Kingdom Calling of Bob Buford

Let's take a look at some of the catalysts that fueled Bob Buford's impact. One of the most important pieces was Peter Drucker's entrance into Bob's life. At an early age, Bob lost his father, which created a noticeable hole in his life. He once told me that Drucker was a surrogate who helped fill that void. As a young entrepreneur leading a fast-growing company, Buford actively read management books. He was drawn to Drucker's writings. "Peter's thinking, so highly principled, felt as solid as granite to me," Buford once said. "He wrote from a perspective that gave me the steel girders that framed the business practice that guided me through a forest of here-today-and-gone-tomorrow concepts. In Peter, I found a soul mate."¹⁷

In 1981, at age 41, Buford sought Drucker out as a mentor. Initially, the relationship was through the lens of Buford's lucrative cable business. Still, it quickly shifted to their shared calling to see the church thrive and serve as a catalyst for a functioning society. Drucker's belief that the nonprofit sector and the church were key to a functioning society further appealed to Buford. Their relationship would deepen and remain heartfelt until Drucker died in 2005. Drucker influenced much of Buford's business and Kingdom thinking, including the eventual birth, mission, strategy, and growth of Leadership Network.

Drucker's impact on Buford's Kingdom thinking and the management principles that Bob brought to church leaders is undeniable: "Peter said the objective [of business management] is to make a church more churchlike," Buford said. "The mission is set down in the Great Commission and other places in the Bible. It's clear what God wants people to do. So the missing piece was how to go about doing it. How to bring a church up to scale—basically, to scale the church to the place of need in the community, rather than tapping out at two hundred people, which pays the bills. [Peter] once told me that your job is to transform the latent energy in American Christianity into active energy. And everything I do is in that realm."¹⁸

Reflecting on this pivotal season, Buford said that he "wanted to escape the pathological side of wealth and satisfy a much more important thing to do. ... What was vastly more important was my faith. The question for me, the tension

in my life, was not what I believed but what I was going to *do* about what I believed.”¹⁹

Buford was intentionally strategic about shifting from pursuing success rooted in money to pursuing significance, living in the sweet spot of his unique Kingdom calling. He scheduled an extended meeting with Mike Kami, a strategic business consultant. He describes the time as transformational and catalytic. Let’s go inside the room where it happened. Kami explained that before he could help Buford set the course for the second half of his life, he needed to know what was most important to him. As the story is told, he asked Buford to draw a box on a piece of paper. “I’ve been listening to you for two hours,” Kami said, “and I can’t help you unless you put one thing in the box. It is either money or Jesus Christ.” One symbol, one passion—Bob had to choose.

When Bob placed that little cross in the middle of the box, he felt he was saying to God, “*I’m yours. From now on, nothing will be as important to me as You.*” That decision launched Bob into his parallel career.²⁰ That cross in the box set the course for everything that followed, including the organization that would pour gasoline on the megachurch phenomenon.

Reflection Questions

Are You Learning from Practitioners or Principles?

The movement shifted from seminary professors teaching principles to successful pastors teaching practices—but practices that work in one context don’t always transfer to another. Look at the last three church leadership resources you consumed (books, podcasts, conferences)—how many taught you replicable principles versus copying someone else’s successful practices? What would it look like to learn biblical principles of disciple-making from Jesus himself instead of importing someone else’s weekend service model?

What Would You Put in Your Box?

Mike Kami forced Buford to choose: money or Jesus, one passion in the box. If someone asked you to draw a box and put one symbol representing your

church's primary passion, what would you draw? Would it be a cross (making disciples who multiply), a building (growing attendance and programs), or something else? Look at your church's budget, calendar, and staff time over the last quarter—what does the actual data say is in your box, regardless of what your mission statement claims?



CHAPTER 8

Leadership Network

Fueling the Large Church Phenomenon

“My mission is to transform the latent capacity of American Christianity into active energy.”

~ Bob Buford, Founder of Leadership Network

“So you are pioneering, you are creating a new field of human activity, almost. And you are setting standards of effectiveness. I’ve never seen anything as effective in such economy of means as Leadership Network, and I mean it.”

~ Peter Drucker, Father of Modern Management

In some ways, the modern Church Growth Movement is remembered as a Boomer story—embodied by leaders like Bill Hybels and Rick Warren who built and scaled the megachurch phenomenon that came to define an era. Yet the more time I’ve spent tracing the history, the clearer it becomes that Boomers were builders standing on foundations quietly laid by three generations before them.

Donald McGavran, born in 1897, a member of the Lost Generation, asked the first disruptive questions about how people come to faith and gave us the missiological framework that made church growth thinkable. Peter Drucker and Robert Schuller, members of the Greatest Generation, legitimized the idea that churches could thoughtfully apply management and organizational insights to mission and think beyond the traditional paradigm of the church. And Bob

Buford, a product of the Silent Generation, became the quiet architect who connected these ideas to emerging Boomer leaders and created the platforms they needed to run their organizations.

Leadership Network sits right at the convergence of those generational streams. When it was founded in 1983, I was a college student focused on an engineering career, completely unaware that this behind-the-scenes network would become one of the most catalytic ministries in the American church—and that it would eventually intersect with my own calling decades later. Years later, I would serve as Bob Buford’s personal strategic advisor, and in 2021, I stepped in as the interim CEO of Leadership Network before it merged into Exponential. Even with that unique front-row seat, it wasn’t until researching this book that I fully grasped the richness of Leadership Network’s history and its important role in platforming innovators, connecting large-church leaders, and quietly shaping the DNA of the Megachurch Era.

From Success to Significance

In 1983, Buford again talked with Fred Smith Sr., ready to engage more directly in Kingdom work. Buford actively participated in the Young Presidents’ Organization (YPO). YPO’s founder, Ray Hickok, started the organization with a group of young executives who met regularly to share ideas and learn from one another. According to YPO’s website, “YPO is an inclusive community of open sharing and trust. We learn from one another, access rich learning programs, share exceptional experiences, and make lasting friendships. YPO opens a world of relationships and opportunities that create a monumental impact for your business and for your life.”¹

Buford’s YPO experience shaped the foundation of Leadership Network and the work to which he would devote the second half of his life. He told Smith Sr. that he needed help starting a YPO-type forum for church leaders, focusing on engaging management principles in the church. Smith Sr. had a long history with *Christianity Today* (CT) magazine and introduced Buford to CT Publisher Harold Myra and Editor Paul Robbins. CT agreed to coordinate the first Large

Church Pastor's Forum of approximately 20 leaders, with Buford funding the initiative.

In April 1984, a group of leaders, including leaders like Bill Hybels and Randy Pope, gathered for the first forum. Pope remembers his time there, "We were invited to connect, network, and be equipped. I knew a 'wealthy man' had funded our trips, but until I met him at the gathering, I didn't know it was Bob Buford."²

The gathering was a huge success. Buford wanted more, enthusiastically saying, "Let's do it again!" Soon, Fred Smith Jr. joined Buford in the work, and Leadership Network was born (the name "Leadership Network" was chosen later in 1986).

As Smith Jr. planned the second forum for April 1985, he recalls being influenced by Barbara Wheeler's white paper, "Tall Steeple Churches." Wheeler studied large Presbyterian churches to see what their leaders needed most in terms of equipping. She found they had little interest in seminaries, in denominational gatherings, or in connecting with their peers.

Smith concluded that the interconnectedness among U.S. denominations was lacking and that large-church pastors would value peer-to-peer learning and networking across denominational lines. These large-church pastors became the primary "customers" for Leadership Network, receiving intimate, cross-denominational peer-to-peer YPO-style engagement.

Smith Jr. took me through his strategy. His first task was to create a database of these large-church pastors. His threshold for "large" was at least a thousand people attending on a Sunday. With no internet access or existing lists to use, Smith Jr. spent a year using the Yellow Pages in major metro areas to identify potential prospects.

He explained his grassroots tactics:

"I assumed the churches with the most prominent Yellow Pages ads were likely the largest in their geographic areas. I'd call and interview lead pastors and ask them if there were other large churches in their area."³ This major networking

initiative positioned Leadership Network to connect with thousands of influential leaders and become known as a pioneering leader in the coming Megachurch Movement.

He recalls that the timing of these forums was “just right” for the peer-to-peer relationships the large-church pastors desired. “We were building a community and didn’t know it,” he said. Eventually, the forums settled into a rhythm of five a year under the banner “Church in the 21st Century.”

Thinking back to these early days of Leadership Network, Randy Pope recalls, “There was always a theme, but not an agenda, with at least one ‘big name’ leader like Peter Drucker, Ken Blanchard, or Lyle Schaller. The gatherings were intimate and highly interactive, with little focus on theology. Small group breakouts were built around the practical issues of leading and growing large churches. Before Leadership Network, there were no conferences or cross-denominational equipping opportunities on the unique challenges of growing large, sustainable churches.”⁴

Robert Lewis, then the lead pastor of Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, attended many of Leadership Network’s invite-only gatherings in the 1980s and became a lifelong friend of Buford’s, eventually officiating at his funeral. Lewis remembers that the gatherings were practical, focusing on the most pressing issues for growing churches.

“The peer-to-peer connection and intimacy were the strength,” he recalls, thinking back to those catalytic moments. “We didn’t have the internet, social media, or cell phones in those days. Those gatherings created meaningful relational connections we wouldn’t otherwise have had.”⁵

Pope attributes Leadership Network for expanding his Kingdom perspective. “I was granted the privilege of seeing the church’s potential impact as much bigger than I otherwise would have,” he says.⁶

As I talked to these leaders, I began to see the integral connection between Leadership Network and the Church Growth Movement. Leadership Network set the stage for leaders like Bill Hybels and Rick Warren to establish the

significant teaching and resourcing platforms of the Willow Creek Association and Purpose-Driven Church. From 1984 to 1996, the expansion of Leadership Network, including its Large Church Network, Leadership Training Network, Church Champions initiative, Young Leaders Forum (the genesis of the Emergent movement), and Foundation Conferences, represented the premier platforming ministry in America for fueling innovation in the church and the Megachurch Movement.

Noteworthy are Buford and Drucker's roles in shaping the enormous teaching and church-resourcing platforms of Purpose Driven and the Willow Creek Association. Buford and Drucker were both mentors to Hybels and Warren. Buford partnered with Hybels in the 1980s and early 1990s to fund foundation conferences that inspired thousands of young Kingdom-minded business leaders. And in Hybels' book, *Courageous Leadership*, he highlights the significance of Drucker's mentoring: "Often during conversations about staff performance, I am silently pondering the teachings of the two men who have most shaped my thinking on this issue. Who are they? Jesus and Peter Drucker—in that order, of course."⁷

The megachurch phenomenon was inevitable, given the convergence of factors we've read about, including the intersection of the consumer movement and the rise of suburbia. Driven by a pioneering spirit and burden for lostness, leaders like Hybels and Warren were naturally drawn to business management principles that could help them "go big!"

The leaders of these emerging megachurches were schooled in theology, but most lacked business acumen. As pioneers seeking to scale churches, they were naturally drawn to leaders like Drucker and Buford for coaching, mentoring, and wisdom. If you were writing a script for Kingdom-minded business leaders to shape this new landscape, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more dynamic "yin and yang" duo than Buford and Drucker. Coincidence? I think not. These two friends were instrumental in fueling the emerging era of business management in the church, which we will cover in the next section.

Reflection Questions

Are You Learning What Works or What Jesus Modeled?

Leadership Network's strength was sharing "what works" for growing large churches—but "what works" isn't always what Jesus modeled. Look at your last three leadership decisions about ministry approach—did you choose methods based on proven results from large churches, or based on biblical principles of disciple-making? What would change if you prioritized faithfulness to Jesus' method over effectiveness at attracting crowds?

What's Your Church's "Large Church" Threshold?

Fred Smith set the bar at 1,000 weekend attendees to define which churches mattered enough to connect. What's your church's threshold for success—at what attendance number would you consider your ministry "successful"? If you could only measure reproductive disciple-making (disciples who made disciples who planted churches) and couldn't count weekend attendance, would your church still look successful, or would you need a major restructure?



SECTION 3

Growing the Movement

Business Principles, Purpose-Driven Models, and the Megachurch Explosion

The decade from 1985 to 1995 marked the explosive growth phase of the Church Growth Movement, when what had been birthed in the mission fields and defined in American suburban churches suddenly scaled to unprecedented proportions. This was the era when the Church Growth Movement discovered the power of systematic implementation, business management principles, and replicable frameworks that could transform churches of any size into growing, dynamic organizations.

More than any other period, these ten years established the modern Church Growth Movement as a dominant force in American evangelicalism. The movement had expanded beyond pioneering experiments to become a proven methodology with measurable results, institutional credibility, and widespread adoption. During this period, we saw the birth of the foundational operating system of contemporary church life—an operating system that remains deeply embedded in our evangelical church culture today.

The Business Management Revolution

The defining characteristic of this era was the systematic integration of business management principles into church operations. What had begun as McGavran's missiological insights and Hybels' Seeker-Sensitive innovations now encountered sophisticated management theories and practices transforming American corporations.

The catalyst for this integration was the recognition that growing churches were becoming increasingly complex organizations that required professional management capabilities. As churches expanded beyond a few hundred members, traditional pastoral approaches to leadership and administration proved inadequate. The movement needed new tools for managing growth—and it found them in the business world.

This wasn't merely about adopting corporate terminology or organizational charts—it represented a fundamental shift in how church leaders understood their role and responsibilities. Pastors began to see themselves as CEOs of growing enterprises, responsible not just for spiritual care but for strategic planning, staff management, financial stewardship, and organizational development.

The Purpose-Driven Paradigm

The business management revolution found its most elegant expression in Rick Warren's Purpose-Driven Paradigm, emerging as the dominant framework for church growth during this period. Warren's genius lay in his ability to synthesize McGavran's church-growth principles, business-management practices, and biblical foundations into a simple, accessible, and highly replicable model.

The Purpose-Driven approach provided what the movement had been lacking: a comprehensive, scalable roadmap that any church leader could understand and implement. Warren's five purposes, baseball diamond progression, and systematic processes gave churches a clear pathway from vision to implementation. More importantly, the model was flexible enough to be adapted to diverse contexts while maintaining its core integrity.

The publication of Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Church* in 1995 marked the culmination of this era, codifying a decade of practical experience into a resource that would influence thousands of churches and become the foundational text for church-planting in the coming decades.

The Megachurch Explosion

The most visible manifestation of the Church Growth Movement was the dramatic rise in megachurches during this period. From approximately 150 megachurches in 1980, the number quadrupled to 600 by 1995—a 400% increase in just fifteen years that represented one of the most remarkable organizational phenomena in American religious history.

This explosion wasn't simply about individual churches growing larger; it represented the successful scaling of church growth principles across diverse contexts and demographics. The megachurch became both the symbol and the validation of the movement's effectiveness, demonstrating that church growth principles could produce consistent, measurable results when properly applied.

Peter Drucker's Influence

Much of the business management integration was shaped by Peter Drucker's influential mentoring. As we saw in chapter 8, Bob Buford's Leadership Network became the vehicle through which Drucker's management thinking reached church leaders like Bill Hybels and Rick Warren.

Drucker's emphasis on effectiveness, measurement, innovation, and customer focus provided a theoretical framework that enabled church leaders to professionalize their operations without sacrificing their spiritual focus. His influence helped legitimize the integration of business principles into church life and provided intellectual credibility for the movement's growth-oriented approach.

Market Orientation and Church Marketing

Perhaps the most controversial development of this era was the Church Growth Movement's embrace of marketing principles, including market research, demographic analysis, and marketing. Churches began identifying target audiences, conducting market research, and developing comprehensive marketing strategies to reach their communities.

This shift toward market orientation represented both the logical extension of McGavran's insights about understanding people groups and a significant departure from traditional approaches to church outreach. The emergence of church marketing as a professional industry created new tools and resources for growth while raising important questions about the relationship between spiritual mission and commercial methodology.

The six chapters in this section explore how these various elements came together to fuel the Church Growth Movement's dramatic growth: the integration of business management principles, the development and impact of the Purpose-Driven Paradigm, the megachurch explosion and its implications, Peter Drucker's influential mentoring, the shift toward customer orientation, and the emergence of church marketing as an industry.

By 1995, the Church Growth Movement had achieved a level of scale, sophistication, and cultural influence that would have been unimaginable to Donald McGavran when he first published *Bridges of God* forty years earlier. The Church Growth Movement had truly grown—and in that growth lay both remarkable achievements and emerging challenges that would shape the decades to come.



CHAPTER 9

Reaching the Consumer Customer

Modern Business Management in the Church

“Look what difference it made when Willow began to think of new customers as Seekers and to program specifically to their needs.”

~ Bob Buford, Founder of Leadership Network

People are naturally drawn to the charisma of leaders who have a pioneering spirit, an evangelistic passion, and a willingness to follow the fresh wind of the Spirit. I first met Jesus through their work and this movement. That first Willow Creek church service I attended in the movie theatre in the 1970s was unique, memorable, compelling, and infectious. You were left with a sense of anticipation of what you might miss next week if you didn't show up on Sunday.

The Seeker-Sensitive approach was naturally appealing to non-Christian consumers like my family, and it created an experience we wanted to share with our friends. Friends inviting friends to an attractive, Sunday-centric experience formed the flywheel of the Seeker-Sensitive Phenomenon.

I now see the unintended consequences of how this flywheel gained traction and built momentum. Programmatic and institutional conversions generally took priority over a slower relational disciple-making growth engine capable

of biblical multiplication. The church's growth engine shifted from personal evangelism to institutional programs, and from relational disciple-making to transactional conversions. This opened the door for the church to become more of a social and programmatic affiliation than a deeply relational family dynamic with spiritual brothers and sisters.

Donald McGavran's church growth ideals and the Seeker-Sensitive Phenomenon's consumer-focused strategies shared common priorities, including evangelism, demographic research, and growth measurement. Hybels represented a new generation of apostolic and evangelistically gifted leaders who leveraged business management principles and practices to turn the Seeker-Sensitive approach into a movement.

In context, it's understandable how these emerging gifted leaders would naturally embrace a measure of success that pointed toward securing decisions for Christ, resulting in the endgame of growing large, sustainable churches.

Consider the paradox of Schuller's faith challenge to Hybels: Do we offer up to God a fifty-gallon- or a thimble-sized cup? What would you have done in response to Schuller's counsel? The dream and the answer to their prayers were rooted in growing a large church. Filling the cup (or bucket or tub) is important, but how you add makes all the difference and sets the stage for McGavran's original principles to be co-opted.

Business management tactics became the toolbox for enhancing programmatic growth, setting the stage for an entirely new church consulting industry that would simultaneously leverage programs' strengths and overcome the inherent growth barriers they create. In seeking to become more attractive to our unchurched communities and to market our programs, we set the stage for an attractional "come and see" church. These strategies prioritized accumulation over mobilization, with success measured by growth in individual church attendance rather than by the collective fruit of aggressive church-planting.

Many of the unintended consequences that have produced our prevailing consumer-driven church operating system are rooted in how we've applied business management principles, not in the principles themselves.

In a podcast, Gary McIntosh notes that McGavran never thought that the term “church growth” would become synonymous with business principles: “Younger pastors today were raised at a time when church growth was all about business management principles and marketing the church. I think part of what happened is that American entrepreneurialism co-opted the term ‘church growth’ via publishing, marketing, and business principles.”¹

McIntosh continued, “When ‘church growth’ became such a popular term, it gradually picked up baggage, other topics, and other ideas that were *never* in McGavran’s mind. McGavran never thought of church growth as management, marketing, or advertising. Although he knew that churches had to be managed and churches would advertise, he never in his mind perceived that church growth would be known as marketing or advertising.”²

Business Management and the Church

Critics quickly and appropriately run to questions like, “What exactly is a business, and how does it relate or apply to the church? What makes a business a business and a church a church? What principles and practices apply to both, and which are more appropriately applied to only businesses?” Similar questions, such as “What is profitability?” and “Who is the owner?,” are equally valid.

To work through these questions meaningfully, the words “business, owners, customers, and profitability” must be contextualized to the church. For example, profitability in the secular marketplace means financial return on investment. In the church, we measure it differently. “Profit,” according to Drucker, is not just the monetary reward or outcome of business. It’s more of a holistic test of the business’s validity. Per Drucker’s definition, profitability in the church would be measured by factors such as faithfulness, honoring God, and life change.

Similarly, a “customer” in the secular marketplace is the person we must please and convince to purchase our product or service. Words matter, and “customer” means something different in the church. It’s this difference that concerns critics: Is our customer “Jesus” because we ultimately need to please him? Or is our customer the lost person we need to reach with our message, so that we can

attract them? The reality is it's both, but this divergence in application warrants caution. We must please Jesus, our founder and owner, and then work diligently to reach lost people.

The Bookkeeping of Eternity

Drucker understood the unique benefits and challenges of the church. In his book, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization*, he wrote, “All nonprofits have one essential product: a changed human being. This is a different approach from business. In business, your goal is not to change or educate the customer; it's to satisfy the customer. Nonprofits aim for change. Hospitals seek to change sick patients into healthy ones. Schools aim to change students into educated individuals. The church has a difficult problem because the books are not kept on this side [of eternity]. But I would say the church's aim is to make a difference in how the parishioner lives—to change the parishioner's values into God's.”³

If our customers are the lost people in our communities, our role is not to satisfy or change them. Only Jesus can do that after a life-transforming relationship with him, resulting in continual surrender to his Lordship. Our mission is to faithfully make biblical disciples who make disciples who plant churches that plant churches until we see gospel saturation.

Pressing into the unique challenges that cause churches to dilute their focus from this primary mission of making disciples, Drucker told *Christianity Today*, “Often people feel the church exists to take care of problems. And it's terribly hard for the church to say no. The church needs to be market-driven. But it also needs to understand its purpose. The two things have to mesh.”⁴ Leading a church is complex and causes leaders to get pulled in many directions.

Drucker understood the importance of responsiveness to customers and the complexity of the nonprofit's customer base. He was keenly aware of the temptation to become overly focused on institutional programs as we seek to please people and meet their felt needs. He also understood the tension in balancing the priorities of reaching and serving, going and making.

Drucker said, “If you’re only eternity-driven, you quickly become bureaucratic. You lose touch with people and lose your effectiveness. If you’re only market-driven, you quickly become mercenary and totally opportunistic. You need both. There’s nothing wrong with the Girl Scouts, but the church is not the Girl Scouts. There’s nothing wrong with the country club, but we aren’t the country club. We are a church. And we have certain things we value that are not of value to anybody else. That’s where we should focus.”⁵

Drucker highlights our current paradox: *Are we more like the Girl Scouts and country clubs than the communities of faith Jesus desires for us to be? What changes are we calling our customers to in our prevailing Consumer-Driven Operating System?* Surrendered lives of submission to King Jesus and his counter-cultural commands or a club membership requiring periodic attendance and financial contributions? Are we calling people to an adventurous life of mission and significance in God’s earthly and eternal plans, or to the continually evolving perks of church-country-club living?

McGavran defined success as more holistic disciple-making that produces genuine conversion, active participation in a local church family, and ongoing transformation. He was not the author of institutional, programmatic growth in the U.S. church. That came as part of the co-opting of his principles. He championed an urgent, outwardly focused conversion to evangelistically grow the church through church-planting. As noted earlier, we’ve lowered or eliminated the bar for church membership. Consequently, we’ve functionally defined “customer success” as attendance and participation rather than surrender and transformation.

Ironically, like McGavran, Drucker called for more substantive change than we expect in our Consumer-Driven Operating System. Drucker’s life purpose was to see a “functioning society.” How does a consuming, cultural Christian seeking to meet their felt needs mobilize in a way capable of fulfilling Drucker’s dream? They can’t. They consume and must be served. When we define success as winning them to a new form of consumption, we produce what we have now.

To be clear, our problem is not taking a customer posture or following solid business management principles. Even McGavran strongly advocated proven,

pragmatic systems and used data and research to better understand and reach customers (though he would probably call them the “lost”). Our problem lies in how we define winning or “change” for the customer, and not in our strategy to pursue the lost as customers.

The single most significant factor in the evolution, or co-opting, of McGavran’s original principles into the Seeker-Sensitive Paradigm is the customer focus. This customer posture of finding and being more evangelistically effective in reaching non-Christian seekers is arguably consistent with many of McGavran’s core principles. The customer is embraced as a non-Christian in the community that we seek to reach and assimilate into our membership. Success becomes getting as many people there as possible.

Critics argue two points. First, win the lost through consumer strategies that produce conversion without surrendering to Jesus’ Lordship, and you will always have consumers. Many see these strategies as optimized to produce cultural Christians. Second, they argue that Jesus should be the primary customer in stewarding our message, means, money, and metrics. Our strategies should be aligned with his. While McGavran’s principles weren’t rooted in business or customer-oriented strategy, they did lend themselves to easy co-opting in this direction.

In distilling McGavran’s principles to their fundamental core, I see six non-negotiables.

McGavran’s Growth Ideals

Be motivated and driven by reaching lost people through life-changing conversions
Use research to identify natural bridges or meaningful connections to potentially receptive converts
Develop culturally pragmatic strategic methods for reaching and evangelizing these potential converts

The mission field is beyond the walls of the church, where everyday disciple-making missionaries work, live, learn, and play.
Measure success by reaching, converting, and mobilizing, not by collecting organic or transfer growth
Plant churches for saturation through the fruit of repeated, generational disciple-making

So, how might these principles be co-opted? Consider this simple exercise through the lens of Drucker’s customer questions. Let’s look at the four principles above through a business management, customer-focused lens. To do this, replace the words “lost people” with “potential customers,” “life-changing conversions” with “transactional sales,” “converts” with “customers,” and “reaching and evangelizing” with “marketing and programming.” The four principles listed above would then read something like:

Business Translation

Be motivated and driven by reaching lost people through life-changing conversions potential customers to produce transactional sales
Use research to identify natural bridges or meaningful connections to potentially receptive converts ; and address the felt needs of potential customers
Develop culturally pragmatic strategic methods for reaching and evangelizing potential converts attractive marketing and programming strategies for reaching potential customers
The mission field is beyond the walls of the church, where everyday disciple-making missionaries work, live, learn, and play market is anywhere we can attract potential customers to our spectacular Sunday sales event and periodic seasonal sales bonanzas

Measure success by the lost being surrendered and saved total sales transactions, and revenue
Repeat relational disciple-making generationally to plant churches and grow the Big C church! Repeat weekly and scale ever-increasing sales to optimize growth for a single franchise location.

Now, take the exercise one step further and replace “sales” with “attendance growth” and “revenue” with “offerings.” This provides a fairly good description of the current Consumer-Driven Operating System.

McGavran’s Co-Opted Growth Ideals

Be motivated and driven by reaching potential customers to produce transactional attendance growth
Use research to identify the felt needs of potential customers
Develop attractive marketing and programming strategies for reaching potential customers
The market is anywhere we can attract potential customers to our spectacular weekly Sunday services and periodic seasonal outreach bonanzas
Measure success by total attendance growth and offerings
Repeat and drive ever-increasing attendance growth in a single church without church-planting or geographic saturation.

How we add makes all the difference, and who we define as the primary customer will drive our strategy. Jesus, as our primary customer, will produce an endgame of gospel saturation and a core mission and growth engine of relational disciple-making, as Jesus modeled it. However, Rick Warren’s primary customers, Saddleback Sam and Samantha, give us a different endgame and growth engine.

Regardless of your view on who the primary customer should be, the central, unifying principle that has driven the strategies of the Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch Movements—and is embedded in our prevailing Consumer-Driven Operating System—is seeing the non-Christian in our communities as the primary customer. Winning is the conversion transaction, regardless of the depth or quality of surrender or what comes after securing it.

The Association of Religious Archives (ARDA) puts it this way: “American evangelicals coupled their love for evangelism and missions with a new pragmatism steeped in marketing and business strategies. The result was a new emphasis on consumer- or customer-oriented church growth. Evangelicals concentrated on institutional factors that would attract a target customer within a targeted market to facilitate growth.”⁶

Critics argue that this approach shifts our measure of success from the eternal impact of developing fully surrendered followers of Jesus to a more temporal, worldly posture of “self-help” through the consumption of institutional programs and services. I think of A. W. Tozer’s famous quote: “You win them to what you win them with.”

Win consumers through programs, and you’ll build a large and growing church of consumers who continually need new and improved programs. Ironically, these growth-oriented programs generally consume staff hours, volunteer hours, and financial resources, with no capacity for biblical reproduction.

The well-intentioned co-opting of McGavran’s principles is inseparable from the programmatic consumer- or customer-oriented growth engines we’ve embedded in our prevailing church operating systems.

Regardless of our view on the appropriateness of applying business management principles in the church, particularly a market-driven approach, these principles have significantly impacted the Megachurch Movement, an outgrowth of the Seeker-Sensitive Movement. The evolution and co-opting of McGavran’s original principles in the American context into the Seeker-Sensitive Movement, and then the Megachurch Movement, are understandable.

Speaking to Buford about applying business management to the needs of the emerging Megachurch Movement, Drucker said, “The function of management in a church is to make the church more church-like, not to make it more business-like.”⁷ Although critics contend that the church became more business-like, that was never Drucker’s or Buford’s intention.

In addition to mobilizing and empowering a new generation of teaching churches like Willow Creek and Saddleback, Drucker and Buford helped solidify the already emerging customer orientation in churches, set the stage for the impact and ripple effect of applied marketing practices in the church, established a new measure of success for the church, and enabled the era of the senior pastor as church CEO.

These impacts helped light a fire under the Purpose-Driven Church paradigm and the Megachurch Movement, enabling the continued co-opting of McGavran’s original Church Growth Movement principles.

Drucker’s profound influence on the Church Growth Movement and his remarkable personal journey from Austrian refugee to management pioneer merit fuller treatment, which we’ll explore in Chapter 12.

Reflection Questions

Who Is Your Primary Customer—Jesus or Seekers?

Bill Hybels designed Willow Creek to satisfy seeker preferences (entertaining services, minimal financial appeals, a casual environment), which produced explosive growth but also created consumers rather than disciples. Look at your church’s last major ministry decision—did you prioritize faithfulness to Jesus’ disciple-making method, or did you prioritize attracting and satisfying people? What would change if you treated Jesus as the primary customer whose mission (making disciples who make disciples) defines success?

Are Your Programs Capable of Reproduction?

List your church's top five programs (weekend services, small groups, children's ministry, etc.) and ask: Can these programs reproduce without additional staff, budget, and facilities? If you planted a church tomorrow with no paid staff and no building, which programs could multiply through volunteer-led relational investment? The percentage of reproducible programs reveals whether your church is built for addition (programmatic growth) or multiplication (disciple-making movements).



CHAPTER 10

The Purpose-Driven Paradigm

*Lighting the Fire on the Megachurch Phenomenon
1990 to 1995*

In many ways, Hill Country Bible Church in northwest Austin became a living case study of the Purpose-Driven paradigm. Led by my longtime friend Tim Hawks, the church grew into a large, attractional, externally focused, multisite congregation that helped launch a regional church-planting network and the national ministry Christ Together. Tim is a respected pastor and strategic thinker, and his story embodies both the excitement and the eventual tensions that came with fully embracing the Purpose-Driven model.

I asked Tim to share his account of how this paradigm helped name and accelerate what they were already becoming:

“In March of 1989, our minivan, loaded with my expecting wife and our 18-month-old first child, pulled up to a small building behind the Dairy Queen in far northwest Austin—the home of a recently planted Hill Country Bible Church. As graduates of Dallas Seminary, we had already seen God do miracles as we planted and led a church in Ruston, Louisiana, for 3.5 years, but this felt like stepping into a whole new calling. The ‘church behind the Dairy Queen’ quickly became home, and that little building behind a fast-food restaurant would be our family’s spiritual base for the next 35 years.”

Northwest Austin was booming, and the people we came to lead were highly committed to evangelism, discipleship, and the expansion of the kingdom of God. God moved, and the church grew rapidly—every time we added a service, the room filled; every time we knocked down a wall, it seemed like it was only a matter of months before we were out of space again. Long before we had language for it, we were already living many of the instincts that the Purpose-Driven model would later describe.

When we finally encountered the Purpose-Driven paradigm and the frameworks Rick Warren taught, it was as if someone had handed us a blueprint for what God was already guiding us toward. The model gave us simple language to align our staff and core leaders around a clear, customer-centric strategy for reaching people far from God, and our growth accelerated. Before long, our people were fully embedded in the movement's practices, and everything was up and to the right when it came to church growth. Hundreds—perhaps thousands—of my peers around the country were living a similar experience.”

It's understandable how Warren's Purpose-Driven approach became a significant shaping force in our current American church operating system. Warren positioned his approach to focus on health, believing that healthy things grow. Consider the book's subtitle: "Growth without compromising your message & mission." Like Hybels, Warren was passionate about reaching lost people, but as a missionary at heart, he also sought to grow a sending church.

Warren's memorable, common-sense elements made his Purpose-Driven Model easily accessible to most churches. Eventually, his approach increased the visibility, accessibility, and acceleration of the Seeker-Sensitive Movement, helping fuel the Megachurch Movement. And his approach was consistent with McGavran's teachings.

Doug Slaybaugh shared with me that in the early 1990s, he transitioned from his role at Fuller to work with Rick Warren—he called it a "wild season." Slaybaugh reminded me that Bob Buford initially funded his salary to help launch Purpose-Driven Ministries and also funded an aggressive city tour schedule of Purpose-Driven Church events throughout 1993. Warren recalls, "After attending our

Purpose-Driven Church training in 1990, Bob said, ‘Everybody needs to hear this!’ so he financed 13 Purpose-Driven Church seminars across America.”¹

Slaybaugh and Warren jumped on this opportunity, pulling together events in cities nationwide, each averaging 1,000 attendees. Slaybaugh recalls that demand was high, and they were shifting the paradigm for how the church could be done more effectively and how churches should be planted.²

Slaybaugh says he was impressed by Warren’s grasp of the importance of understanding customers. “Rick was ahead of his time, going directly to the consumer as a teaching church. He took Peter Drucker’s mentoring seriously. If you control distribution, you control your destiny. This approach was not as commonplace as it is now.”³ Warren’s book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*⁴, and related national churchwide campaigns debuted soon after in 1995.

The iconic book codified the content of his city-tour conferences and made his approach accessible to even more leaders. The book sold more than a million copies and became the road map for 21st-century church-planting. Warren’s Purpose-Driven Principles and approach were intuitive, easy to understand, easy to integrate into a contextual implementation plan, and grounded in the experience of a successful church planter.

Brett Andrews, lead minister of New Life Christian Church in Chantilly, Virginia (the church I’m a part of), has noted that, aside from the Bible, three resources most impacted the planning and launch of his New Life in 1994. These included a Fuller seminar in the late 1980s, Bob Logan’s Church Planter’s Toolkit, and one of the Purpose-Driven events in 1993. Of course, Andrews isn’t alone. Over the past forty years, thousands of church planters have been influenced by the legacy of McGavran’s work through Fuller, which has grown into an entire industry of church growth resources, such as Purpose-Driven.

Andrews recalls Warren’s significant impact on him, his wife Laura, and the church they launched. He remembers, “Approaching the end of the millennium, young church planters knew the church of the future wouldn’t look like the churches we grew up in. But how could we change strategies and structures while remaining true to the unchanging Scriptures? When Warren said, ‘It’s simple.

Follow the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, five purposes, lived out on one baseball diamond,' he gave us a fresh vision and strategy for God to do a new thing in our church plants."

Warren believed in McGavran's original principles and sought to implement them in the Purpose-Driven Paradigm. Like many other influential church leaders in America, Warren received his DMIN from Fuller under Peter Wagner, with his dissertation serving as the foundation for his best-selling book. For thousands of leaders and churches, Warren's work and the Purpose-Driven Paradigm have a far-reaching impact on the landscape of Christianity. The paradigm is so deeply embedded in Christian culture that it has become the foundational core of our Consumer-Driven Operating System. Once viewed as revolutionary, it is now inherited and embraced by successive generations without a full understanding of its origins.

For me, Warren's work is personal. My children professed their faith in Jesus at New Life, a Purpose-Driven church. I was also called to vocational ministry there, where I continued serving as a strategic missionary to church-planting and founded Exponential (exponential.org). Warren even served on my leadership team for a season. Hybels' and Warren's work is forever embedded in my spiritual heritage.

Warren tells the story of Saddleback Church during their membership class. The following excerpt from a transcript of Rick Warren as he taught Saddleback's 101 Membership Class shows why Saddleback became an excellent American case study of the application of McGavran's principles and why Warren was invited to be a teaching team member during those early Fuller seminars:

What kind of church are we going to be? What kind of strategy are we going to have? When I realized there were already a bunch of good churches reaching Christians, I said, 'Let's be a church for the unchurched.'

If we were going to reach people who'd never been to church, I needed to go out and talk to them, find out what kind of church would interest them, and get their attention. In the twelve weeks leading up to our launch of public services at Easter, I went door to door, visiting people

in the Saddleback Valley. To every home I went, I'd have my clipboard and say, 'Hi, I'm Rick Warren, and I'm here to take an opinion poll. I'm not here to sell you anything. I'm not here to convert you. I'm not here to invite you to anything. I'm just here to take your opinion.' I didn't have anyone turn me down. I asked if they were an active member of a local church. If they said 'no', I asked them four questions: *Why do you think most people don't attend church? If you were looking for a church, what things would you look for? What advice would you give me as the pastor of a new church that really wants to benefit the community? How can I help you?*

From this door-to-door survey work, I summarized all the information and identified the four biggest complaints people gave as to why they didn't go to church. The church strategy emerged by listening to and learning from the local residents we hoped to reach.

Once I had interviewed all those thousands of people, I developed a little profile of the typical person we were trying to reach. We call that person Saddleback Sam. Saddleback Sam is married to his lovely wife, Saddleback Samantha. They have two kids, Saddleback Steve and Sally. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4, when I'm with people, I try to become like them in order to reach them. When I'm with Jewish people, I become like a Jew to reach the Jews. When I'm with Greek people, I become like a Greek to reach the Greeks. I build a bridge to where they are. I become like them to tell them about Christ. A missionary doesn't say, "Learn my language, and then I'll tell you about Christ." He says, "I'll learn your language." If Paul were in California, he'd say, "When I'm in California to reach Californians, I become like a Californian."

Saddleback Sam and his family put a face and "target" on who the church was trying to reach. This target drove the strategy, the decision-making, the budget, and the tactics. It became the tip of the spear for the Purpose Driven Model.

Saddleback Sam gets to hear about Jesus by somebody getting close to him and becoming his friend. Somebody says, "Hey, Sam! You've got

to come to this church. It's incredible. You don't even have to come on Sunday. You could come on Saturday night. Come to this building that's real light and bright and airy and doesn't even look like a church. The pastor doesn't wear a robe. You don't even have to wear a suit. The pastor doesn't even wear socks! They tell jokes. And the music isn't hymns; it's like contemporary pop music. The messages aren't like, "Who is the best in Revelation?" It's like "How do I handle the financial stress in my life?" You're not going to believe this church. Come on, Sam!" That's about how 80% of the people in this church got here.

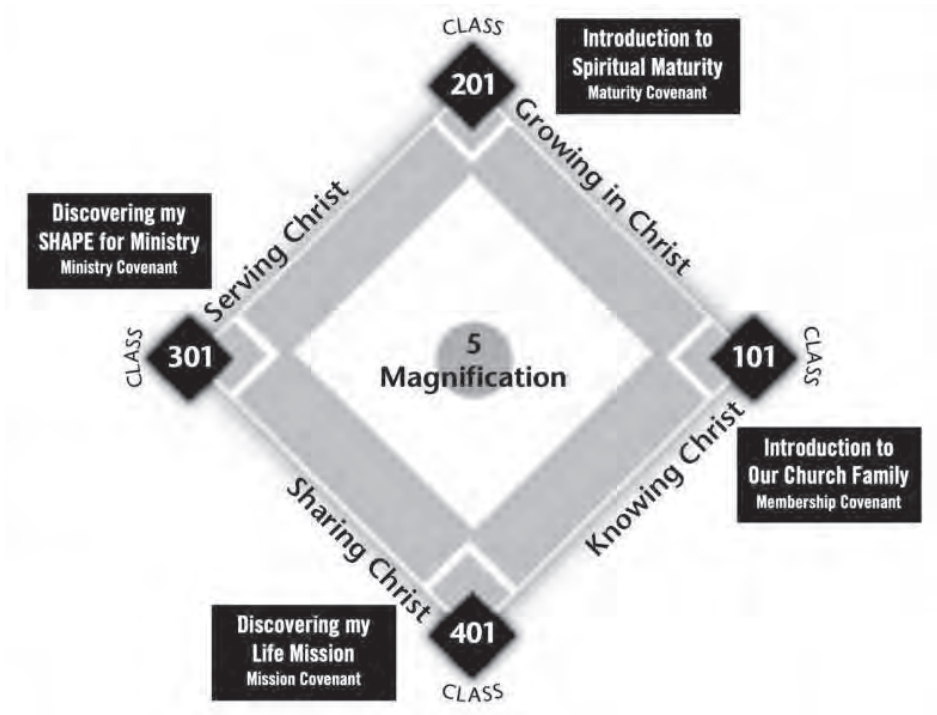
Saddleback Sam would rather start out in a large group where he can hide in the crowd. He's skeptical of organized religion, likes contemporary music, prefers casual and informal, and is overextended in both time and money. When you understand our target, who we're trying to reach, our strategy for connecting with Saddleback Sam and moving him into deeper levels of commitment makes more sense.

Our strategy seeks to move Saddleback Sam through five circles of increasing commitment. We aim to keep people moving to the Core by encouraging spiritual commitment. Our goal is to move the Community into the Crowd, where they start coming weekly as regular attendees. Then, we want to move them from the Crowd into the Congregation, where they become members. Then, we seek to move them from Congregation to Committed, where they grow in deeper levels of spiritual maturity. As they grow, we seek to help them serve within their area of gifts and talents by moving them from Committed to Core. Finally, we want to see those in the core sent on a mission back to the community to share their faith and reach more people.⁵



Warren focused on intentionally moving people through a reproducible process from being disconnected from God in the surrounding community to the “crowd” at church and ultimately to the committed “core.” Believing that healthy things, like the human body, mature in stages, Warren focused the primary process in the Purpose-Driven Model on reaching people and moving them through increasing stages of maturity. The magic was found in his simple, intuitive, and easily accessible frameworks, which became known as “the Purpose-Driven Model.”

His process was easily visualized as four bases on a baseball diamond. The four bases represented the successive stages of maturity: Membership, Maturity, Ministry, and Mission. Courses (101, 201, 301, and 401) created a reproducible, systematic process for moving people through the bases as stages of maturity. The model was easy for any church leader to embrace, contextualize, and implement.



Warren successfully applied the model to his church for forty-plus years, taught it to hundreds of thousands of church leaders worldwide, and saw the framework become a normative foundation for our current operating system.

Unfortunately, the broader implementation in the evangelical world co-opted the model into our current Consumer-Driven Operating System. Winning became associated with getting as many converts as possible to the first base (membership) rather than with developing and mobilizing mature, fully devoted followers of Jesus from the fourth base. The team with the most people on first base wins, regardless of how you get them there.

Tim Hawks eventually saw this dynamic play out at Hill Country Bible Church. What had once felt like a clear pathway for multiplying disciples slowly turned into a sophisticated system for getting more people to first base.

“By 2015, our leadership began to notice a significant shift taking place in the way our congregation viewed their personal practice of faith,” Hawks told me. In reflecting on the unintended consequences of their success, he said, “Evangelism had become an invitation to a service, event, or program. Spiritual growth came through participation and volunteering. Most of our staff had been hired to run programs rather than to lead people into spiritual and missional living. Vitalized disciples who were leading their friends and coworkers to Christ and discipling those people to reach others were the exception, even among our most committed leaders. We had shifted away from multiplying disciple makers and deploying evangelists, as was the norm in our early days. Our model had begun to undermine our mission, and the road back to our roots was a massive and traumatic undertaking.”

As I’ve said several times, how we add makes all the difference. What I’ve seen and continue to hear from church leaders is that overly focusing on first base and using the wrong normative method for getting people there has unintended consequences:

- Programmatic institutional growth strategies to get converts to first base have become the norm and are increasingly difficult to sustain without consulting industry support.
- Large buildings and the associated debt are increasingly needed to sustain programmatic growth. Furthermore, a growing army of paid, professional clergy is required to manage the institutional aspects of this growth.
- The army of converts (or transfers) attracted to and collected at the first base is incapable of reproduction and multiplication.
- In our continued need to feed programs, our top priority becomes volunteerism rather than mobilizing everyday missionaries to disciple people where they work, live, and play.
- An attractional (to first base) culture instead of a sending (from fourth base) culture. The flywheel of movement is suppressed by how we add.

I don’t believe the Purpose-Driven Model’s motives, principles, or basic approach are wrong or unbiblical. I believe that well-intentioned leaders, driven by an evangelistic passion to reach lost people, are susceptible to institutional growth strategies that get converts to first base. When they do, the endgame shifts to growing large, accumulating churches with people stuck at first base.

How you add makes all the difference, and the focus on getting as many people to first base as quickly as possible results in growth through institutional programs rather than Jesus' relational disciple-making style.

Despite Warren's commitment to church health with growth as the outcome, the Consumer-Driven Operating System placed such a premium on growth that the *lack* of health was often criticized.

For example, in my research, I came across a Wesleyan critique of the Church Growth Movement by Alan Padgett, a pastor and Professor of Systematic Theology at Luther Seminary. He concluded that defining "health" as "growth" is problematic. Healthy and unhealthy things grow, and health must be determined by more than numerical growth, he wrote. Padgett focused on the *quality* of the growth.⁶

Today, our challenge as the church in America is to define what we mean by "health." It's a primary source of division. Phil Newton, church planter and pastor of South Woods Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, wrote what I think was a balanced article on his journey in the Church Growth Movement. In it, he reflected, "I had been duped under the guise of church growth. Lacking theological clarity, I failed to distinguish between church growth and church health, not grasping that unless there is spiritual vitality and biblical reformation, more numbers are meaningless—even detrimental. I fell for the common tendency to excuse the church's poor health in favor of substituting increased numbers. Despite the 'growth,' deeply rooted spiritual problems remained, with the church no better off."⁷

But Donald McGavran never advocated church growth over church health. Warren's posture that healthy things grow came directly from his understanding of McGavran's principles. Warren also embraced McGavran's teaching that converts should be moved into meaningful membership in a church. The critical factor here is that you set the bar for membership expectations. Will the bar of commitment be set high, calling and leading new Christians into a life of increased surrender to the Lordship of Jesus? Or will the bar be set low, allowing converts to live indefinitely as cultural Christians?

From my years in leadership, I've seen that most organizational experts believe the best-performing groups have a shared set of clearly defined, well-communicated expectations. The principle is simple: people will aspire to the expectations commonly embraced and understood by their community. Want healthy, higher-quality results? Set clear expectations for those results and establish empowering processes and structures to turn expectations into results.

Randy Pope recalls the lively conversations on membership during the early Leadership Network peer-to-peer gatherings. The apostolic and evangelistically biased leaders wrestled with membership in the context of the Seeker-Sensitive cultures they were pioneering. Pope now describes himself as the “contrarian in the group” who often pushed back on the idea of eliminating membership. In my conversations with him, Pope shared that he believed (and voiced his opinion) that eliminating the covenant agreement of membership and lowering the bar for converts would be detrimental.⁸

Unfortunately, a whole generation of churches co-opted the Purpose-Driven Model, eliminating membership—not considered “Seeker-Sensitive” or “seeker-safe”—and lowering the bar of commitment. This trend extended into children's Sunday school classes. You may remember how most churches eliminated grade-based standards and expectations for Bible knowledge and application.

Looking at these moves, I'm not surprised by the emerging cultural Christian product. It was driven by the consumer-sensitive culture that fueled the Seeker Sensitive Movement. And we continue to deal with the consequences of a Consumer-Driven Operating System today.

Warren's Purpose-Driven Model enabled any church to become more evangelistically effective, regardless of size. The model's simplicity, accessibility, and intuitive framework put the Seeker-Sensitive Movement on an accelerator, adding momentum to the Megachurch Movement.

Furthermore, successive generations of church planters, such as Brett Andrews of New Life Christian Church, have launched new churches with Purpose-Driven DNA embedded in their cultures. For thirty years, this has become the default operating system that most planters inherited. I think it's reasonable to

assume that more than 50% of all U.S. megachurches today were built on the Purpose-Driven Paradigm.

The Purpose-Driven Model didn't just reshape individual churches; it helped ignite an explosion. By the early 1990s, the number of megachurches was accelerating in ways no one had predicted, and a generation of pastors who had never studied McGavran were building large churches on a paradigm they inherited without ever questioning its origins.

What would McGavran have thought if he could have seen what his movement had become?

Reflection Questions

Are You Measuring First Base or Fourth Base?

Warren designed the baseball diamond to move people from membership (first base) through maturity, ministry, and mission (fourth base)—but most churches measure success by first base attendance. Look at what your church celebrated last month: Did you celebrate new members joining (first base) or disciples being sent to plant churches (fourth base)? If you could only count people who reached fourth base (reproducing disciples on mission), would your church still look successful, or would you need to restructure everything?

Who Is Your “Saddleback Sam,” and Who Does That Exclude?

Warren surveyed his community and created a specific customer profile that drove all decisions. Draw a picture of your church's target demographic—what do they look like, where do they live, what do they value? Now ask: Who is your church unable to reach because you're optimized for this one demographic? What would it cost to redesign your church to multiply across different cultures, classes, and contexts instead of just attracting people who look like your current attendees?



CHAPTER 11

The Megachurch Era

The Impact of Third-Generation Leadership

Put yourself in the shoes of a reflective Donald McGavran in early 1990. You are being interviewed, months before your death, about the movement that grew up around your work. You never set out to train American pastors; your focus was overseas mission fields. By the late 1970s, your ideas had been absorbed and partly co-opted into the U.S. church.

And now, with a movemental increase in the number of large congregations emerging across the country, you find yourself quietly acknowledging that the American scoreboard has changed. What began as a call to measure growth by new disciples, new churches, and the advance of the gospel among unreached peoples has become a pursuit of large, well-resourced congregations shaped by programs, transfer growth, and consumer expectations.

McGavran would have felt mixed emotions. On the one hand, he probably felt blessed that his work profoundly impacted the U.S. Church and that many new converts would experience eternity. On the other hand, he certainly felt some angst that the center of gravity shifted from the multiplication of the big C Church to the expansion of individual churches designed primarily to attract and retain attenders.

Looking back from that point in history, these reflections would not be a condemnation but a sober recognition that the operating system driving much of the American church no longer resembled the village-level, disciple-making vision that animated his early work. The scoreboard now rewards scale,

efficiency, and excellence in the weekend experience. The emphasis had shifted from questions like “How do whole peoples come to Christ?” to practical ones like “How do we remove every barrier to attending this church?”

The movement grew, but not always in the direction he originally imagined. And with that bittersweet recognition, our story turns to the megachurch phenomenon and what came next.

The increase in megachurches from 1970 to 2005 represents movemental growth. It’s believed there were fewer than 50 U.S. megachurches for the first 200 years of our nation’s history. According to Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, that number tripled to 150 megachurches between 1970 and 1980, then quadrupled to 600 by 2000, and doubled again to 1,200 by 2005.¹ This represents a massive 2,400% increase in just 35 years after centuries of relative stagnation.

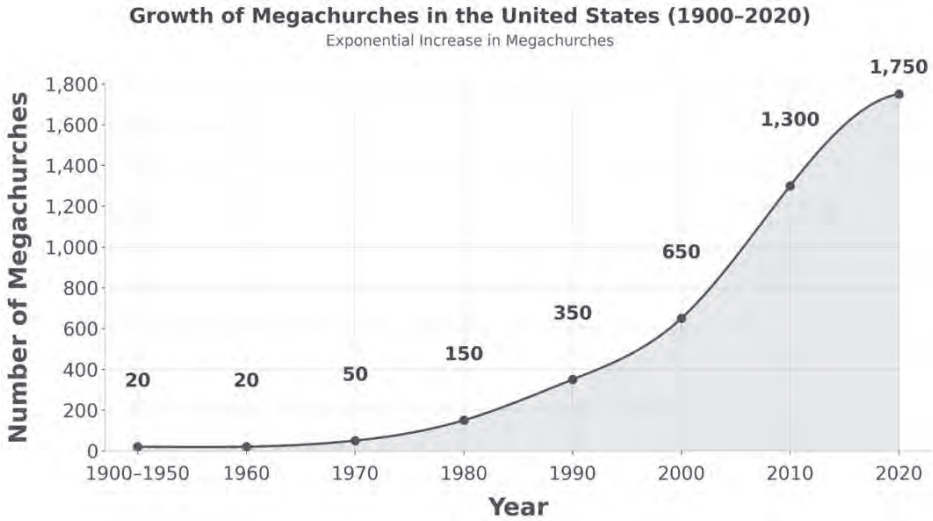
The following table and graph show the explosive growth of megachurches. Although the numbers continue to increase today, the rate of increase significantly slowed after 2005 and continues to slow.

Growth of Megachurches in the United States (1900–2020)

Growth of Megachurches in the United States (1900-2020)

Year	Number of Megachurches	Numerical Growth	Percentage Growth
1900-1950	<20 (est.)	—	—
1960	~20	—	—
1970	50	+30	150%
1980	150	+100	200%
1990	350	+200	133%
2000	650	+300	86%
2010	1,300	+650	100%
2020	1,750	+450	35%

Data sources: Eagle (2015); Thumma & Travis (2007), *Beyond Megachurch Myths*; Hartford Institute for Religion Research/Leadership Network surveys (2000-2020)



Gradually, the “success” scorecard for consumer-driven churches solidified around growing large, sustainable churches, with “mega” status being the grand prize to aspire toward. While the promise of numerical growth was attractive, the *movemental* dynamic was fueled by the relatively simple, easily accessible Seeker-Sensitive and Purpose-Driven approaches that intersected with the suburban, consumer-driven context. The convergence of cultural movements like these and others helped fuel the rapid acceleration of the Megachurch Movement.

With this rapid growth, an entire consulting industry emerged. No founding elder statesman or organization provided leadership to guide the Megachurch Movement as McGavran and Wagner had for the original Church Growth Movement. Consequently, many leaders who did not train directly under McGavran and Wagner began to influence and shape the Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch Movements. The impact of these third- and fourth-generation leaders of the Church Growth Movement is subtle but significant.

Consider Dr. Thom Rainer’s journey. He entered vocational ministry in 1982, pastored several local churches, completed advanced degrees, became the founding dean of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary’s (SBTC) Billy Graham School of World Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth, founded the Rainer Group consulting firm, and served as CEO of Lifeway Christian

Resources. While Rainer never directly trained under McGavran or Wagner, he has significantly shaped thousands of leaders serving in these movements, both directly and indirectly.

As the Seeker-Sensitive Movement became normative for new churches and the Megachurch Movement was in full stride, Rainer published a book on the history, theology, and principles of the Church Growth Movement.² Rainer based *The Book of Church Growth* on his Ph.D. dissertation, which explored the first twenty years of the Church Growth Movement. In the book's foreword, Peter Wagner highlighted the significance of Rainer's status as a "third-generation" student of the Church Growth Movement. Where second-generation leaders like Gary McIntosh, John Maxwell, and Rick Warren trained directly under Wagner and played critical roles in propelling the movement, Wagner understood the importance of third-generation leaders in scaling the movement far beyond what those in his Fuller classes could do.

These third-generation leaders were catalytic in expanding the scope and reach of the Americanized Church Growth Movement, but they lacked a solid connection to McGavran and his original principles. This lack of connection fueled the co-opting into the Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch Movements.

As I researched this book, it became clear that the leaders influencing the church today were deeply influenced by the Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch Movements. But these same leaders are disconnected from the foundational seeds that McGavran planted—the seeds that grew into the Church Growth Movement.

An Unlikely Partnership

In chapter 8, we met Peter Drucker, the father of modern management, and Bob Buford, the founder of Leadership Network. These men ranked among the most important third-generation leaders in the Church Growth Movement. In retrospect, they gave permission and encouragement to the pioneering leaders and early adopters shaping nearly all aspects of the Americanization of the Church Growth Movement. Drucker and Buford directly funded and nurtured

strong leaders like Hybels and Warren, as well as those who went on to become top church-growth consultants.

As I pored through articles, books, and Google searches, I began to realize just how critical Drucker's and Buford's partnership was to the Seeker-Sensitive Movement blooming into the Megachurch Movement. Neither man had a theology degree, nor had they ever led a local church. However, both were passionate about the impact that large, growing churches could make on society and spent decades helping shape and fuel the Megachurch Movement. Although they came from radically different backgrounds, these men formed an anointed relationship.

Bob Buford published his reflections on his relationship with Peter Drucker in his book, *Drucker and Me: What a Texas Entrepreneur Learned from the Father of Modern Management*.³ Following the book's launch, an article in the *Dallas Morning News* reported:

“In his introduction, Buford calls his friendship with Drucker unlikely. ‘One of us spoke English with a heavy Austrian accent. The other spoke Texan. I owned a cable television company. Peter didn't even own a television. I followed the Dallas Cowboys. He followed Japanese art. But as we would both learn a few years into our relationship, we shared a passion for a phenomenon that could literally change the world.’

By the time the two met, Drucker was 72 and had written almost all of his major books. Buford was 42, rich, but looking for more enrichment. They found common ground in what they saw as hope for the future: the evangelical Megachurch Movement. As founder and president of the Leadership Network, Buford has become a worldwide mentor of megachurches, infusing social management and leadership principles into large religious organizations.”⁴

The dynamic duo's unique callings and combined strengths produced the context for a more unified voice and focus in the Megachurch Movement. Drucker was a futurist thought leader with an unresolved burden to see a “functioning society.”

Buford was an entrepreneur with money, motivated by 100X Kingdom impact, and capable of creating a platform to attract and mobilize entrepreneurial church leaders like Hybels and Warren.

The new breed of entrepreneurial church leaders represented by Hybels and Warren, who were fueling the Seeker-Sensitive Movement, were naturally drawn to the entrepreneurial zeal, expertise, and help that leaders like Drucker and Buford provided.

Ed Stetzer knew Buford well and studied his impact. After Buford's death, Stetzer wrote, "Bob loved Drucker, but Bob translated Drucker (and much more) to the church. Together, Buford and Drucker made a huge impact on the direction of the church. While the Church Growth Movement was declining and the contemporary church was emerging, Buford became a key catalyst in remapping the church's influence—all the while remaining relatively unknown. He chose to catalyze his learning from Drucker and his fortune from cable without much concern over the credit."⁵

The Druckerites

As Drucker and Buford discussed the church's future, Peter Wagner published two books on the importance of "dynamic leadership" in growing churches. Wagner concluded, "In America, the pastor is the primary catalytic factor for growth in a local church. In every growing, dynamic church I have studied, I have found a key person who God is using to make it happen." He added, "Vital sign No. 1 of a healthy church is a pastor who is a possibility thinker and whose dynamic leadership has been used to catalyze the entire church into action for growth."⁶ The phrase "possibility thinker" was a learning from the ministry and the impact of pioneering leader Robert Schuller. This pioneering and entrepreneurial type of church leader was especially attractive to Drucker and Buford.

Drucker sought to find the elusive key to a functioning society, and Buford sought to convert American Christianity's latent capacity into active energy for Kingdom impact. The intersection? Leaders like Schuller, Hybels, and Warren.

Elliott Nesch, a strong critic of megachurches, called Buford, Hybels, and Warren the “Druckerites.” As an ardent opponent of the Megachurch Movement, Nesch understood the impact that Drucker’s mentoring had on this influential group and that they, in turn, helped fuel it.

In an article, Nesch wrote, “The Druckerites Bob Buford, Bill Hybels, and Rick Warren are like the franchises Burger King, Wendy’s, and McDonald’s. Just as all of those fast-food restaurants sell hamburgers, so the Druckerites all sell knowledge-based products to build churches. Though the different brands of hamburgers taste different and come with different toppings, they are all hamburgers. In the same way, the Druckerites brand may vary, whether it be Leadership Network, Willow Creek, or Purpose Driven, but they are all essentially the same in their implementation of best business practices for building the local church.”⁷

Nesch was right. Buford was definitely a Druckerite. He kept a bronze head/sculpture of Drucker on his desk with the quote, “The joy is in the results.” Buford says, “With every significant decision, I consult three sources: the Bible, Peter Drucker, and my wife, Linda.”⁸ In nearly every meeting I had with Bob over fifteen years of being on his team, Bob would affectionately recall what Drucker taught him. I remember how Bob would lean forward in his chair, with a twinkle in his eyes and a more energetic voice, when sharing memories of Drucker.

Bob was the co-founder and founding chairman of what was initially called the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management. He would later become the chairman and one of the Drucker Institute’s largest donors. Bob needed Drucker’s voice in his life and sincerely believed, to the depths of his soul, that the church needed it, too.

Buford shared with me: “Peter taught me a set of values. You need to build on islands of health and strength, and your fruit should grow on the trees of others. Find the right leaders, let them do the work, and give them permission and encouragement to be who God made them to be.” Bob’s deepest aspiration was to pay forward what Drucker had given him: permission, encouragement, and accountability to be who God made him to be and to steward the unique work God had for him. And that’s

exactly what he did, spending the rest of his life pouring into thousands of leaders and ministries and shaping the Megachurch Movement.

Drucker also had a significant impact on Bill Hybels. In his *Fast Company* article, “How Willow Creek Is Leading Evangelicals by Learning from the Business World,” writer Jeff Chu highlights the impact Drucker played on Hybels’ ministry:

“Hybels crystallized his vision for Willow Creek in the 1980s at a dinner conversation with Drucker. ‘Bill, what is your unique contribution to Willow Creek?’ Drucker asked. Hybels decided that one of his unique contributions to his church, aside from being the pastor, could be to create a resource for pastors who didn’t have firsthand access to thinkers like Drucker. This idea later turned into Willow Creek’s business school, called the Global Leadership Summit. One reporter commented that ‘if evangelicalism does have a global power center, it would have to be Willow Creek, thanks largely to its business school. At the Willow Creek campus in South Barrington, Illinois, pastors and laypeople are disciplined in Drucker’s leadership and management practices.’”⁹

Drucker had a similar influence on Warren’s ministry. In Bob DeWaay’s book, *Redefining Christianity: Understanding the Purpose Driven Movement*, he explains, “Drucker has helped Warren use cutting-edge management ideas from the business world and implement them in his management of the local church. Warren has now taken those ideas and made a business system that can be implemented by church leaders all over the world to improve their own church management and bring their efforts into alignment with Warren’s Purpose Driven paradigm.”¹⁰

The collective impact of Drucker, Buford, Hybels, Warren, and thousands of other leaders influenced by them cannot be overstated. The Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch Movements are what they are today, largely due to their collective influence. While neither Drucker nor Buford was ever the face of these movements, their behind-the-scenes roles were catalytic. Buford spent the second half of his career fully engaged in these movements, often giving Drucker the credit for empowering and encouraging him.

In 1970, as the seeds of McGavran's movement began to be Americanized, no one could have foreseen the role an Austrian-born business consultant would play in American Christianity. But behind the megachurch pastors who became household names stood Peter Drucker, the father of modern management, whose quiet Kingdom calling shaped the movement in ways that most church leaders have never fully understood. His story reminds us that God often works through unexpected people, and it may be through similarly unexpected people that the next movemental era emerges. That's why I'm giving Drucker his own chapter—not just to understand how we got here, but to train our eyes to recognize the unlikely catalysts God may already be positioning for what's next.

Reflection Questions

Are You a Third-Generation Leader Who Inherited Methods Without Mission?

If you learned church growth through books, conferences, or copying successful models rather than training under missionaries or church planters, you're likely a third-generation leader who inherited methods (seeker services, programs, facilities) without McGavran's missional foundations (people movements, reproduction, multiplication). Look at your church's strategy. Is it optimized to attract attendees or to multiply disciples? If McGavran visited your church and asked, "Show me the generational disciple-making you've sparked that has potential for people movements," what evidence would you show him?

Would Your Church Be "Successful" If You Could Only Count Multiplication?

The 2,400% megachurch explosion validated attraction-based methods for building large churches, but did it validate McGavran's vision for multiplication? If your church could only measure success by churches planted (not weekend attendance), disciples who made disciples (not program participation), and movements sparked (not buildings built), would you still be considered successful? What would you need to stop doing, start doing, or completely restructure to optimize for multiplication instead of attraction?



CHAPTER 12

Peter Drucker

The Father of Modern Management

My first exposure to Drucker was more than thirty years ago, when I was pursuing a Quality Management certification. Drucker's impact was seemingly larger than life. I recall his straightforward, common-sense approach, and as a strategic futurist, I was drawn to his ability to read the current moment to forecast the future.

At the time, I was serving in Naval Reactors, a world-class engineering organization started by the “Father of the Nuclear Navy,” ADM Hyman G. Rickover. I remember thinking how both men were legendary in their impact and reputations. They shared noteworthy similarities that didn't escape notice. They were both born in the early 1900s and were immigrants from Europe. Both valued the importance of a functioning society, faithfully and persistently championing their vocational causes for more than sixty years, and receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom for their life's work. What captivated me was reading Drucker's wisdom of management principles in the classroom and then seeing them in action in Rickover's real-life nuclear Navy.

Drucker's work wasn't just theory that I read and studied; it was actionable insights that made practical sense. I remember feeling fortunate to have these men's collective wisdom and teachings embedded in my understanding of successful and healthy management. Drucker's teachings were equally compelling and appealing to the apostolic leaders of the large, growing churches during the 1980s and 1990s.

Years later, as Buford's personal strategic advisor, I had a unique front-row seat to Drucker's influence on Bob's life and the church.

Drucker's Impact

Peter Drucker is widely considered the father of modern management. Anyone who takes a management class learns about Drucker and his principles. After his death at age 95, *Business Week* reported, "The story of Peter Drucker is the story of management itself. It's the story of the rise of the modern corporation and the managers who organize work."¹ Intel Co-Founder Andrew S. Grove said, "Like many philosophers, he spoke in plain language that resonated with ordinary managers. Consequently, simple statements from him have influenced untold numbers."²

As I researched this book and its many integral characters in the Church Growth Movement, I realized the significant role that Peter Drucker's life and teachings play in answering the book's title question: *How did we get here?* I'm dedicating this whole chapter to more clearly seeing how he influenced the Church Growth Movement and the Large Church Phenomenon, and to reveal the easily overlooked importance of his contribution to today's prevailing operating system.

According to the Drucker Institute, he published 39 books. He was "driven by an insatiable curiosity about the world around him—and a deep desire to make that world a better place."³ Drucker described himself as a "social ecologist," or someone who studies the relationships between people and their environment, often the interdependence of people, institutions, and the domains of society.

During a 1934 college lecture at Cambridge, he recalled, "I suddenly realized that all the brilliant economic students in the room were interested in the behavior of commodities while I was interested in the behavior of people." Over the next seventy years, Drucker's writings were biased toward the human resource side of management.⁴

Although he is best known as a guru in business management, a common theme throughout his ninety-five years and central to his personal calling was the

pursuit of what he called “a functioning society.” Living in Germany during the rise of Nazism, Drucker became haunted, not so much by Hitler, but rather the leadership vacuum that Hitler filled. Drucker told *Christianity Today* that his life’s work is dedicated to “never again.”⁵ He spent most of his adult life pursuing solutions for creating a functioning society where institutions perform responsibly, autonomously, and on a high level of achievement.” This lifelong journey would eventually lead him to Bob Buford and the megachurch.

An immigrant to America, the father of modern management, a passion and burden for a healthy, functioning society, where evil has no place, and a conviction that awakening in the church is the answer. Sounds like a great advocate for the Christian cause! Let’s take a deeper look into the fascinating story and calling of Peter Drucker.

A Unique Perspective

According to *Christianity Today*, Drucker “made a career out of seeing the world from an unfamiliar angle—of noticing the significance of some factors that others miss.”⁶ *Fortune* magazine described him as “the most prescient business-trend spotter of our time.” For example, Drucker introduced the idea of decentralized management and management by objectives, predicted the coming era of the knowledge worker and the impact of computers on business, foresaw Japan’s rise as an industrial power, and introduced the customer-driven paradigm, which holds that there is no business without a customer. I think this quote from economist and oil executive Charles Handy sums up the significance of Drucker’s ability to see things differently: “Much of what sounded revolutionary, even absurd, when he first said it has now become so familiar that we take it for granted.”⁷

Drucker also foresaw the coming Megachurch Movement and the need to equip entrepreneurial church leaders with business management principles. His strong emphasis on the customer would forever cement his legacy as a core growth principle of the Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch Movements. And his mentoring relationship with Texas businessman and entrepreneur Bob Buford

was well-established, as Drucker saw the vast potential the megachurch could play in his goal of creating a functioning society.

In a 1991 *Christianity Today* article, Drucker told an audience of church leaders that American churches were in a remarkable renaissance. Drucker said, “This, to my mind, for my lifetime, is the greatest, the most important, the most momentous event, and the turning point, not just in churches but perhaps in the human spirit altogether.”⁸ Drucker reportedly told *Forbes* magazine in 1998, “The pastoral megachurches that have been growing very fast in the U.S. since 1980 are surely the most important social phenomenon in American society in the last 30 years.”

While Drucker was a Christian in the Episcopalian tradition, his enthusiasm for the potential of the megachurch was likely driven more by his calling to see a functioning society than by a conviction for evangelism. Having become increasingly disillusioned by the ability of capitalism-driven leaders and corporations to embrace a higher cause of producing a functioning society, he turned his focus to the nonprofit sector. From there, Drucker was encouraged by what he called “pastoral leaders” like Bill Hybels and Rick Warren, who were driven by mission and impact and naturally inclined toward a customer-oriented approach. And they embraced his affinity and teaching with open arms.

Drucker became increasingly interested in coming alongside them and similar church leaders. In my research, I came across an article by church leader Steve Sjogren recounting a personal conversation with Drucker. Sjogren quotes him: “Over the years, I have made a career out of studying the most challenging management roles out there. After all of that, I am now convinced the two most difficult jobs in the world are these—one, to be President of the United States, and two, to be the leader of a [large growing] church.”⁹

Personal Calling

As a certified Life Planner, I’ve learned that the stories of our lives integrate to offer clues into our unique personal callings. God is writing a book in our lives, including chapters, sections, characters, sub-characters, themes, and sub-

themes. By studying the chapters God has already written, we can discern our personal calling. This is certainly true of Peter Drucker's life story. As you read the summary of his life below, watch for a progression of events that may initially appear disconnected but are strongly aligned with his life's calling.

I'm going into detail about Drucker's life to highlight the perceived importance of the megachurch phenomenon as it emerged, to provide context for understanding Drucker's role in accelerating the movement, and, finally, to show the easily overlooked importance of Drucker's contribution to the prevailing operating system of today's church.

I have separated his life and impact into three distinct seasons, each spanning about one-third of his life. The first third focused on journalism and politics, the second on business and corporations, and the third on nonprofits and megachurches. Peter Drucker's life was a grand adventure that few would have predicted would land him at the epicenter of the U.S. Megachurch Movement.

In my book *More: Find Your Personal Calling and Live Life to the Fullest Measure*¹⁰, I define the "sweet spot" of personal calling as the intersection of the answer to three questions: "Who am I created to BE?" a design question, "What am I made to DO?" a purpose question, and "Where am I to GO?" a positioning question. The story God is writing in our lives can often be captured in a simple BE-DO-GO statement. So if we were to write Drucker's BE-DO-GO statement, it might be something like, "Peter Drucker was a self-proclaimed social ecologist (BE) who saw and wrote about the futurity of present societal events (DO) to equip influential leaders in creating a functioning society (GO).

The three seasons of Drucker's life are most notably distinguished by his unique position, or his GO. His unique BE-DO-GO calling naturally attracted him to the Megachurch Movement and its leaders, whom he believed could advance his passion for building a functioning society.

Season 1 – Journalism and Politics

Born in Vienna, Austria, in 1909, raised during the destabilizing years of World War I, and schooled in Germany during the rise of Nazism, Drucker earned his law degree, served as a journalist, and was part of a conservative political party that opposed Hitler. When the Nazis burned his controversial political essays, he fled Germany to England, married his wife, and immigrated to the U.S. during the depression era. In this season, Drucker wrote his first book, *The End of Economic Man: The Origins of Totalitarianism*,¹¹ (favorably reviewed by Winston Churchill and made mandatory reading for every British soldier), and began teaching political science and philosophy.

During this 33-year season, we see the traits of being a social ecologist (BE) and writer (DO) emerge. We also see his lifelong passion for “a functioning society” (GO) born out of his burden of “never again.” His GO context would continue to evolve over the next two seasons, placing him at the epicenter of the Megachurch Movement.

Season 2 – Business and the Corporation

This season started in 1943 for Drucker with the publication of his second book, *The Future of Industrial Man*.¹² At the time, General Motors (GM) was the largest corporation in the world and invited Drucker to conduct an internal study of its structure and management philosophy. By shifting his focus from politics to business, Drucker gained one of the most strategic business and social-ecological learning laboratories he could ask for, putting him in close contact with GM’s legendary patriarch, Alfred P. Sloan.

In 1945, Drucker published his learnings in his third book, *The Concept of the Corporation*. The ideas positioned management as a scientific discipline and created the field of business consulting.¹³

Personally, Drucker saw great promise in the American corporation as a catalyst for creating a functioning society. After witnessing the oppression of the Nazi regime, he found hope in the potential of the modern corporation to build

communities. The “GO” context of his calling shifted from politics to business leaders.

Drucker became the consultant of choice for a growing number of CEOs and major corporations, giving him an ongoing learning laboratory to fuel his writing and position him to serve as a social ecologist with an eye on the futurity business management trends and how they could be leveraged for creating a functioning society. Adding to his learning platform, Drucker became a professor of management at New York University in 1950.¹⁴ Extending the work of his first two books, he published *The New Society: The Anatomy of Industrial Order*¹⁵, followed by *The Practice of Management*.¹⁶

In these early books, Drucker argued that management was one of the century’s major social innovations. He could see the enormous potential and the critical role it would need to play in a functioning society. These early works also posed his classic three business questions: What is our business? Who is our customer? What does our customer value?

His pursuit of a functioning society and his conviction to maintain a customer-driven posture positioned him to embrace nonprofits and megachurches as his GO context in the next season.

Season 3 – Non-profits and the Church

This final season of his life began in the 1970s, as Drucker grew increasingly frustrated by corporate greed. He was vocal in his criticism of executive pay and the endgame of prioritizing financial profit above all else. His souring was undoubtedly influenced by the reality of his aging and the recognition that corporations would *not* be the solution for creating a functioning society. Not coincidentally, consumerism’s rise and rapid acceleration were underway. It’s also not a coincidence that his autobiography, *Adventures of a Bystander*, and his only two fictional books were published during this reflective, transformational transition to his profoundly significant final season.

Drucker shifted his hopes and energy to the nonprofit sector, believing it held more promise than corporations. Drucker did not work with nonprofits simply as a gesture of goodwill. He saw them as strategic, among America's fastest-growing and most crucial sectors.¹⁷ As a testament to this shift, he published *Managing the Nonprofit Organization: Principles and Practices*.¹⁸ The Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management (later renamed the Frances Hesselbein Leadership Institute) was also started to strengthen and inspire the social sector's leadership and business and government partners. Bob Buford served as a co-founder.

In the early 1980s, Drucker turned his attention to the blooming Megachurch Movement and its entrepreneurial, customer-minded pastoral leaders. Considering Drucker's passion for seeing a functioning society, his shift from journalism to politics, corporations, nonprofits, and now megachurches is understandable. It is also a testament to the potential impact that "the father of modern management" saw in the megachurch phenomenon and in the leaders who were fueling it.

Drucker described his attraction to the megachurch phenomenon: "[Bob] Buford and I shared the idea that the megachurch might be a new major force for revival in the U.S. church. Bob had the idea of starting an organization to help the megachurches learn how to manage themselves. He had the idea to start Leadership Network to bring those leaders together to share experiences and learn how to build a successful and lasting organization."¹⁹ Drucker saw that denominations were declining and optimistically believed, "The megachurches are a new force of great religious revival."

Years ago, Bob explained to me Drucker's role in mentoring him in his transition into the megachurch context:

First, Drucker suggested that the Large Church Phenomenon (not yet called a movement) would be significant and worth investing in. He said sociologists would one day consider the Megachurch Movement the most significant social phenomenon of the past 100 years. While this may reflect Drucker's optimistic hope of seeing a functioning society in his lifetime, it nevertheless profoundly inspired Buford, who sought to achieve "100X Kingdom impact."

Second, Drucker told Bob, “Your role is to direct and guide energy, not supply it. Be the platform and not the show.” In Buford’s words, this translated to “be the catapult and not the carrier” and “my fruit grows on other people’s trees.”

Finally, Buford asked, “If this movement happens, what specific contextual role should I play to help pour gas on it?” Drucker then insightfully suggested that these future megachurch leaders would not have the training in business management principles necessary to grow and sustain their large churches. He suggested they come alongside small groups of these future influence leaders, viewing them as customers, discovering what they value, and how a new platform like Leadership Network might best serve them.

The Rudder on the Ship

Buford worked diligently to fuel the Megachurch Movement, always equipping church leaders with Peter Drucker’s business management wisdom and principles. Tragically, Drucker’s death in 2005 left his dream of a functioning society unfulfilled. But the principles he championed—customer focus, measurable results, strategic marketing—had already taken root so deeply in the American church that they would continue shaping its operating system long after he was gone.

Drucker gave us powerful tools, and his customer orientation became the rudder on the ship, defining where the church’s operating system in America would go. Meeting customer needs built big churches, but it didn’t produce Drucker’s functioning society, and it created a consumer-driven system incapable of the gospel saturation McGavran gave his life to pursue.

Here’s the paradox: that customer focus gave us wild success in accelerating the Large Church Phenomenon—Seeker-Sensitive, megachurch, purpose-driven, and beyond. But it simultaneously may have been the single greatest influence on the co-opting of McGavran’s original ideals and goals. Understanding how the customer focus became so central to the evolution of the Church Growth Movement is essential to seeing how we got here.

Reflection Questions

Is Your Church Optimized for “Functioning Society” or “Gospel Saturation”?

Drucker wanted megachurches to create functioning societies through community transformation; McGavran wanted churches to spark people movements through gospel saturation. These are different endgames with different methods. Look at your church’s mission statement, budget priorities, and staff focus—are you optimized for community impact (functioning society) or multiplication movements (gospel saturation)? Both are biblical values, but which one defines your scorecard for success?

Are You Using Drucker’s Questions to Serve Jesus or Satisfy Customers?

Drucker’s three questions (“What is our business? Who is our customer? What does the customer value?”) are powerful tools—but they can serve two different masters. If your customer is Jesus, the answers lead to faithfulness in disciple-making. If your customers are seekers, the answers to their questions lead to satisfaction through programs. Write down your honest answers to Drucker’s three questions—do they reveal that you’re optimized to please Jesus through obedience, or to please seekers through services?



CHAPTER 13

The Customer

*Felt Needs, Real Needs, and the Questions
That Shaped a Generation*

*“The day a company begins to be run for the benefit of the
insiders, and not the benefit of the customers, is the day that the
institution begins to die.”*

~ Peter Drucker

Hanging on the wall next to my desk is a beautiful commissioned painting, autographed by Peter Drucker. The artist layered dozens of watercolor handprints—in muted earth tones of rust red, dusty pink, warm taupe, and deep burgundy—across the canvas, creating texture and movement that draw you in. Above the hands, in clean capital letters, sits a single name: PETER DRUCKER. Below, in elegant serif type, are three deceptively simple questions:

What is our business? Who is our customer? What does the customer consider value?

Bob Buford commissioned this painting as a tribute to the man he considered his most important mentor. Drucker had been like a father figure to Bob—a surrogate for the father he lost as a young man. For over twenty-five years, their relationship shaped not only Bob’s thinking but the trajectory of the entire American Megachurch Movement. Buford had the means and the connections to honor Drucker in countless ways—to fund institutes in his name, to

commission biographies, to establish scholarships. But of all the ways he might have chosen to memorialize Drucker's legacy, he selected these three questions.

The same print hung in Bill Hybels' office at Willow Creek, outside Rick Warren's office at Saddleback, and in the offices of countless other pioneering megachurch leaders. In choosing to commemorate Drucker not with his theories on management or his books on nonprofit leadership, but with these three questions about business, customer, and value, Buford was saying something profound: This is what Peter believed the church needed to understand. This is what would shape a generation.

And he was right. For better and for worse, these three questions became the lens through which an entire movement designed its future.

The Customer Lens

Drucker saw the practice and application of business management theory through a customer lens. The importance of customers is a theme that runs through much of Drucker's career and writing.

In one of his early and important books, *The Practice of Management* (1954)¹, Drucker wrote that the purpose of business is to "create and keep a customer."² In this context, Jesus cannot be our customer, pointing us, instead, to seeing lost people who don't know Jesus as our customer target. This is precisely what the Seeker-Sensitive and Purpose-Driven approaches did. Saddleback Sam and Samantha are the customer avatars driving the design of our church programs, past and present.

In business, someone becomes a customer through a financial transaction. But we must exercise caution when defining precisely what makes a lost person a customer. The devil is quite literally in the details of our answer to this question. The correct answer has the power to produce gospel saturation.

Functionally, the evolution and co-opting of McGavran's principles shifted how we answer this question. Unfortunately, in shifting our focus to "pleasing" the lost person, we risked (and continue to risk) diluting the gospel message and Jesus'

calling. The answer to how we best “please” Sam and Samantha unintentionally leads us down a slippery slope toward building programmatic “clubs” that never quite satisfy our customers and don’t bring the “profitability” or fruit that Jesus intends.

To understand how we arrived at this tension, it helps to return to Drucker’s framework itself. He never advocated designing churches like country clubs or entertainment venues, but he did insist that every organization clarify who its customer is and what value that customer seeks. The tool itself isn’t the problem—it’s how the church applied it.

In his book *The Five Most Important Questions You Will Ever Ask About Your Organization*, Drucker summarizes his teaching on the customer. Jack Bergstrand, former Chief Information Officer at Coca-Cola and founder of Brand Velocity, put Drucker’s teaching into practice. He recalls Drucker telling Bob Buford, “The day a company begins to be run for the benefit of the insiders, and not the benefit of the customers, is the day that the institution begins to die.”³ In our case, pleasing our customers with church programs aimed at their felt needs creates insiders who demand ever-better programs.

As I researched Drucker and McGavran, I realized they shared a common concern about the danger of insider focus—organizations that exist primarily to serve their own members. Both saw this as a dead end. In McGavran’s book, *How to Grow a Church*⁴, he observed that so many Christians have become accustomed to—or preoccupied with—their own congregation. “They like their own congregation,” he wrote. “That’s perfectly natural. They should. But unfortunately, the outsiders remain outsiders. There is no way of reaching these outsiders when a church is preoccupied with its own members.”

He continued, “So, congregation after congregation is sealed off to itself, by its own language, its own culture, by its own degree of education, or wealth, or residence. The bridges to other segments of the population, across which church growth will occur, simply are not built.”⁵

Here’s where Drucker’s questions and McGavran’s mission should have worked together, but often didn’t. Drucker’s third question—“What does the customer

consider value?”—was designed to help organizations listen carefully to the people they serve. It’s a diagnostic tool: What do they think they need? McGavran, however, was equally clear about what the outsider’s real need is: life-transforming surrender to Jesus and incorporation into a church family that produces ongoing discipleship. The co-opting occurred when leaders used Drucker’s questions to optimize around what seekers said they wanted (felt needs) rather than anchoring their strategies in what McGavran insisted they actually needed (real transformation). Drucker gave us powerful listening tools. McGavran reminded us of the ultimate need. The tragedy is that we let the listening replace the mission.

Drucker championed five core questions that every organization—religious or secular—must constantly ask itself: *“What business are we in? Who is the customer? What does the customer consider value? How will we deliver that value (what is the plan)? How will we know we’ve succeeded (what are our results)?”*

Notice the third question: What does the customer consider value? This is where the tension lives. The question itself is neutral—a tool for listening and learning. But it pushes organizations to focus on perceived value, on felt needs. For churches seeking to reach lost people, the challenge is to distinguish between what people think they need (community, inspiration, help with life’s problems) and what they actually need (life-transforming surrender to the Lordship of Jesus). This becomes particularly problematic when the standard of surrender for Warren’s first base is diluted in the effort to attract converts. Unfortunately, we can meet felt needs programmatically without calling for any surrender at all.

I think Drucker and McGavran were getting at a core principle for churches: As we seek to reach lost people, we must distinguish between their real needs and their felt needs. How we address their felt needs versus their real needs differs significantly. Their real need for the life-transforming surrender to the Lordship of Jesus cannot be delivered by our programmatic approach to addressing their felt needs.

Our evangelistic impulse to do whatever it takes to reach lost people often leads us to meet people’s felt needs through programs. But Jesus’ more holistic, relational approach to disciple-making points us to the more complex work

of meeting their real needs in a life-changing, transformational relationship with Him. In practice, we must balance the two priorities. Unfortunately, this dichotomy and our strong bias toward meeting felt needs over addressing real needs are potentially the single most significant factors driving the co-opting of the Church Growth Movement, giving us a faulty Consumer-Driven Operating System.

Evangelism and Disciple-Making in the Church Growth Movement

Win Arn, an associate of McGavran and a founding pioneer of the Church Growth Movement, understood this tension deeply and wrestled with the role of evangelism and disciple-making within the Church Growth Movement. Frustrated by the ineffectiveness of evangelism in the church, he was initially drawn to McGavran's holistic approach to disciple-making.

Years later, in reflecting on what success in evangelism and disciple-making means through the lens of church growth, Arn wrote, "This question [of success] highlights one of the most significant differences between 'evangelism' and 'disciple-making.'" Then he defined success in evangelism as "a verbal response given by the non-Christian, which indicates their personal endorsement of a new set of convictions reflective of the Christian faith." Arn distinguished success in disciple-making as "an observed change in the behavior of an Individual, which indicates their personal integration of a new set of convictions reflective of the Christian faith."⁶

Arn said the distinction between evangelism and disciple-making is subtle yet fundamental. And that is because the goals and processes employed to achieve them are different. "The church growth goal, in response to the Great Commission, is to proclaim Jesus Christ as God and Savior and to persuade persons to become responsible members of His Church," Arn wrote. "A responsible church member is indicated through behavioral observations."⁷

Arn's distinction is significant to our understanding of the co-opting of the Church Growth Movement. By his and McGavran's measure, Saddleback Sam

and Sally can be evangelized to first base (conversion). Still, they must then demonstrate behavioral changes as responsible members of the Church as they progress from first to second to third, and then to home plate, in Warren's spiritual formation baseball diamond.

These behavioral changes indicate holistic disciple-making and what McGavran intended as proof of the fruit of church growth. Within the Church Growth Movement, a shift from "real need relational disciple-making" to "felt need programmatic evangelism" occurred. The shift is a consequence of overly focusing on felt needs without balancing them with real needs.

Matt Reynolds, the Founder of the church renewal ministry Spirit & Truth, offers good insights into the consequences of shifting our focus from real needs to felt needs and lowering the bar for engaging with the ways and expectations of Jesus. He says:

Christian movements tend to grow by raising the bar of expectation, not by reducing the cost to join. People are fundamentally longing for something more than mildly religious entertainment and self-help. They are yearning to be a part of something bigger than themselves. They want their lives to count for something. It is no coincidence that the majority of the places where Christianity is growing also happen to be places where choosing Jesus requires real sacrifice. Costly discipleship is the essence of Jesus' way. When Jesus left the earth, he did not have a big church, but he did have women and men who were willing to die for his vision.

I am seeing a rising movement of pastors, leaders, and everyday church members who are yearning for something more than they have received in our consumer-minded churches of recent decades. I am seeing more and more people who are dissatisfied with a simple exchange of religious goods and services on Sunday morning.⁸

The Impact of Drucker's Five Questions

Drucker's core customer questions became the metaphoric rudder on the megachurch cruise ship. We built models and strategies around reaching people programmatically through their felt needs, not because the questions are faulty. A generation of leaders embraced and implemented this customer paradigm in growing large, sustainable churches.

These weren't just abstract principles debated in seminars. The painting that opened this chapter—Buford's commissioned tribute to Drucker's three questions—wasn't merely a personal keepsake. It hung in the offices of the movement's most influential leaders, a daily visual reminder of what mattered most.

In highlighting Drucker's impact on Hybels, *Christianity Today* wrote, "James Twitchell, in his new book, *Shopping for God*, reports that outside Bill Hybels' office hangs a poster that says: What is our business? Who is our customer? What does the customer consider value?" Directly or indirectly, this philosophy of ministry—church should be a big box with programs for people at every level of spiritual maturity to consume and engage—has impacted every evangelical church in the country."⁹

Author Gregory A. Pritchard wrote, "Willow Creek has so enthusiastically adopted and applied the principles of marketing that it has received growing attention from business schools and publications. Harvard Business School selected Willow Creek as the subject of one of its famous case studies. Its author explains that the staff of Willow Creek attributes much of their success to the simple concept of knowing your customers and meeting their needs."¹⁰

Elliott Nesch, a strong critic of the customer-driven approach, wrote that "Rick Warren says his staff at Saddleback reads and discusses Drucker's writings, using them to manage the church. In Warren's office is a print signed by Drucker and given to Warren ..."¹¹ Warren's application of the three questions to meet Saddleback Sam and Samantha's felt needs has been used by thousands of church planters as the normative method of starting and growing new churches.

I regularly use the questions as powerful tools to more effectively align my activities with my mission and to help others do the same.

To be clear, neither Drucker nor Buford championed the biased focus on felt needs over real needs. Now, as we look at where we are today, it's easy to see the unintended consequences of how the business principle was embraced and poorly implemented. When Schuller, Hybels, and Warren conducted extensive door-to-door surveys to understand their community's felt needs, their motivation was to open the door to addressing people's real need for Jesus.

Understandably, the broadly embraced “safe” practices of the Seeker-Sensitive Movement were in tension with the more complex, slower work of addressing real needs rooted in surrender and sacrifice. Focus defaulted to the easier and faster numerical growth path of meeting felt needs programmatically.

Looking back on this path, we can more clearly see how we got to where we are today. With the increasing hostility toward Christianity that we're seeing now, it's critical that our churches shift the priority from meeting felt needs to strategies for meeting real needs. I realize that's a painful but necessary shift from the prevailing norm that most church leaders have inherited. Still, this shift seems to align with the priorities of the emerging generation of church leaders and the trending vocational micro-expressions of the church.

Armed with a clear picture of the customer and Drucker's questions as their guide, a generation of leaders launched an era of church marketing that continues to shape how we attract, serve, and measure success today. The question that remains is whether we're reaching people with what they need—or simply with what they want.

Reflection Questions

Who Is Your Primary Customer—Jesus or Saddleback Sam?

Draw two columns. In column one, list decisions your church made this year to be faithful to Jesus' mission (making disciples who multiply), even if it didn't attract attendees. In column two, list decisions made to attract or satisfy people

(Saddleback Sam/Samantha) even if they didn't advance multiplication. Which column is longer? If Jesus walked into your church and asked, "Are you pleasing crowds or Me?", what would your budget, calendar, and staff priorities reveal?

Are You Measuring Evangelism (Verbal) or Disciple-Making (Behavioral)?

Win Arn distinguished evangelism (verbal profession) from disciple-making (behavioral transformation). List what your church celebrated last quarter—did you celebrate conversions/baptisms (people reaching first base) or reproducing disciples (people at fourth base planting churches)? If you could only count behavioral transformation (disciples making disciples who plant churches), would your church look successful? What would need to change?



CHAPTER 14

Marketing the Church

Attracting the Customer

The postcard arrived on a Tuesday. It was professionally designed, full color, with a smiling family on the front and a bold headline: “Looking for a church that fits your life?” On the back, a list of benefits: relevant teaching, great music, amazing kids’ programs, a friendly coffee bar, and convenient service times. It could have been an ad for a gym membership or a new restaurant. But it was an invitation to church.

No mention of sin, repentance, or the cross. No call to surrender. Just a compelling value proposition tailored to a target customer’s felt needs. And it worked. Thousands of churches sent millions of these postcards, and people came. The question few leaders paused long enough to ask was this: What happens when you attract people as consumers? You get consumers.

That postcard didn’t appear out of nowhere. Behind it was an entire framework of marketing principles, adapted from the business world and applied to the church with increasing sophistication over two decades. Understanding how that happened requires a quick look at what marketing actually is and how it became so effective in the church context.

Marketing is identifying customers, understanding their values, and persuading them to exchange their time, talent, or treasure for what an organization offers. It typically involves aligning sales and advertising efforts to help customers understand how products and services align with their needs.

Pointing out the essentials of a marketing plan, Drucker said that designing the right marketing strategy with specific objectives for nonprofits is the first basic strategy. Non-profits, he said, need what he called “marketing responsibility,”—taking your customers seriously. “Instead of saying, ‘We know what’s good for them,’ we ask, ‘What are their values? How do I reach them?’”¹

While Drucker is not suggesting that we target only a customer’s felt needs, we must be very careful in our approach. Look closely at the subtle impact of seeking to serve a customer’s stated felt needs over their unrecognized real needs. In our Jesus-focused context, felt needs are an easy programmatic target, but addressing real needs has no viable pathway other than the transformative power of surrendering to the Gospel message. I’m not talking about an emotional, prayer-based conversion, but instead a life-transforming surrender to the Lordship of King Jesus.

Marketing became an effective accelerator of the church’s programmatic growth engine, further establishing evangelism as a corporate activity built around Sunday services and discipleship as just another diluted church activity. Jesus-style relational disciple-making became non-essential in the church growth equation, yielding the unintended consequence of suppressing the normative pathway to transformative life change under the authority and Lordship of Jesus.

As the Seeker-Sensitive Movement matured into the 1980s, thousands of churches and church plants began conducting demographic research to develop marketing strategies. George Barna published the controversial book *Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You About Church Growth* in 1988.² Barna, a well-respected researcher in church leadership and growth, argued that marketing is more than a business tool; it can be a strategic approach to fulfill the Great Commission more effectively. Barna made marketing understandable and accessible for the average church leader. He also helped contextualize Drucker’s focus on customers for the church.

Warren’s *Purpose-Driven Church*, published in 1995, provided more concrete marketing tools with the introduction of Saddleback Sam and Samantha. This simple, easily reproducible approach to understanding and defining the church’s customers became a normative practice in marketing.

With clarity on the target customer and an understanding of their felt needs, the next natural step in the Church Growth Movement was to implement a marketing strategy. Building a church brand and communicating it effectively became critical steps in growing and sustaining large churches. Creating a recognizable, appealing identity for the church became especially important for communicating its core beliefs, vision, values, mission, and unique community offerings in ways that resonate with both current members and potential newcomers. This approach extended beyond traditional notions of branding and marketing by deeply intertwining marketing with the church's spiritual mission, using many of the same strategies in the business world to attract and engage with a target audience.

It's not surprising that church marketing became a normative practice through the introduction of customer-focused strategies. As with competitors in the marketplace, branding and marketing enabled churches to "differentiate" themselves from other churches by highlighting their unique qualities, strengths, programs, and services. This scarcity mindset and competitive posture, unfortunately, created barriers to the type of open-handed collaboration required for gospel saturation.

Church Marketing to the Masses

So, what was "church marketing" during the latter years of the Church Growth Movement (1995 to 2005)?

While difficult for younger readers to imagine, most of the church growth era lacked social media platforms, websites, or internet access. Further, there was limited access to cell phones and texting. If you wanted to find or research a church, the Yellow Pages (a.k.a. phone book) was your method of choice. Even then, you had to physically visit the church to check it out, as there was no website or online services to preview.

In 1995, Leadership Network was the premier platform representing and communicating with the leaders of larger, growing churches. Their primary form of communication was a weekly fax (short for facsimile) to 5,000 fax

subscribers.³ The Church Growth Movement never had the benefits of Facebook (2004), widespread text use (2005), Twitter (2006), iPhone (2007), or Android (2008). Church marketing during the last decade of the Church Growth Movement (1995 to 2005) primarily involved direct-mail postcards inviting people to church.

As Warren introduced the process for defining Sam and Samantha in 1995, John Manlove founded what I believe was the first full-service marketing company specializing in direct mail for churches. Strategic clarity strategist Will Mancini, author of *Church Unique*, worked for Manlove before launching his national strategic clarity ministry. Numerous spin-off companies, such as Mancini's, were born from Manlove's original church marketing company.

Manlove recalled to me the early days and the resistance he faced from churches. The first reaction by many church leaders was, "It's wrong to market the church. The church doesn't need to be marketed."⁴ But it wasn't long before churches began to see the potential impact.

Manlove specialized in direct mail postcards: 1 Postcard = 1 Invitation to Church. Instead of the slow growth of personal relationships and invitations, churches could now send 30,000 mass invitations at once, multiple times. The results were formulaic. For every 10,000 invitations mailed, churches could expect a specific number of church visitors. The number of visitors was directly proportional to the amount of money you were willing to spend. This programmatic approach to mass invitations dovetailed nicely with the programmatically driven experience visitors would have when visiting the church.

Manlove operated his company for about a decade and saw demand skyrocket before selling it as ChurchMarketing.com in 2005. His pioneering work helped catalyze the birth of an entire church marketing industry, including Outreach Marketing, now the largest and oldest (29 years) company of its type and the parent of *Outreach Magazine*. Outreach Founder Scott Evans offered turnkey, affordable solutions for a wide range of marketing materials, from direct mail postcards to table covers and banners. Outreach enabled virtually any church to send at least 5,000 direct-mail postcard invitations to its community and offered

the added value of providing almost every marketing and branding product a church could need.

A Front-Row Seat

Church marketing, as a broad service industry, did not fully emerge until after 1995, when the Church Growth Movement began to wind down. Because Outreach's turnkey solutions were more expensive, churches seeking to run high-volume marketing began learning the business of direct mail and doing it themselves. That happened at New Life Christian Church, where I entered full-time vocational ministry in 2000. At that point, I began to see firsthand the power of marketing to reach the customer. But I had no idea I would soon become one of the leaders in this growing industry.

Brett Andrews was (and still is) the lead and founding minister of New Life. He started New Life using Warren's Purpose-Driven approach, including identifying an equivalent Saddleback Sam and Samantha. As a portable church, New Life set up and tore down weekly, lacking the community presence that comes with a permanent facility. Although we were heavily evangelistic and outreach-focused, direct mail postcards accelerated community awareness and brand identity, using the marketing principle: "It takes six positive touches with a customer to gain their trust!"

For over a decade, New Life conducted at least two sizeable direct-mail postcard campaigns per year. Each campaign included at least three postcards sent to 25,000-plus people over one month, totaling more than 150,000 postcard invitations per year. To minimize cost, we purchased our own labeling equipment and became a wholesaler of marketing lists. We developed partnerships with large printing companies with excess capacity, enabling us to secure incredibly low prices to fill the empty spots in their print runs. We started saving over \$25,000 per year in marketing expenses, which we rolled back into the marketing budget to run about 50% more marketing than before. Other churches noticed and began asking us regularly how they could do the same thing.

From this experience, we launched the National Church Marketing Institute (NCMI) as a nonprofit marketing group in 2002. Initially, we focused on educating churches to do their own marketing. However, most of the churches we served asked us to handle their marketing. At the time, Manlove and Outreach were the clear pacesetters in the newly emerging industry. However, unlike Manlove and Outreach, which incurred higher overhead from their printing presses and labor, our nonprofit ministry and decentralized approach offered much lower prices. Remaining a nonprofit, we shifted the NCMI from an educational institute to Church Marketing Solutions, a marketing fulfillment company.

Church Marketing Solutions grew rapidly, and we served hundreds of churches across the U.S. each year through millions of direct-mail postcard invitations. Over the coming years, Manlove exited the market as demand for church marketing increased and the industry became saturated, with an expanding number of service providers entering the market. Outreach significantly lowered its prices, and we also decided to exit the marketing space and focus on church-planting.

As with John Manlove's experience, New Life's national marketing engagement led to the spinoff of additional national ministries. In working with church planters to maximize their marketing, an innovative, best-in-class project management service called Passion for Planting (church-planting.net) was launched. This ministry helped accelerate the impact of Stadia, a national church-planting ministry, as well as numerous other groups. Passion for Planting served as the parent/umbrella ministry in forming the Church Planting Network, which later became the national church multiplication ministry, Exponential (exponential.org). (Yes, I know this is sounding like the Matthew 1 "begat" chapter).

While this history is important for understanding the progression of the Church Growth Movement, don't miss a key phenomenon that emerged in parallel. The Church Growth Movement was catalyzed by apostolic, evangelistically minded Boomer Builders. It did not start with an existing foundational support industry to service it. The support industry largely grew out of innovative churches like New Life, which started parachurch support ministries such as Passion for Planting and Church Marketing Solutions.

An Eternal Difference

Hundreds of similar stories are spread throughout the Church Growth Movement's history. It would be fascinating to capture the interconnectedness and ripple effect of emerging leaders, churches, and ministries on a giant wall chart. Much of today's "church support industry" finds its roots in a lineage touched by and traced back to the Church Growth Movement.

Marketing, including branding, was crucial to fueling the Megachurch Movement and remains so today. While our focus has now shifted from print to digital media, I'm convinced that church marketing remains an important tool for reaching the lost.

It's important to note that millions of people will experience eternity with Jesus because of the impact of church marketing during the Church Growth Movement. While critics question its need and biblical basis, the effect of church marketing is unquestionable. I recently met fifteen people at a large church we helped start nearly twenty years ago through Church Marketing Solutions. I remember personally operating our labeling machine for over 2 full days to address over 120,000 postcards to support the church's grand opening.

Our facilitator asked each person to introduce themselves and explain how they initially came to the church. I was amazed. Three of the fifteen people came to the church through the direct-mail postcards I had labeled. All three were now key leaders at the church. Thousands of churches can tell similar stories.

Reflection Questions

Is your Growth Strategy Scalable Through Marketing or Reproducible Through Relationships?

List your church's top three growth strategies from the last year. For each one, ask: Could this strategy work without paid staff, marketing budget, or professional execution? Or does it require ongoing investment to maintain results? If your church plant couldn't afford marketing, professional production, or facilities, could it still grow through relational disciple-making? The scalability question

reveals whether you're built for addition (marketing-driven) or multiplication (relationship-driven).

Are You Building Brand Awareness or Making Disciples?

Marketing strategies focus on “touches” and “impressions” to build brand trust—the church becomes a product people evaluate before trying. Disciple-making strategies focus on relationships and transformation—the church becomes a family people belong to as they are changed. Look at your church’s communication strategy (website, social media, direct mail, advertising)—is the primary goal to build brand awareness (attracting customers) or to equip disciples (mobilizing missionaries)? Which approach did Jesus model?



SECTION 4

Institutionalizing the Movement

From Pastor-As-Shepherd to Pastor-As-CEO

By 1995, the Church Growth Movement had achieved something remarkable. The Purpose-Driven Paradigm had been codified and was spreading rapidly. The number of megachurches had quadrupled from 150 to 600 in just fifteen years. Business management principles had been successfully integrated into the church's strategy. Peter Drucker's customer-focused thinking shaped how churches understood their mission. Marketing had become a standard tool in the church growth toolkit. Leadership Network had created the connective tissue that allowed innovation to spread at unprecedented speed.

The movement had grown—and in that growth lay both unprecedented opportunities and emerging challenges.

What happens when a movement becomes an institution? Or, when entrepreneurial ventures mature into complex enterprises? When innovations become established practices? When what began as a fresh wind of the Spirit settles into predictable patterns and professional systems? This section explores those questions by examining the period from 1995 to 2005, when the Church

Growth Movement moved from defining and growing into something more complex: institutionalizing.

The Enterprise Evolution

The central dynamic of this period was the transformation of growing churches from mission-driven causes into enterprise-level organizations. Churches that had reached megachurch status found themselves managing multi-million-dollar budgets, overseeing hundreds of staff members, coordinating complex programming across multiple campuses, and serving thousands of members with diverse needs and expectations. The pastoral calling had to expand to include organizational leadership. The traditional pastor-as-shepherd model proved inadequate for leading organizations of this complexity.

The Birth of a Leadership Industry

This complexity created an unprecedented demand for leadership development and management training. Bible colleges and seminaries, designed to prepare pastors for traditional ministry roles, proved inadequate for equipping leaders to manage complex organizations in rapidly changing cultural contexts. Into this gap emerged an entirely new industry focused on church leadership development. The Global Leadership Summit, launched by Bill Hybels in 1995, became the flagship platform for this new sector, bringing business leadership principles directly into church culture. Leadership Network expanded its influence as the premier connector and catalyst for innovative church leaders. Publishing houses, consulting firms, and conference networks emerged to serve the growing market of pastors seeking to develop their leadership and management capabilities.

This institutionalization of leadership development represented both the movement's maturation and a significant departure from its original focus. Where McGavran had emphasized missional effectiveness and evangelistic results, the leadership sector increasingly emphasized organizational effectiveness and leadership competency. Yet institutionalization also brought necessary benefits—growing organizations require sophisticated systems, professional

management, trained leadership, and sustainable structures. Success increasingly meant building sustainable enterprises capable of long-term impact.

Crosscurrents and Critique

Yet simultaneously, crosscurrents of critique began to emerge. The most significant was the emerging church conversation, led by younger leaders who challenged the Church Growth Movement’s marketing orientation, programmatic approach, and cultural accommodation. These voices raised fundamental questions about authenticity, community, and mission that would prove prophetic in the years to come. Simultaneously, missional church conversations began to emerge, emphasizing incarnational presence and community transformation over attractional programming and numerical growth. These conversations represented a return to some of McGavran’s original missional insights while critiquing the consumer-driven applications that had become the norm.

The solution that emerged could be called “intrapreneurialism”—the cultivation of entrepreneurial innovation within institutional frameworks. Churches learned to balance the stability and efficiency of institutional systems with the creativity and risk-taking of entrepreneurial ventures. This balance became a defining characteristic of successful megachurches during this period.

Understanding How We Got Here

This was the era when the movement’s greatest successes began creating complex challenges. The very foundations that had powered fifty years of church growth were producing both impressive results and unforeseen consequences. The Consumer-Driven Operating System that enabled rapid expansion also created constraints that even aware leaders found difficult to escape. These unintended consequences have left us with a divided nation and fractured evangelicalism. Looking ahead, we will have to understand and address these consequences. In this section, we begin to see more clearly the importance of understanding “How Did We Get Here?” as a tool for defining our current problems and their consequences.

The six chapters in this section explore how these institutionalizing forces shaped the movement: the emergence of the church CEO model (Chapter 15), the birth of the modern leadership industry (Chapter 16), the church's enthusiastic embrace of leadership resources (Chapter 17), the crosscurrents and tensions that emerged (Chapter 18), the Emerging Church conversations that challenged prevailing assumptions (Chapter 19), and the intrapreneurial approach that balanced innovation with institutionalization (Chapter 20).

By 2005, the Church Growth Movement had achieved something remarkable: it had successfully institutionalized its principles and practices as the dominant operating system for American evangelicalism. Yet this achievement came with costs and complications that would become increasingly apparent in the years ahead, setting the stage for the outward-focused innovations of Section 5 and the eventual disruptions of Section 6.



CHAPTER 15

The Church CEO

From Cause-Based Mission to Enterprise Dynamics

The executive coach leaned back in his chair and studied the megachurch pastor across from him. They'd been meeting at this coffee shop for six months, and today's conversation had revealed something the pastor hadn't yet acknowledged.

"You know what you actually are?" the coach said. "You're running a \$15 million enterprise with 12,000 members, 100 employees, multiple facilities, and thousands of volunteers. You're not a pastor who happens to have a large church. You're a CEO who happens to work in a church."

The pastor opened his mouth to protest—to say something about shepherding, evangelism, teaching God's Word, and calling. But the words caught in his throat. Because looking at his calendar, his responsibilities, and his lack of margin, he couldn't argue. The coach was right. The question was: when had the shift happened? And what had been lost in the transition?

With the Americanization of the Church Growth Movement and the application of business management principles, the average pastor's paradigm of success shifted from shepherding a small church of fewer than 100 people to growing a large, sustainable church. However, the leadership, management expertise, systems, and staff required to grow and lead a complex enterprise are markedly greater than those needed to lead the average U.S. church with fewer than 100 people.

This tension is as old as the church itself. Think about the apostle Paul. His calling was crystal clear: preach the gospel where Christ had not been named, gather new believers into simple communities of faith, and move on to the next unreached place. Yet as those churches grew, complexity followed. In Corinth, gifted leaders competed for influence, and factions emerged. In Galatia, theological drift threatened the very heart of the gospel. In Ephesus and Crete, Paul instructed Timothy and Titus to appoint qualified elders because unstructured zeal was no longer enough. Growth created problems that demanded new structures, roles, and governance.

Paul never set out to become an institutional architect; he was a missionary church planter. But a movement that begins with cause-based passion almost always has to grapple with enterprise dynamics once it bears fruit. The same thing happened in the modern Church Growth Movement. What began as an evangelistic push to reach the lost eventually produced churches so large and complex that they required new kinds of leadership, systems, and staff just to keep functioning week to week.

While the transition from church as a “cause” to church as an “enterprise” is a natural and understandable shift that enabled the growth of the megachurch, it was also difficult, complex, and multidimensional. An enterprise involves business-like activities with a systematic, purposeful focus. Check, check, and check.

This paradigm shift from pastor-as-shepherd to pastor-as-CEO was a direct consequence of the demands and realities of growing a megachurch and a necessary adjustment to fuel its continued growth. In this approach, the lead pastor’s primary role is vision.

This transformation saw some churches integrate corporate roles and titles, including the CEO, into their organizational frameworks. In these settings, the church CEO was responsible for the church’s day-to-day management, operations, strategic direction, financial stewardship, and expansion efforts. This role paralleled that of a CEO in the secular corporate sphere, signifying a critical evolution from the traditional pastoral and administrative roles that had historically characterized church leadership.

The “church CEO” concept arises from the modern intersection of traditional church governance and contemporary corporate management practices. Historically, church leadership was not framed in corporate terms. From the hierarchical structures of the early Christian church to the multitude of governance models that emerged from the Protestant Reformation, the administration of religious communities was distinct from a business.

The evolution towards a church CEO model reflects the integration of successful corporate practices into the church to manage complexity, drive growth, ensure sustainability, and navigate cultural shifts.

The adaptation of the church CEO role has been criticized. Some argue it can emphasize growth and efficiency at the expense of pastoral care and spiritual depth. Others see the unhealthy power structures and seemingly endless string of moral failures in today’s church as a consequence of this. Still, others worry that the shift will lead to secular corporate weaknesses within the church and detract from its primary mission.

Generally, the Large Church Phenomenon has extended the church’s evangelistic reach, facilitated innovation, and helped offset declining national attendance. Unfortunately, it has not given us disciple-making movements, church-planting movements, or a pathway toward gospel saturation. Instead, the process has given us a definition of church success that requires a more complex enterprise model to sustain continued growth.

Let’s look at four distinct shifts rooted in the church as an enterprise that helped fuel the Megachurch Movement and necessitated the role of the church CEO.

From Mission to Enterprise

I’ve had hundreds of “church CEO” friends over the years. From Bill Hybels to Rick Warren to J.D. Greear to Andy Stanley, I’ve yet to meet a single megachurch pastor motivated by a desire to be a church CEO. On the contrary, most are mission-driven. Their callings tend to be evangelistic with a parallel apostolic

drive. This one-two punch produces strong visionary leaders who are discontent with remaining small and static. They thrive on big dreams and hills to conquer.

However, when large becomes attainable and normative, a tension emerges between being cause- or mission-driven and becoming an enterprise. This is normal and healthy tension. I'm not trying to pit these against one another. Ideally, an enterprise's strength lies in its ability to maintain what business guru Jim Collins calls "the genius of the AND." The challenge lies in how we become large AND simultaneously maintain the hungry, mission-driven zeal that motivated our initial launch as a church.

In my research, I remembered Bob Buford telling me about his struggles with the dynamics of organizational growth at Leadership Network. In 1999, legendary consultant Lyle Schaller wrote the following in a letter to Buford, highlighting the paradox of success. It's easier to remain small and mission-driven than large and complex. But the fruit of success, when small and mission-driven, is often a more complex enterprise. Many organizations feel the tension as they grow, but Schaller does a great job of articulating the phenomenon:

"I believe a pickup truck with one person in it and a ladder in the back is a lower-cost operation than a van carrying two employees. I also believe that when an organization grows to more than seven paid staff, the managerial load begins to grow very rapidly. I believe it is easier to have three or four or five paid staff completely internalize values, mission, and goals than it is to persuade twenty-five people to internalize identical values, mission, and goals. Finally, I believe the larger the paid staff, the greater the temptation to diffuse purpose, role, values, and mission. 'Mission creep' becomes more of a threat with (a) passage of time, (b) the larger the number of paid staff, (c) the faster the rate of turnover in leadership positions, and (d) when productivity goes down as a size of staff goes up. So, I favor several smaller empires over one big empire."²¹

Recall McGavran's context. He has started over 15 churches, none of which grew to more than 100. His motive was conversion, his means was evangelistic disciple-making, and his growth vision was church-planting. In Schaller's context, the church leader was an evangelist and sole proprietor whose mission-

driven charter was to make disciples and multiply churches. The leader never had to deal with the enterprise dynamics we face today because they had a different definition of church success and a naturally organic strategy for pursuing it.

In our Consumer-Driven Operating System, which optimizes the growth of individual churches while suppressing the planting of autonomous new churches, managing enterprise tension is inevitable. Against the complex realities of leading an enterprise church, we see the emergence of the church CEO paradigm.

I felt this tension acutely in my own leadership at Exponential. In the early years, we were a small, decentralized team punching far above our weight and cobbling together events, resources, and relationships in ways that far exceeded our staffing and budget. Demand was exploding. More leaders wanted to come, more networks wanted to partner, more churches were asking for help. On paper, the solution was obvious: hire more staff, build more structure, and formalize what had largely been relational and entrepreneurial. But in my gut, I knew that every new hire and layer of complexity carried a cost. Too much infrastructure and we would lose the very agility and missionary edge that made Exponential effective in the first place.

That's why Bob shared Lyle Schaller's letter with me. He knew I was living in what I now call a cross-current—pulled in one direction by the cause (multiplying churches and movements) and in the other by the enterprise (building an organization capable of sustaining the demand). The New Testament gives us a similar picture: Paul spent part of his time starting new works and part of his time writing letters to clean up the inevitable messes that growth created. Those messes led to the development of governance structures and the appointment of qualified elders—topics we'll explore more in a later chapter. The lesson is paradoxical, but unavoidable: success always breeds complexity, and how you add—how you choose to grow—will either grease the skids of complexity or create friction.

From Simplicity to Complexity

The demands of growing large, sustainable multisite churches are too much for a single gifted, entrepreneurial church CEO to handle. Consequently, the role of Executive Pastor, or Chief Operating Officer (COO), also emerged and became a normative staffing priority by the late 1990s and early 2000s.

As churches began adopting more business-like practices, the principles of strategic planning, staff management, financial oversight, and organizational development were applied within church ministry. The Executive Pastor or COO role enabled churches to benefit from these practices while ensuring they were adapted and applied in a way that was congruent with the church's mission and values.

My calling to full-time vocational ministry in 2000 initially led me to become an Executive Pastor. At the time, the role was still relatively new in churches, and few resources were available to guide me. The best I had were periodic retreats with other EPs who were trying to adapt to the role. Collectively, we joked that our jobs were to do everything the lead pastors didn't want to or couldn't do.

While working in the marketplace at Naval Reactors, I oversaw complex engineering and operational initiatives. Subsequently, as an Executive Pastor, I remember saying that my new role in ministry was more challenging. Specifically, functional accountability in the marketplace was straightforward, with paid staff and supervisory ratios of 20:1 or less. In a ministry with a primarily volunteer-based workforce, I found the eighty-to-one supervisory ratio far more complex and challenging to manage.

Generally, the birth and normative implementation of the Executive Pastor role were necessary responses to this complexity. They complemented the Lead Pastor's visionary and teaching role. The Executive Pastor functions like a marketplace COO and is responsible for the complex operational side of the church, including strategy, staffing, systems, facilities, resourcing, and programming. In my experience, most Executive Pastors tend to either be more entrepreneurial or more administrative. The entrepreneurial role is needed for churches seeking a more adventurous, possibly innovative journey, while

the administrator role is well-suited to stability and smooth waters. Both are valuable, with the selection driven by the lead pastor's gifting and the church's culture. In the complex church enterprise, a growing number of churches now have multiple Executive Pastors.

Staff structure and hierarchy must evolve as a church grows from the average U.S. church with one to one-and-a-half staff members, to a megachurch with twenty-plus staff members. As Schaller notes, the increased staffing needed to run an enterprise introduces complexity and dynamics that can lead to mission drift. The church CEO (Lead Pastor) and COO (Executive Pastor) are responsible for the complex integration and alignment of vision casting, strategy development, church growth, and mission effectiveness.

While each church is unique in its implementation of roles and responsibilities, I believe the way Brett Andrews and I worked together at New Life, as the functional CEO and COO, was representative of the model that emerged during the 1990s. Our church vision and mission rarely changed. Our strategy, however, was often aggressive and evolving. We were on the leading edge of purpose-driven, externally focused, multisite church approaches and pioneers in church-planting networks. I tend to be entrepreneurial, and our strategy represented that. We needed a "COO type" leader like me to bridge our vision into an aggressive strategy. Brett always kept us focused on the vision and mission. We were "joined at the hip" on vision and strategy, with my bias to developing and managing the strategy. Brett also relied on me to align vision, mission, strategy, priorities, and resources (including staff, facilities, and budget). Together, our complementary leadership gifts were pivotal in leading an increasingly complex enterprise.

From Elder- to Staff-Led

In the average U.S. church with fewer than 80 members, the elders provide leadership and management oversight. These elders oversee the Lead Pastor, provide vision and strategy direction, and steward biblical doctrines and the church's operations. Because of the relatively small budget, staff size, and

programmatic demands, most decision-making is handled by this board, with little need for delegation. The Lead Pastor primarily teaches and shepherds.

As a church grows larger and adds numerous staff, the volunteer elders are unable to keep up with everything. Leadership and management responsibilities shift from elder-led to staff-led. Many churches create a senior or executive staff team comprising the CEO (Lead Pastor), the COO (Executive Pastor), and key department heads. This team essentially becomes the enterprise's operational management team, empowered by the elder board.

This shift typically coincides with a change in the church's legal governance structure from board-driven to policy-governed. Dr. John Carver developed policy governance, which became broadly embraced in the 1970s and 80s, including by many emerging megachurches (enterprise churches). It enables organizations of any type, especially those with boards of directors, to achieve accountability and efficiency while fulfilling their obligations. The core idea behind policy governance is to clarify the board's roles and responsibilities, as well as those of the staff who manage the organization.

The model emphasizes that the board should focus on more significant issues, such as vision and biblical doctrine, while delegating operational details to the staff. The board focuses on desired outcomes and impacts, such as growth in attendance, financial performance, and conversions. Board policies set the boundaries for the CEO, outlining what's prohibited rather than prescribing specific actions. This empowers the executive team to determine how to achieve the organization's goals within those boundaries.

This approach clearly delineates the board's responsibilities from those of the executive staff, including how the board and CEO interact, how authority is delegated, and how performance is monitored. Authority is an important principle in this shift in governance. The board delegates authority to the staff team but doesn't disown the responsibility associated with that authority.

When thinking about responsibility, I always go back to what Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, the founder of the Nuclear Navy and father of naval nuclear propulsion, famously said: "Responsibility is a unique concept. It can only reside

and adhere in a single individual. You may share it with others, but your portion is not diminished. You may delegate it, but it is still with you. You may disclaim it, but you cannot divest yourself of it. Even if you do not recognize it or admit its presence, you cannot escape it. If responsibility is rightfully yours, no evasion, ignorance, or passing the blame can shift the burden to someone else. Unless you can point your finger at the person who is responsible when something goes wrong, then you never had anyone really responsible.”

In shifting to policy governance, church elders must steward their role as overseers in a way that prevents the church CEO (Lead Pastor) from functioning as an authoritative king (or Pope) and ensures the CEO remains clearly under the authority and oversight of the overseers. Like the mission-and-enterprise tension, this area of delegation and responsibility by the elder board is critical. In our culture today, many church leadership problems related to trust and credibility are rooted in authority rather than in delegated responsibility, with the oversight role shifted from the overseers to the church CEO.

From Mission to Vision, and Managing to Leading

Management and leadership concepts are frequently discussed within the continuum of organizational behavior and effectiveness, with overlapping characteristics and distinguishing elements that set them apart. The precise distinctions can vary by context and perspective, but generally, the differences align with the foundational approaches each takes in achieving the organization’s vision and mission.

Managers are vital to an organization’s operations. They ensure that resources are used efficiently, tasks are completed, and goals are met through planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. With their heads down, their work is mission-critical. Leaders are more focused on guiding and inspiring people to follow them toward realizing the vision. Leadership is about change, innovation, and moving the organization forward in new directions. With their heads to the sky, their work is often vision-critical.

It's important to recognize that management and leadership are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Management (or stewardship) is a core competency of great leaders. While not all great managers become great leaders, genuinely great leaders rarely lack proven management skills. While the leader may be integral to communicating a strong vision and building a culture around it, the same leader without solid management skills is often a liability to the organization's mission.

The mission and vision are inseparably tied. Effective organizations need strong management to keep the operations running smoothly and strong leadership to drive change and innovation. The best organizational leaders can manage and lead, adjusting their approach based on the situation and the organization's needs. In essence, leadership and management together shape the success and direction of organizations by balancing process, efficiency, vision, and inspiration.

I spent fifteen-plus years in the marketplace before entering vocational ministry in 2000. Our Naval Reactors' organization was relatively complex but flat in structure. As a 22-year-old college graduate, only three levels of supervision stood between the four-star Admiral running the nuclear Navy and me.

Admiral Rickover built the organization's culture around developing strong managers and rarely spoke about leadership. He knew strong leaders would rise if he focused primarily on developing strong managers (stewards). The Admiral instinctively understood that a leadership-centric culture would likely not produce the pool of strong managers needed to accomplish the mission.

Contrary to contemporary church thinking, Rickover was biased toward management thinking over leadership thinking. Not coincidentally, our primary responsibility was inseparably tied to "stewardship" (the biblical word for management), and our mission-critical stakes were far higher than a corporate bottom line.

What About the Church?

One of my biggest surprises when entering full-time vocational ministry was the megachurch's fascination with leadership over management. It challenged my understanding of the principles I long thought I understood. Without my prior marketplace experience, the church world could easily have convinced me that management and leadership are inversely proportional: one must decrease their management responsibility to increase their leadership role.

When Leadership Network convened the early groups of large-church pastors in the 1980s, were those groups focused on leadership or on management? Buford's calling to a parallel ministry career involved bringing management principles to the emerging megachurch. Drucker told him the emerging, entrepreneurial church leaders who would fuel the megachurch phenomenon lacked management skills. I think that was 100% right.

So, why not "Management Network" instead of "Leadership Network" for this new ministry? Functionally, the content of those early peer-to-peer gatherings focused on management as a catalyst for the growth of large churches. This would argue for "Management Network" as a more accurate description of what Buford was pursuing functionally. Beyond the apparent consideration that "leadership" is a far sexier, more attractive word than "management," something more was happening. Leadership Network more accurately described the impact or outcome that would characterize success in engaging with the megachurch phenomenon through management.

Reflecting on the impact of Leadership Network, missiologist Ed Stetzer identified three important outcomes: "Leaders were pushed to a great capacity of leadership. Gifted pastors became effective leaders, resulting in stronger ministries."² Before the large church enterprise era, the average church in the U.S. generally had a small, static vision, lacking a strong evangelistically driven mission.

Under the authority and supervision of an elder board, one full-time vocational pastor could handle the demands of balancing management, leadership, and mission and vision. With the birth of the large church enterprise era, the Lead

Pastor's ability to balance their management and vision responsibilities became increasingly difficult. The role of the church CEO, strongly biased toward leadership competencies, became essential. As noted above, the Church COO (Executive Pastor) role emerged to keep the focus on management responsibilities, while the CEO focused on communications and vision.

The Elephant in the Room

Our success in growing large, sustainable churches created the need for a visionary leader and a church CEO role. There are consequences when God's vision for gospel saturation is co-opted with our vision for accumulation and growth. These consequences are magnified when God's plan for disciple-making is co-opted by our plans for institutional and programmatic conversions. God's vision, mission, and how and why we grow matter.

When accumulation metrics replace deployment metrics, local church numbers might grow, creating enterprise dynamics. When this happens, the enterprise generally gives us what I call the momentum flywheel. Profit in a business is measured by increasing attendance (growth) in a church. Growth fuels increased giving and budgets, fueling more and better programs. Programs, buildings, and Sunday programming then fuel more growth.

The enterprise becomes like a machine that needs continuous refueling of the tank and oiling of the gears. Each growth barrier consumes more programmatic energy and resources. The leadership-versus-management continuum becomes more challenging, and the shifts we've looked at in this chapter become necessary adjustments to fuel the growth-momentum flywheel.

Coinciding with the rise of the church CEO, the need for visionary and organizational leadership resources emerged, giving birth to a new Christian leadership sector to support the church as an enterprise.

K.P. Yohannan, founder of Gospel for Asia and prolific writer of over 200 books, once told me, "The movement of Christianity that Jesus established 2,000 years ago can be accomplished with ninth-grade-level competencies. We mess it up by

making it too complicated.” Until I researched this book and better understood the enterprise dynamics of the megachurch phenomenon, I didn’t really grasp the depth of Yohannan’s observation.

The leadership industry that emerged to serve the church didn’t exist a generation ago. At one level, it was a natural consequence of our success. Large churches are genuinely complex organizations, and good stewardship of God’s blessing demands capable leadership. But there’s a second, deeper factor. Visionary leadership and communication are far more appealing than the detailed managerial functions and the slow, personal work of modeling disciple-making in the trenches.

The fruit of our success drove the need for leadership, and the Consumer-Driven Operating System that produced that growth through programmatic and institutional efforts reduced, or even eliminated, the need for personal, generational, relational disciple-making. In essence, the co-opting of the growth engine fueled both the attraction to and the need for leadership as a priority, giving rise to an entire industry that would have been unrecognizable to the early church.

How that industry took shape, and how quickly it reshaped the church, is a story worth understanding.

Reflection Questions

Is Your Lead Pastor’s Role Defined by Biblical Qualifications or CEO Competencies?

Review your church’s elder/pastoral qualifications (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1) versus your Lead Pastor’s actual job description and evaluation metrics. Is your pastor primarily evaluated on spiritual fruit (teaching sound doctrine, shepherding people, modeling godliness) or organizational results (attendance growth, budget performance, staff management, vision-casting)? If your Lead Pastor role requires CEO competencies more than elder qualifications, what does that reveal about your operating system?

Does Your Church Need Enterprise Complexity or Are You Making Discipleship Too Complicated?

K.P. Yohannan says Jesus' method works with "ninth-grade competencies," but we make it too complex. List your church's core systems (weekend services, small groups, staff structure, facilities, budget processes). How many require professional execution, significant budgets, or complex management? Could your church plant tomorrow with no paid staff, no building, no budget—and still make reproducing disciples? If not, have you created dependency on the enterprise infrastructure that Jesus never modeled?



CHAPTER 16

The Birth of Modern Church Leadership

A New Sector Emerges

The pastors who functionally became CEOs, the ones we met in the last chapter, faced an uncertain reality. They were leading complex organizations with growing staffs, multimillion-dollar budgets, and enterprise-level demands, but nobody had trained them for any of it. Their seminary courses covered hermeneutics and homiletics, not strategic planning and organizational design. Their mentors had shepherded congregations of 100, not enterprises of 5,000. They needed help, and most had nowhere to turn.

They weren't alone. Across corporate America during the same period, a new industry was taking shape, one built around a single premise: leadership can be taught, developed, and scaled. What emerged was a massive leadership sector of conferences, books, consultants, coaches, and training programs. It wasn't built for the church, but the church would soon become one of its most enthusiastic customers.

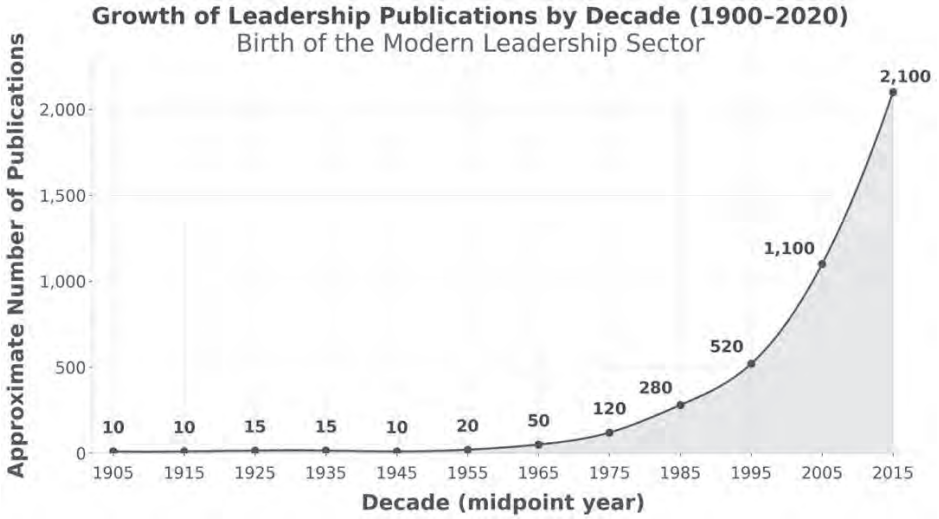
The timing couldn't have been more convenient. The Megachurch Movement and the related shift to enterprise churches in the 1990s made this new field of study particularly relevant and actionable for churches. Ask enterprise-focused church CEOs about their top challenges and needs, and leadership development will certainly be in the top three.

In less than thirty years, pursuing leadership development as a church strategy has become the norm in growing churches. Most church leaders under the age of 60 are surprised to learn that the formation and rapid growth of the field of leadership are phenomena unique to their lifetimes. For example, the first doctoral program in leadership studies in the U.S. was established in 1979 at the University of San Diego,¹ and the first undergraduate degree program was launched in 1992 at the University of Richmond². Today, there are hundreds of degrees and certificate programs. Just fifty years ago, leadership development pipelines were a foreign concept in churches. Today, most churches wrestle with such pipelines as essential resources for fueling the church enterprise and its growth.

It may surprise you to know that just thirty years ago, there were few leadership resources. In 1995, I had never attended a leadership conference or even heard of one. Beyond Leadership Network's invitation-only "Church for the 21st Century"³ conferences, limited to 400 attendees, it was difficult to find Christian leadership conferences in 1995. By 2005, I was taking my staff to multiple church leadership conferences each year. The choices were extensive, such as the Global Leadership Conference (Bill Hybels), Catalyst (John Maxwell and Andy Stanley), and Maximum Impact (John Maxwell), to name just a few.

In 1995, I had never read a contemporary leadership book. By 2005, the church leadership resourcing and conferencing space was in full gear. During this era, Leadership Network launched a major national publishing line focused on church leadership and innovation, eventually publishing more than 80 books.

The chart below highlights how rapidly this new sector emerged and grew at the end of the twentieth century.⁴ From 1900 to 1970, very few leadership resources were published. The 1970s saw twice as many leadership resources published as in the first 70 years of the century. The 1980s then saw that total double again. The 1990s saw the start of the exponential rise of the new leadership sector and industry. This shows that leadership as we know it was an adaptation of the second half of the 20th century, coinciding with the emergence of the megachurch phenomenon.



Leadership Publications in the 20th Century⁴

Figure 1

In 2000, demand increased exponentially amid cultural, business, global, and technological complexities. The new church leadership sector emerged as a byproduct of this larger cultural phenomenon, as the marketplace addressed leadership solutions that church leaders could easily access and contextualize to meet their felt needs. The resulting church leadership sector was fueled by church leaders who benefited from resources and had the platforms to gain exposure.

Today, the core paradigms and algorithms for successful growing churches are built on leadership development. I told ChatGPT to assume the role of an experienced lead pastor/minister who’s successful in church management, operations, and growth. I asked, “*What are the top challenges you face in growing your church?*” The top answers included leadership development and delegation. Most of the other challenges ChatGPT identified can be addressed through leadership development.

I asked a second question: “*What are the top challenges faced by stagnant or declining churches that are not prioritizing growth?*” The top answer was “lack of vision and direction”—the primary leadership role in most twenty-first-

century organizations. As the Church Growth Movement grew increasingly institutionalized, leadership development became a felt need of most pastors, fueling the rapid rise of the new sector and what we have today.

Words and Definitions Matter

Survey one hundred people on the definition of leadership, and you'd get nearly that many different definitions. J.A. McCleskey suggests there are more than 200 distinct ideas and theories about leadership and its definition.⁵ Benmira and Agboola state, "There is no one definition or particular leadership approach that is considered universal, and efforts continue in trying to identify what makes an effective leader."⁶ Others argue that these efforts are in vain as the definitions continually evolve based on the interest of the researcher and the context being studied.

I've been intentionally slow to define the words "leader" and "leadership," opting first to provide some history and evolution of this relatively new field of study. The evolution of leadership theories shows that even the definitions of leadership have changed. This means that our application of leadership in the church is susceptible to cultural co-opting and bias, especially when the prevailing secular wisdom appears to meet the complex felt needs of our church enterprise. As theories and definitions rooted in secular research and context evolve, we must exercise caution in our biblical applications.

To highlight the wide range of thought during the final decade of the twentieth century, John Maxwell (1993), a key voice in the business and religious space, defined leadership simply as "influence—nothing more, nothing less."⁷ In 2016, acknowledging the evolving leadership landscape, Alberto Silva wrote an excellent scholarly journal titled "What is Leadership?"⁸ He sought to capture a modern definition by integrating the works of top thought leaders. His inputs included:

- R.M. Stogdill (1950), an early pioneer in modern leadership, defined leadership as "the process (act) of influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts toward goal setting and goal achievement."⁹ Silva

notes that Stogdill was among the first to emphasize that leadership is a process of influencing others, not merely an individual activity.

- John Kotter (1988), a distinguished professor and author from Harvard Business School, defined leadership as “the process of moving a group (or groups) in some direction through mostly non-coercive means.”¹⁰ The role of power and coercion is a continuing point of debate.
- Warren Bennis (1995), widely regarded as a pioneer of the contemporary field of leadership studies, affirmed that leadership is “the capacity to create a compelling vision and to translate vision into organizational realities.”¹¹ In short, Silva notes that “Bennis’ idea of leadership was the capacity to translate vision into reality.”¹²
- And Peter Drucker (1996) summarized his core idea of leadership: “The only definition of a leader is someone that has followers.”¹³ Inherent in Drucker’s view is the need for a leader to have an intended goal or outcome (the vision or mission); the ability to communicate the necessary direction for achieving the outcome; and the activated, free-will choice of followers to submit to the leader’s influence.

Regardless of the varying definitions of leadership, seeking consensus on the outcomes of effective leadership is helpful as we look back to understand how we got here. These outcomes have remained relatively constant throughout the evolution of leadership theories, at least from the secular perspective. This is less clear in the biblical application of leadership through the 21st-century lens.

As we entered the twenty-first century, Silva’s work highlighted the commonly understood elements of leadership. He concluded it is a process in which a person of influence (the leader) mobilizes followers in a specific direction. The direction often represents the alignment of vision, strategy, and goals. The ability to inspire people directionally toward a vision emerged as a critical leadership trait.

Benmira and Agboola note, “Leaders are generally viewed as visionaries and strategists, whereas managers monitor and control performance, maintaining order and stability in the organization. Some researchers argue that leaders and managers have distinct roles and responsibilities, while others assert that

leadership and management are complementary, and it would be difficult to separate them in practice.”¹⁴

A lawyer practices law and seeks justice; a doctor practices medicine and seeks health; and a leader practices leadership and seeks directional influence. Unlike lawyers’ and doctors’ practices, which are relatively fixed and consistent, the practice of “leadership,” as we’ve seen in this deep dive, has been continually evolving, making it a moving target. Leaders define a preferred future through vision and align strategy, goals, resources, and people (followers).

As you read the following definition of a leader, focus on positional authority, action traits, and amplifying descriptors.

leader *noun*

lead·er \ 'lē-dar \

1 : one that guides, directs, or has a primary or preeminent position
She emerged as the clear leader in her field.

2 : the principal or foremost part or member of something
He became the recognized leader of the expedition.

3 : the main shoot or stem of a plant that grows upward and determines direction
The gardener trimmed the side branches to strengthen the leader.

4 : a person who commands or directs a group, force, or organized body
The unit waited for orders from their leader.

5 : a person of commanding authority or influence
She is regarded as a natural leader.

7 : the principal performer or figure who sets direction for others in a group
As leader of the ensemble, he set the tempo and tone for the musicians.

Figure 1 - Adapted from Online Merriam-Webster Definition

Common to all these elements is positional authority with primary influence on direction. I gained additional clarity from the synonyms for “leadership”: channel, conduit, duct, pipe, and tube. At first, these words caused me to pause. However, I realized that all these things shape and define the direction of what is inside them, channeling them toward a specific destination or outcome. Leaders practice leadership through directional influence.

The definitions of leadership and a leader continue to evolve as secular culture progresses. The church rides the wave of change, adapting best practices from other sectors to address the demands of the enterprise church.

The Evolution of Leadership Theories

As you’ve no doubt seen, leadership is a complex, multidimensional field of study that has grown rapidly. It’s become more important since World War II. Our fast-changing, technologically complex, increasingly globalized world yearns for strong leaders. This need is even more relevant today, given our growing distrust of institutions and the cynicism and division across all domains of society.

One of the most debated questions we study is, “*What traits and styles make strong leaders?*” Our pursuit of answering this question led to leadership becoming a modern field of study in the twentieth century. It also drove the progression of several evolving leadership theories.

While leadership as a field of study is relatively new, the role of leaders is as old as mankind. I like how the book *The Evolution of Leadership* sums it up: “Throughout the centuries, there have been leaders. We are social animals who bond together, but we look for order against the chaos of life. Society looks to organize itself to accomplish tasks that individuals cannot perform individually. As a result, someone inevitably ends up in charge.”¹⁵

Until the latter half of the twentieth century, leadership theories evolved slowly, coinciding with the rise of the Church Growth Movement. Historically, the application of leadership theories was primarily rooted in the military, political,

and religious sectors. However, with the rise of the Industrial Revolution, the need to apply leadership theories in business became important.

According to an article in *Leadership Excellence*, the so-called “Captains of Industry found they could build an empire based on modern technology instead of swords. Oil barons, railroad magnates, and factory owners amassed large fortunes without relying on armies.”¹⁶ The best practices in military leadership theories were embraced in business and then adapted into the modern enterprise church.

Trait theory was dominant for a quarter century from 1970 to 1995, while the Church Growth Movement was maturing. It provided a framework or lens for church leaders to understand leadership and identify which elements of natural leadership they had and which they did not. From a timing perspective, the convergence of successive models into the transformative model represented a hybrid theory that was easily embraced by church leaders. Much of the church leadership writing in the 1990s was rooted in this hybrid collective, drawing on elements of trait, behavioral, situational, and transformational theories.

As the complexity of the enterprise and of church leadership increased, governance shifted toward greater decentralization. The dynamics of the church as an enterprise, with numerous staff and all its complexities, increasingly demanded leadership solutions as the Church Growth Movement matured—naturally pointing church leaders to pursue theories and resources to become better leaders.

The following table names the various leadership models and summarizes their evolution. It is intended to give context for the modern church leadership models that emerged in response to the megachurch phenomenon.

The Evolution of Leadership Theories

Leadership Model	Approximate Era	Description & Distinctives
Great Man Theory	Mid-1800s – Early 1900s	Leaders are born, not made. Rooted in the idea that history is shaped by "great men" with innate, divine, or fated characteristics. It focused on studying heroic historical figures to identify the specific mix of gifts that destined them to lead.
Trait Theory	1900s – 1940s	The "Inventory" of Leadership. Growing out of Great Man theory, this model attempted to catalog the non-negotiable, inherent qualities (such as high energy, integrity, and intelligence) required for leadership. It served as a framework to identify "natural" leaders.
Behavioral Theory	1940s – 1960s	Leaders are made, not born. A major reversal from previous models, this theory asserts that effective leadership is defined by actions rather than traits. It introduced the idea that leadership could be learned and developed by studying specific behaviors and styles.
Situational / Contingency Theory	1960s – 1980s	Context is King. Asserts there is no "best style" of leadership. Instead, effective leadership depends on the environment and the "leader-subordinate dynamic." Leaders must possess emotional intelligence to adapt their style to fit the specific context.
Transformational Theory	1980s – 1990s	Interaction and Inspiration. Focuses on mobilizing followers toward a shared vision and mission. It views leadership as a process of influence that transforms both leader and follower, serving as the foundation for modern "lean" and "agile" strategies.

Consolidated Summaries¹⁷⁻²⁷

Figure 2

Beginning in the late 1990s and continuing into the 21st century, leadership theorists increasingly moved beyond the “born vs. made” dichotomy that had dominated earlier scholarship. Subsequent models, including Servant Leadership, Authentic Leadership, and Adaptive Leadership, emerged as integrative or hybrid frameworks that reincorporated character and inherent qualities alongside learned behaviors and situational adaptation.

These newer models recognize that effective leadership is neither purely a matter of innate traits nor purely a matter of behavioral mastery, but rather a dynamic combination of both. For example, Authentic Leadership requires specific character traits (moral grounding, self-awareness, integrity) as prerequisites for the behavioral and relational practices it prescribes. Similarly, Servant Leadership requires both a disposition of humility and demonstrated behaviors of listening, empowering, and serving others.

These integrative approaches represent a maturation of leadership theory, moving beyond rigid categorical boundaries to acknowledge the interdependence of who leaders are and what leaders do.

Church Planting

Dr. Charles Ridley is considered the father of modern church planter assessment. In 1984, during the rise of the modern Consumer-Driven Operating System and Church Growth Movement, Ridley completed a study of successful church planters. He identified 48 distinct “traits” to assess potential planters. The 48 traits were condensed down to 13, and then the “Top 5 Ridley Knockout Factors”—a filter for selecting leaders. His top 3 traits include:

1. visioning capacity,
2. intrinsic motivation as a self-starter,
3. and instilling ownership in others,

He published his work in the book *How to Select Church Planters: A Self-Study Manual for Recruiting, Screening, Interviewing, and Evaluating Qualified Church Planters*.²⁸

Ridley specialized in “behavioral” interviews/assessments. According to the Center for U.S. Missions, “behavioral interviewing is based on the social science theory of behavioral consistency, which states that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. So, for example, instead of asking a prospective church planter, “What would you do if conflict arises in this position?” an interviewer might ask, “Tell me about a conflicted situation you had to deal with and how you handled it.”²⁹

Dr. Ken Behnken, director of the Center for U.S. Missions, participated in behavioral interview training with Ridley. He said the behavioral interview process allows the interviewer to clearly identify the person’s gifts, so that the congregation, school, or entity can extend a call or contract to the person with the needed gifts for that position. “We have found this particularly helpful in identifying pastors with the gifts to be a church planter,” Behnken said.³⁰ Ridley pioneered the intersection of leadership trait theory and behavioral theory for church planters, shaping the future leadership of thousands of churches. Most networks and denominations have built their church-planting assessment processes on Ridley’s trait and behavioral work.

In one sense, Ridley’s work was a necessary maturation of McGavran’s original impulse. If church-planting is the primary vehicle for reaching new people and multiplying the big “C” Church, then identifying planters with the wiring to start and lead new works is an important stewardship of the mission. Yet it also reveals how deeply the modern leadership lens has become embedded in our church operating system. Rather than primarily asking whether potential planters were evangelists and disciple-makers who could multiply generationally, we increasingly asked whether they had the traits and behaviors of high-capacity leaders who could launch and manage healthy enterprises.

The leadership sector that emerged to serve megachurches thus shaped the next generation of church planters as well—often shifting the emphasis from simple, reproducible disciple-making toward scalable, leader-centric church enterprises.

Reflection Questions

Are You Developing Leaders or Stewards?

Leadership development programs focus on vision-casting, influence, directional capacity, and the mobilization of followers. Stewardship development focuses on faithfulness, character, teaching truth, and modeling godliness. Review your church's leadership pipeline—what are you actually developing? If Jesus is the only Leader (as in Moses' theocracy), shouldn't every other role be understood as faithful stewardship rather than directional leadership?

Would Your Church Leaders Qualify as Biblical Elders?

Compare your current leaders' qualifications to Paul's elder requirements (1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9): above reproach, faithful spouse, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not lover of money, manages family well, not a recent convert, good reputation with outsiders. How many of your leaders were selected based on these criteria versus leadership competencies (vision, influence, execution)? What would change if biblical qualifications became non-negotiable?



CHAPTER 17

Church Leadership

The Church's Enthusiastic Embrace

Walk into a pastor's office in the mid-1980s, and the bookshelf tells you everything you need to know about how leadership expectations have changed. As you scanned the bookshelf, you would have seen a predictable lineup: worn commentaries, a few theology texts from seminary, classic devotional writers, and maybe a dog-eared copy of J. Oswald Sanders' *Spiritual Leadership* or Oswald Smith's *The Man God Uses*. The leadership books, where they existed at all, were mostly about character—humility, holiness, prayer, suffering, and the qualifications of elders. Leadership was something you were before it was something you did.

Fast-forward twenty years. Now walk into the average megachurch pastor's office. The commentaries are still there, but they share space with shelves of John Maxwell, Jim Collins, Patrick Lencioni, and Ken Blanchard. The conference posters on the wall are no longer just for youth events or preaching conferences; they advertise the Global Leadership Summit, Catalyst, and church growth boot camps. The conversations have shifted from "Am I above reproach?" and "Am I feeding the flock?" to "How do I build a high-capacity team?", "What's our vision and strategy?", and "How do we break the next growth barrier?"

That shift on the bookshelf tells the story of a much larger change. In a single generation, pastoral leadership shifted from being defined primarily by biblical qualifications and spiritual maturity to being defined by organizational capacity, strategic thinking, and enterprise results. The rise of the modern leadership

sector did not begin in the church, but as the Megachurch Era took off, it found in the church a ready and eager customer.

In Chapter 16, we traced how a new leadership industry emerged during the Institutionalizing era—the conferences, publishers, consultants, and training platforms that turned leadership development into a thriving sector serving churches. We examined the supply side: organizations such as the Global Leadership Summit, Leadership Network, and INJOY Ministries have created an entire ecosystem to meet the leadership needs of enterprise-driven churches.

Now we turn to the demand side: why churches embraced these resources so enthusiastically, how the leadership industry reshaped pastoral identity and church governance, and what happened when CEO-level organizational leadership became the dominant paradigm. The unintended consequences of that embrace are the focus of this chapter.

As the megachurch phenomenon reached new heights, the enterprise factors we examined in previous chapters also increased. Not surprisingly, Bible colleges and seminaries did not prepare church leaders for the challenges of managing complex, growing enterprises. The emergence of a new church leadership support sector is a natural outcome of the church market's adaptation to meet the new demand.

This new sector was fueled by the needs of the modern movement's increasingly entrepreneurial leaders. Carl George's work at Fuller in the late 1980s, John Maxwell's important writings on church leadership in the early 1990s, and Bill Hybels' Global Leadership Summit, which started in 1995, played pivotal roles in the emergence of this new leadership sector during the closing era of the modern Church Growth Movement.

However, unintended consequences emerged as church CEOs strove to balance their growth ambitions with the need for external assistance. Critics of the Church Growth Movement highlight the following examples that help us see how we got to where we are today:

Mortgage Debt	Funding Large Facilities → Significant Mortgage Debt → Multi-Million-Dollar Capital Campaigns → Fast Numerical Growth vs. Slow Transformational Impact → Cultural Christians
Leadership Standards	Embracing Corporate Leadership Models → Prioritizing Visionary and Managerial Traits → Diluting Biblical Leadership Standards
Decentralized Governance	Enterprise Dynamics and Demands → Policy Governance → Increased Lead Pastor / Executive Team Authority → Decreased Biblical Accountability
Conversion Quality	Customer-Centric Strategies → Felt Needs Over Real Needs → Numerical Growth Priority → Conversion Without Surrender → Cultural Christians
Growth Engine	Sunday Centric + Programs → Attendance, Participation, and Volunteerism → Lack of Generational Disciple-Making → Cultural Christians
Extending Reach	Mass Marketing and Outreach Events → Attractional “Come and See” → Reach Large Numbers, Quickly → Friends Inviting Friends vs. Discipling Friends → Lack of Life on Life Transformation and Accountability → Cultural Christians
Mobilization Focus	Run Programs → No Need for Everyday Missionaries → Volunteer-Centric → We Can Do It, You can Help Culture → Consumption Bias → Cultural Christians
Prioritized Quest	Conquering the Next Growth Barrier → Creating Organizational Momentum → Finding the Next Silver Bullet → Growth Culture vs. Disciple-Making Culture → Cultural Christians

Table 1 - The Consumer-Driven Operating System Produces Cultural Christians

Proponents of the movement believe the critique shown above is overly harsh. By pointing out that godly and ungodly success can produce complexity and unintended consequences, they argue that visionary and organizational leadership are essential to avoiding and minimizing paradoxical outcomes in large, enterprise-driven churches. They ask, “Is it better to remain small without growth and momentum, seeing fewer people in eternity, or to seek to avoid and minimize the unintended consequences of growth and enterprise dynamics?” Regardless of where the truth falls, the enterprise dynamics posed new challenges that most church leaders didn’t foresee.

Further, the realities of leading and growing large, enterprise-driven churches eventually overshadowed McGavran’s original vision of the collective impact of church-planting and gospel saturation across a geographic region, regardless of church size. Paradoxically, the success of growing these large churches led to a new church leadership sector that arguably became a barrier to the type of church growth and multiplication McGavran sought.

Simultaneously with the rise of enterprise churches, secular culture placed greater value on leadership and contemporary business practices as solutions for navigating a complex, technology-driven society. In response to this shift, a modern “church leadership” sector emerged and thrived alongside the evolution of business management practices. Church leaders found this field of study particularly attractive because it addressed the complexities and challenges faced in growing large churches.

In a relatively short time, church leadership books, conferences, and teaching churches emerged, shifting from scarcely available to commonplace. This swift increase in new resources was accompanied by a rapid expansion of internet access and social media, which served as tools for their dissemination.

The Roots of Biblical Leadership

In Exodus, Moses offers the first significant biblical lesson in organized leadership. As the early, pre-eminent leader of the Israelites, He served as intercessor, judge, and guide as He led them out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and toward the Promised Land of their forefathers. Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, called out the

unhealthy leadership burden that Moses was carrying: “What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone” (Exodus 18:17-18).

Here’s the modern-day picture of what is happening. Imagine a professional football stadium with 80,000 seats and a single entrance line, staffed by a single check-in attendant. The ticket holders stand in long lines for days, waiting their turn to funnel through the checkpoint. Metaphorically, Moses managed the checkpoint alone, not just through long hours but also with the burden of judging ugly, heart-wrenching stories of neighbors seeking to settle disputes. As if wandering in the wilderness for 40 years with stiff-necked, whiny, continually complaining people isn’t enough, Moses also bears the burden of hearing their disputes one by one by one by one. It wears me out just thinking about it.

Let’s consider Jethro’s intervention by naming the problem, potential consequences, symptoms, and root cause within that context. This is important because the best solutions for avoiding repeat problems start with understanding root causes. In this case, God’s solution to the underlying root cause teaches us important lessons about His intent in managing complex enterprises and organizing leadership.

- **Problem** - Moses is the only person with the responsibility and authority to fulfill the functional role of judge in a nation of over two million people.
- **Potential Consequences**—Moses is on a path toward burnout, which could hinder his calling and his ability to fulfill God’s plan for him to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land. He is a poor steward of his time and talent, given the opportunity cost of continuing to do things others could do, rather than spending more time on important tasks only he can do.
- **Symptoms** – Long lines and days. Moses spends time doing things others could do, leading to increased frustration and fatigue. Moses and the people are wearing out. Jethro expresses concern for his son-in-law’s health and the welfare of the Israelites.
- **Root Cause** – There is no expectation or process for delegating responsibility and authority from one anointed (chosen) godly leader to

others. Moses had to change his paradigm and think differently. He had to set new expectations and organize around those expectations.

So, is Moses' problem a leadership problem, a management problem, or both? In the context of Israel's history, at this point, God is the leader or CEO, and Moses is an intercessor, steward (manager), and servant—possibly functioning as God's COO. Moses has no authority, position, or role aside from what God gave him. God has a vision and a plan for His chosen people to inherit the Promised Land. Moses manages the implementation, serving as an intercessor between the Leader (God) and His people (the Israelites). This represents a theocracy in the strictest sense, in which God is the supreme leader and lawgiver.

In calling Moses into His service, God commanded him: “So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt (Exodus 3:10).” God is the Leader. The people (the Israelites), the mission (exiting Egypt for the Promised Land), and the means (God's power, providence, and sovereignty) are all at God's command and mercy. Moses' story is epic because he spoke face-to-face with God (Num. 12:7) and humbly served as God's faithful servant and steward. He was simultaneously larger-than-life and insignificant. His faithfulness to God, his relationship with Him, and the power and authority God gave him—not his leadership skills, charisma, or personal accomplishments—made him legendary.

We rightfully see Moses as a leader through our 21st-century paradigm. But, as a jealous God, wouldn't He prefer to be our only true Leader? Moses is functionally leading as we define it today, but he is not “the Leader!” Paradoxically, this represents our 21st-century challenge. How would our organizational and operational approach to church work change if Jesus were the only Leader? I believe most other roles might center around servanthood and stewardship (management). In the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), Jesus tells the story of a master who entrusts his servants (or “stewards”) with his wealth while he is away. The most faithful stewards were good managers. We have no idea how their leadership skills are rated in our 21st-century paradigm of success.

Eventually, the Israelites functionally fired God as their CEO and demanded a worldly king as their leader (1 Samuel 8), marking a major turning point in their

history. The people demanded, “Now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (1 Samuel 8:5). God saw their deeper motives: “They have rejected Me as their king” (1 Samuel 8:7). God told Samuel that their request was not just about leadership, but about wanting to replace divine rule with human rule. They were turning away from God as king (theocracy) to man as king (monarchy).

Let’s ask a harder question: “Would Moses’ gifting (or lack of) qualify him through our 21st-century leadership lens to be the CEO of one of today’s enterprise churches?” Moses tells God, “I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.” He essentially says, “God, I’m not a good speaker. I’m not persuasive, fluent, or confident enough for this.” To be clear, Moses was not the visionary communicator we prioritize in today’s church CEO job description.

The book of Numbers describes Moses as “a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.” This posture of true leadership is consistent with Jesus’ teaching, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant.” I see this as a hard teaching to reconcile with our 21st-century view of successful leadership. It would have been understandable for Moses to fall into the unchecked, dysfunctional power path that subsequently consumed King Saul’s ego and style. Is our paradigm of successful church leadership traits and styles more aligned with Saul’s gifting or Moses’?

So, how would our leadership systems in today’s enterprise-driven churches differ if Jesus were our only leader? What if every other role were understood first as a humble, faithful servant and steward? We have defined the “visionary communicator role” as a primary distinctive in good church leadership and a non-negotiable in selecting enterprise-driven church CEOs. Why? The answer isn’t difficult—because it’s an essential ingredient in the programmatic growth engine of the consumer-driven church. What if our fascination with the field of leadership is overblown and more about our desires than God’s intended order and design? Look around at the places where Christianity is thriving, including some college campuses. If you want insights into the future operating

system beyond our programmatically driven one, consider what future growing churches will look like without visionary communicators.

Jethro proposes a management solution to Moses' burnout problem: "You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them his decrees and instructions and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter because they will share it with you" (Exodus 18:19-22).

Jethro encouraged Moses to establish an expectation and implement a process for sharing responsibility and delegating authority from one anointed (chosen) godly leader to others. Certainly, the apostles modeled their response in Acts 6 after Jethro's earlier wise counsel to Moses. Jethro's recommended leadership or, more appropriately, management building blocks, include structure, shared responsibility, delegated authority, clear expectations, teaching, modeling, supervision, and qualifications. The Apostle Paul's teaching on New Testament elders and deacons also includes these elements of a biblical leadership system. Further, Paul's teaching on elders and deacons sets clear biblical standards for selecting overseers and servants in the church.

Biblical Leadership

Imagine the church uninfluenced by the evolution of the secular leadership theories highlighted above. This may be more difficult than you think. If you're a church leader, there's a good chance the leadership system you inherited or were born into may look more like a hybrid of secular models than anything you can find in the Bible. This is particularly relevant within the broader context of the co-opting that produced the Consumer-Driven Operating System, the programmatic growth engine, the enterprise church, and the era of the church CEO.

In these pages, I'm aiming to highlight observed phenomena associated with the history and evolution of the Church Growth Movement, not to judge the co-opting. This was the first time in my 25+ year career in vocational ministry that I've looked hard at the biblical basis of our prevailing church leadership systems, which were first implemented in the enterprise-based church. If you're a church leader who has inherited your church's system without giving it careful consideration for how it aligns with biblical standards, I encourage you to make that a key action takeaway from reading this book.

What leadership system would you implement if the Bible were your only guide? Where it speaks, you act? Where it's silent, you are cautious? Where your context differs from the early church, how do you adapt and remain true to biblical principles and standards? What leadership responsibilities, roles, and qualifications would you adopt? What about structure, governance, and delegated authority? What core biblical teachings would you integrate into your leadership system independent of your church's model, size, age, location, or ethnic diversity?

You might start by searching the Bible for "leadership." Unfortunately, you'd be disappointed with the results. The word "leadership," as we commonly use it today, does not appear in the original Hebrew or Greek texts of the Bible. The concept is present, but the word is a modern development. You could certainly pay close attention to where God defines leadership principles, structures, practices, and qualifications in letters like 1 Timothy 3 and 5, Hebrews 13, 1 Peter 1, and Titus 1. You could also wrestle with the balancing act between the necessary elements of authoritative leadership and servant leadership.

Where the Hebrew text is translated into modern terms synonymous with "leaders," the literal translation yields words such as prince, ruler, chief, chieftain, official, and commander. In New Testament Greek, the literal translations would be words such as guides, rulers, chiefs, bishops, and elders.¹ Scholars note that the original texts were understood to describe those in positions of authority or responsibility. Still, they emphasize function or office more than what we consider leadership qualities today.

In Exodus 3 and 4 and Numbers 11, we see that “elders” were a recognized group likely serving as spiritual and civic/community leaders before the Israelites left Egypt. Scholars believe this elder system likely evolved from patriarchal tribal structures, where senior men naturally served as decision-makers and representatives of their clans. The nation’s growth (think enterprise dynamics) requires order, structure, and some system of delegating responsibility and authority. This natural emergence of organization and structure represents the intersection of management (stewardship) and leadership via elders.

As part of the governing structure, elders continued beyond Joshua’s life and the era of judges. For example, the elders of Israel approached Samuel and asked for a king, thereby initiating the monarchy. They remain influential, including through functions such as anointing David as their king. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah sometimes criticized elders for failing in their duties. In exile in Babylon, the elders continued to lead within the Jewish communities. Later, elders helped re-establish Jerusalem during the nation’s return from exile.

New Testament Leadership

Paul later defined the important roles, behaviors, and qualifications of elders in the New Testament Christian churches. In his letter to Titus, Paul explicitly links the appointment of elders with establishing church order. In his letter to Timothy, Paul describes the role as an “office” or position of authority. Paul and Peter’s teaching about elders describes their role as shepherds, overseers, stewards, teachers, truth-bearers, protectors, supervisors, and role models.

The specific, descriptive list of qualifications is more stringent for elders than for deacons, underscoring the importance of the role. Paul tells Timothy, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” Likewise, the author of Hebrews writes, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” (Heb. 13:17). Elders carry the heavy burden of responsibility for the welfare of the local church, including maintaining sound doctrine, teaching, and shepherding. As in the parable of the talents, Jesus is the owner, and the elders are stewards overseeing a local family of

believers entrusted to their care. They provide accountability within the church and will be held accountable for how well they steward their roles.

You may know that the Greek word for “deacon” in the Bible (and from which the English word is derived) is *diakonos*. It can also be translated as “servant,” “minister,” or “messenger.” Like elders, deacons are recognized leaders with delegated authority and responsibilities. Throughout the Bible, the specific roles of leaders have varied, but they have consistently involved structure, order, shared and delegated responsibility, delegated authority, and God-honoring, role-specific qualifications. In the book of Acts (Acts 6), Luke records the church’s growing pains as it expanded, distracting the apostles from their roles as overseers (elders) in prayer and preaching. They respond by selecting seven godly men (believed by many to be the first deacons) to serve and minister to the church community’s needs.

Not all leadership positions in the church necessarily warrant the full qualifications of elders and deacons. Still, let’s be prudently cautious when creating governing positions of authority (like elders) and lower levels of leadership (like deacons) that lack the equivalent delegation of authority, clarity of responsibilities, and verification of personal qualifications. To what standard are we discipling and developing younger leaders in the faith toward? We can see the lower bar for deacons as a step toward future eldership. Given the elder’s high calling and importance in the local church, it seems wise to embrace the system of elders and deacons as foundational to sound biblical leadership in today’s churches.

Delegating Authority

The critical dimension bridging the Old and New Testament teachings is how and to whom we delegate authority. Jethro encourages Moses to entrust leadership responsibilities to surrendered followers of God who are capable, trustworthy, and honest. I’m pondering how my 21st-century understanding of “capable” would compare to Moses’. Years after Jethro’s initial advice, Moses recounts this leadership lesson. He amplifies the leadership qualifications, saying, “Choose for your tribes wise, understanding, and experienced men” (Deut. 1:13). Today,

we might say, “Choose wise, discerning, older men,” consistent with Paul’s description of New Testament elders.

Our 21st-century lens tends to be biased against hierarchical structures. However, biblical authority is always delegated vertically, starting with God. Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18) and, in turn, delegates authority for disciple-making to his followers. This does not mean He delegated authority to any believer for any leadership role. He only delegates authority when the recipient demonstrates the relevant biblical qualifications. We know many of Paul’s letters seek to simultaneously clean up messes in local churches and set standards for how the people of God, via the church, should behave. We see a clear biblical pattern of prayerful intentionality in the delegation of authority, the laying on of hands, and the commissioning of Jesus’ followers into leadership positions.

Moses delegated leadership authority to Joshua, his successor. Obeying God, Moses laid his hands on Joshua in the presence of the priests and all the congregation to commission him in their sight—obeying God’s previous words to him: “You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey” (Num. 27:18-20). We are told that this commissioning and delegation of authority gave Joshua wisdom and increased his stature with the people he led (Deut. 34:9). We see that the laying on of hands, prayer, and commissioning represent more than a mere ceremony.

As part of his teaching program for the twelve disciples, Jesus sent them to Jewish villages to practice what they observed him doing. Specifically, Jesus told them to “heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and cast out demons.” Immediately before sending them out, Jesus “gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction” (Matt. 10:1). It is not difficult to see and must conclude that this delegation of authority is critical to the disciples’ success. Jesus likely laid on hands, prayed, delegated authority, and commissioned His disciples to go. These acts were certainly received as a special affirmation that, “in me, with my delegated power and authority, you can do anything!”

We see this process of laying on of hands, prayer, and the delegation of authority throughout the New Testament. In selecting the first deacons, the apostles “prayed and laid their hands on them” to affirm their selection to leadership and to commission them into their work (Acts 6:1-6). Similarly, the leaders in the church at Antioch heard the Holy Spirit say, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2-3). After fasting and praying, the church leaders laid their hands on Barnabas and Paul and sent them off. Of his son in the faith, Paul says, “For this reason, I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.” Paul also refers to the council of elders laying hands on Timothy to commission him.

In selecting elders, Paul cautions Timothy, saying, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands.” For us, this means “set the bar high for leadership qualifications. Do not rush when delegating leadership authority. Be intentional to ensure a potential leader meets biblical qualifications. Be slow to commission people into leadership positions.”

Unfortunately, many churches have drifted from the structure, roles, qualifications, and delegation of authority that Paul commanded for the New Testament church. Earlier in this chapter, I noted that the emergence of the church CEO and the enterprise-driven church led to a decentralization of governance. This became more problematic when churches and denominations were already implementing leadership systems inconsistent with the structure, positions, authority, and qualifications of biblical elders and deacons.

As church CEOs and enterprise-driven churches sought leadership solutions, the emerging church leadership sector stood ready to deliver.

Conferencing

As a pioneering leader and significant catalyst in the modern Church Growth Movement, Robert Schuller co-founded *The Institute for Successful Church Leadership* in 1969. Gary McIntosh told me that he believes this Institute may have been the first organized conference for visionary church leadership.

According to Bill Gaultiere, who worked for Schuller and knew him well, Schuller's Institute trained over 150,000 pastors in its 45-year history. Gaultier recalls, "Many of these pastors arrived at the Crystal Cathedral discouraged and burned out and were so powerfully encouraged that they went back to their churches with new enthusiasm to serve God and then saw their churches grow incredibly."²

Of the Institute and its leadership forum, Schuller said, "There is hardly a church problem a pastor faces that I have not faced during the years I have pastored. I know what it is like to have a dream - only to see it obstructed by negative people. I know what it is like to have a great idea - only to see it crushed by insensitive people. I know what it is like to have ambition, to do something great for Jesus Christ, only to find myself hemmed in by small-thinking people. In order for other pastors to share in these success formulas, I founded the Institute for Successful Church Leadership as a forum to share ideas, motivate, and be inspired. I can guarantee that you will experience a life-changing and church-changing event!"³

Conferencing targeting visionary leadership was minimal throughout the 1980s. In 1991, Leadership Network launched the "Church in the 21st Century" leadership conference. In my research, I discovered that it was one of the earliest notable conferences focused on entrepreneurial leadership and management skills for church leaders. *Christianity Today* called it "one of the hottest new annual conferences."⁴ The event was by invitation only, with attendance capped at 400 people, creating exclusivity and fear of missing out.

The conference featured prominent business leaders, including Peter Drucker, Ken Blanchard, and Max De Pree. Forward-thinking speakers, including trend analyst George Barna, psychologist Larry Crab, and postmodern expert Leonard Sweet, made the event immensely popular through word of mouth. Bill Hybels and Willow Creek helped organize the conference, which was a smaller version of what would ultimately become Willow's Global Leadership Summit (GLS).

Leadership Network concluded its annual conference in 1995, just as Hybels launched his GLS. Initially intended as a leadership training conference for church leaders, the GLS expanded to include business, nonprofit, and

community leaders. The summit was designed to equip and inspire leaders with world-class leadership principles that foster health, growth, and impact in churches, organizations, and communities.⁵ The GLS evolved into a global movement, reaching hundreds of thousands of participants annually, both in person and through digital platforms. Hybels published numerous books, including *Courageous Leadership*, which debuted in 2000.

John C. Maxwell was a local church pastor with more than 20 years of experience in church leadership. In 1985, he founded INJOY Ministries. Initially, the platform helped create visibility and distribution for his leadership books. Maxwell was (and still is) a great communicator—a seasoned local church practitioner who had successfully grown a church and had easily understandable, common-sense content for pastors and business leaders. He was the right leader at the right time to help pioneer the new leadership resourcing space. His influence expanded to provide leadership training, conferences, and coaching for individuals, churches, and businesses, and business leaders.

In 1995, with his leadership ministry thriving, Maxwell resigned as lead pastor at Skyline Wesleyan Church in San Diego to fully commit to leadership training and establish a hub of operations in Atlanta. Gabe Lyons joined Maxwell's executive team soon afterwards. The ministry was tapping into the felt needs of "church CEOs" as they wrestled with the enterprise dynamics of growing large churches and increasing cultural complexities. Maxwell's content met felt needs, and events were optimized around his style. As the sole presenter, he often delivered training from a stool on stage, using a slide deck and a participant workbook. For the Boomer leaders of growing churches and businesses, the model worked well.

Lyons talked to me about the fallout of Maxwell's heart attack at the relatively young age of fifty during this season of growth. Maxwell and his team began to understand the importance of building the ministry with less reliance on him. That forced the team to start dreaming about what the future of conferencing might look like to reach the next generation. "Our team was relatively young," Gabe recalls. "We simply asked the question, 'What type of conference would we want to attend?'"⁶

The emerging vision became Catalyst. Conveniently, Andy Stanley, a strong leader and communicator, had just started North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, Georgia. Planning for the conference began in 1999, with the first one in 2000. Stanley hosted the first two Catalyst conferences.⁷ The event became broadly popular with younger leaders, with Stanley as a regular and popular speaker. I regularly attended Catalyst from its founding and considered Stanley the face of the event for many years. His leadership talks were always one of the event's top highlights.

Unlike most church conferences for Boomer leaders, Catalyst targeted younger leaders with a high-energy atmosphere, featuring creative stage designs, music, storytelling, and interactive elements. It blended secular leadership principles with biblical wisdom, featuring top Christian leaders, business executives, and cultural influencers. It was designed explicitly for next-generation leaders—primarily pastors, church staff, and faith-based entrepreneurs in their twenties and thirties. Catalyst effectively hit the bull's-eye in addressing many of the era's primary tensions, including church growth principles, entrepreneurship, and missional and postmodern shifts (we'll cover these in the next chapter).

In 2001, Maxwell launched the Maximum Impact one-day training events to engage participants in the content of his books. Those events and his Injoy Ministries played a significant role in the birth and expansion of the new church leadership sector, which later expanded into other areas, such as capital-building campaigns.

During this same period, an expanding number of leadership conferences and training events emerged, fueled by local churches. For example, Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, led by Robert Lewis, began an annual leadership conference in 1998. Lewis told me the conference was designed to develop leaders within their church, but leaders from other churches also attended. Similarly, Andy Stanley started his local church-based Drive Conference in 2005, focusing on various aspects of church leadership, including weekend services, family ministry, and community engagement.

Leadership equipping grew into a marketed solution for most leaders seeking to create momentum in their churches and overcome growth barriers. By 2000, a

growing number of leadership training opportunities emerged, partly driven by rapidly expanding online platforms and marketing. As a new executive pastor in the early 2000s, I took our staff to GLS simulcasts, Catalyst, and Maximum Impact training events. We were focused squarely on cultivating the leadership and management skills necessary to overcome the obstacles of growing from a mid-sized church into a megachurch.

In 2005, when I was starting Exponential, the GLS and Catalyst were the two most influential conferences that I sought out. Brad Lomenick, then executive director of Catalyst, shared periodic coaching advice that helped shape and inform our approach at Exponential. By God's grace, Exponential would become an influential voice in eras beyond this one and the world's largest annual gathering of church-planting leaders. In many ways, Exponential draws on what we learned from the GLS and Catalyst. In writing this book, it's been encouraging to see the repeated pattern of God working upstream to shape downstream stories.

The rapid rise of church leadership conferencing from 1995 to 2005 is remarkable. But that was just one dimension of this new leadership sector. Eventually, a strong connection between book publishing and conferencing would also emerge. Prominent local church practitioners such as Stanley, Hybels, and Rick Warren would see their published works popularized through frequent appearances at conferences. Leaders understood the importance of publishing books, which led to conference speaking engagements and snowballed their influence. The strong interrelationship between conferencing and book publishing helped many local church leaders build influence platforms outside their churches.

Book Publishing

Let's take a trip down memory lane and discover how book publishing helped shape church leadership thought and, eventually, how churches of all sizes would function. In 1995, Leadership Network launched a significant book-publishing initiative with Jossey-Bass, which later expanded to include additional publishing lines with other publishers. Leadership Network published more than eighty books on church leadership and innovation from 1995 to 2020. I believe

most of these books provide a good metric and indicator of church leaders' felt needs and forward-looking interests over the last twenty-five years. As the founding CEO of Exponential, I led a joint venture with Leadership Network in a unique book series with Zondervan Publishing focused on church-planting and multiplication.

As interest in church leadership emerged, Maxwell, through his INJOY Ministries, became a leading voice and advocate for this emerging sector. His books, *Developing the Leader Within You*⁸ and *Developing the Leaders Around You*⁹, published in 1993 and 1995, highlighted a felt need that previous generations of small-church pastors had never felt. Maxwell published at least six books on leadership during the 1990s.

Ken Blanchard, author of the wildly successful book *The One Minute Manager*,¹⁰ also influenced this newly forming Christian leadership sector. Blanchard was not a surrendered Christian when he wrote his best-selling book, but he had a sense that “God was in it!” In his autobiography, *We Are the Beloved: A Spiritual Journey*, and in an article he wrote for *Two Ten Magazine*,¹¹ Blanchard describes the profound and direct roles of Bob Buford and Bill Hybels in his spiritual conversion. He remained close friends with Buford until he died in 2018 and went on to write many leadership books from a gospel-centered perspective, including *Leadership by the Book*¹² with Bill Hybels, and *Lead Like Jesus*.¹³

Andy Stanley became a key practitioner and a leading voice in the rise of the organizational leadership sector. For this book, I asked him, “In 1995, when you were starting North Point Community Church, other than Jesus, the Bible, and your dad (Charles Stanley), who were the top leadership voices you were listening to or reading that helped shape your thinking?” He listed a number of influential leadership titles; “To this day, our original team quotes these authors: *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations* by James Kouzes and Barry Posner; *The E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It* by Michael Gerber; *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization* by Peter Senge; and *Focus: The Future of Your Company Depends on It* by Al Ries.”¹⁴

At that time, the church leadership resource space was virtually nonexistent. Faced with the challenges of growing large, sustainable churches (enterprises), Stanley and his peers were naturally drawn to business best practices. Over the next decade, however, Stanley and many other successful church leaders would help accelerate the growth of the emerging church leadership sector. As a practitioner and strong speaker, and following the publication of his best-selling book *Visioneering: God's Blueprint for Developing and Maintaining Vision*,¹⁵ Stanley became a prominent voice in church leadership, especially among younger, emerging leaders. His book, *Next Generation Leader*¹⁶, was published in 2003 and helped solidify his influence.

While significant missional church conversations began in the 1990s, the emerging sector of organizational leadership was driven by the growth of large churches and focused primarily on equipping leaders within prevailing consumer-driven models of church growth. This illustrates one of many crosscurrents that emerged during the 1990s as the Church Growth Movement entered its final days.

Reflections

As the movement matured, the early leaders' ideals, passions, and focus gave way to the inevitable realities required in building a sustainable machine. Embracing business strategies and methodologies was a natural way for churches to identify the systems, governance, structures, and tactics needed to sustain their growth. But here's the pattern we see again and again: as success matures and becomes institutional, it increasingly distracts the successful from their mission. Paradoxically, success unintentionally shifts the successful from mission-centered to enterprise-focused.

The secular biases and pragmatism of the new church leadership sector unintentionally created a visionary leadership role that was not necessarily aligned with the Bible's defined roles, standards, and accountability for elders (pastors and overseers). This decoupling of expectations, the decentralization of authority away from biblically qualified elders, and the formulaic nature of the Consumer-Driven Operating System that fuels the enterprise-driven

church made it possible for even non-Christians with charisma to build large megachurches. Let that sink in. The system we built became so programmatic, so driven by business principles and customer metrics, that it could run without the biblical qualifications Scripture demands of those who shepherd God's people.

Most historians believe the Church Growth Movement wound down by 2005. The Church Growth Movement and associated Seeker-Sensitive, Purpose-Driven, and Megachurch eras were kindled by the Silent Generation, fueled by the Baby Boomer Generation, and inherited by early Generation X leaders. The context was modernity, but by 1995, postmodern thinking was knocking loudly at the church's door, and with it came crosscurrents that would reshape the conversation entirely.

Reflection Questions

Is Your Leadership Pipeline Building Influencers or Faithful Stewards?

Review your church's leadership development process—what are you actually training people to do? If the pipeline emphasizes vision-casting, mobilizing followers, and organizational effectiveness, you're building influencers. If it emphasizes character formation, sound teaching, and faithful stewardship under Jesus' authority, you're building biblical elders. Which one describes your actual practice? What would need to change to align with Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1?

Are You Learning Leadership From Practitioners or From Scripture?

List the top five leadership resources (books, conferences, podcasts) that shaped your church's approach in the last year. How many came from successful megachurch practitioners versus deep biblical theology? Practitioner wisdom is valuable for learning tactics, but it can't replace scriptural foundations for church governance. If you removed all practitioner resources and could only use Scripture to define leadership, what would change about your church's structure, qualifications, and accountability systems?



CHAPTER 18

Crosscurrents

Turbulent Times

1995 to 2005

On April 3, 1974, the town of Guin, Alabama, made history—but not the kind of history any community wants. That afternoon, one of the strongest tornadoes ever recorded in the United States tore straight through the center of town. Winds are estimated to have exceeded 300 miles per hour. Homes were swept from their foundations. Trees snapped like matchsticks. Entire families were lost. By the time the storm moved on, Guin had been nearly erased from the map.

Meteorologists later explained that this “super outbreak” was not caused by a single, simple front but by powerful crosscurrents—clashing streams of warm, moist Gulf air and cool, dry air from the north. Invisible forces collided in the upper atmosphere, producing visible devastation on the ground. You couldn’t see the crosscurrents, but you could see what they did.

The closing era of the Modern Church Growth Movement felt a lot like that. From 1995 to 2005, multiple currents converged: institutionalization and entrepreneurial innovation, modern assumptions and postmodern questions, attractional strategies and missional longings, evangelical confidence and post-evangelical critique. Most of these forces were largely invisible to the average church member, but their collision created turbulence that reshaped churches, leaders, networks, and entire movements.

This closing era of the Church Growth Movement began in 1995, coinciding with the publication of *The Purpose-Driven Church*¹ and symbolically ending in 2005 with Peter Drucker's death. The space between these bookends was filled with crosscurrents and clues about the eras to come.

Difficulty in Naming

A crosscurrent is a stretch of turbulence caused by one current flowing across another, disrupting the status quo. This final era of the Church Growth Movement could be called the Institutionalization Era, the Visionary Leadership Era, the Entrepreneurial Enterprise Era, or simply, the Closing Era.

This final era is filled with paradoxical crosscurrents. You have the continuing enthusiasm for and impact of the Consumer-Driven Operating System, with success measured by the growth of large, attractional churches—crossing with the evolution of “mega” values into multisite and Externally Focused Church strategies, and the emergence of apostolically led church-planting networks. And you have the need for, and the emergence of, an entire church leadership sector to equip the CEO-minded pastors of these large church enterprises. We also see the tensions faced by younger emerging Gen X leaders who were wrestling with postmodern cultural shifts and turning their attention from attractional to missional church conversations.

We previously discussed the programmatic growth flywheel of the Consumer-Driven Operating System and how one of its byproducts is the gradual evolution that churches experience as they become enterprise-driven. The enterprise becomes like a machine that needs to be continually fueled. By 1995, the “machine” had become well-established, even optimized, and was undergoing institutionalization.

At the same time, crosscurrent conversations were rising, shaping the subsequent Outwardly Focused Era. Dave Travis was a part of Leadership Network throughout this era, beginning in 1995 and becoming CEO in 2002. Reflecting on the crosscurrents of this period, Travis suggested to me that a more fitting title for this last part of the Church Growth Movement might be “The Entrepreneurial

Era,” pointing to the rise of teaching churches and the growing number of entrepreneurial trends, such as church-planting networks, the modern church leadership sector, Externally Focused Churches, and multisite churches.² This evolutionary shift to the church as an enterprise further fueled the pioneering dynamics in play during this era.

I’m not suggesting that the earlier eras of the Church Growth Movement were free of turbulence. However, these earlier eras appear to have more linear narratives with more easily discerned central themes. I spent more time researching and writing about this closing era than on any other part of the Church Growth Movement.

Personal Reflections and Crosscurrents

I’ve been blessed to participate in or have a front-row seat to many important events of the Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch Eras, and to have relationships with many of their key influencers, such as Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, and Bob Buford (the “Druckerites”). From 1995 to 2005, I was called from a successful engineering career to full-time vocational ministry.

While I experienced most of the key themes and activities that shaped this final era, I was mostly oblivious to the context at the time. Hindsight really is 20/20. By 2005, however, I was fully immersed in the Purpose-Driven Model rooted in the Consumer-Driven Operating System. From start to finish, this decade represented the most personally significant crosscurrents and changes. As I researched this book, I began to see how the turbulence lurking below the surface of the Church Growth Movement paralleled the significant life crosscurrents I was experiencing personally.

By taking you on my personal journey through this era, I hope you’ll begin to see the scope of the institutional and entrepreneurial crosscurrents and the changes that occurred from 1995 to 2005. As I reflected on these changes and shifts, the following narrative helped me process the significance of the conversations happening and how they would eventually shape the next era.

In 1995, I was a successful engineer at one of the world's top engineering organizations, whose mission was critical to the nation's security. I loved the mission, had been promoted rapidly, and had a promising and secure future. My first significant spiritual crosscurrent occurred years earlier, when I came face-to-face with Jesus and surrendered to his Lordship. But now, years later, I faced a second conversion: stepping into the unique personal calling God had prepared for me. Candidly, this spiritual crosscurrent was harder to embrace than the first. It started with an early "halftime" experience, marked by a nagging sense that there must be something more to my success than what I was experiencing.

While I had absolutely no aspirations to enter vocational ministry, I was considered a model church member. I tithed, attended Sunday worship, served inside the church for one to two hours a week, participated in a small group for one to two hours per week, and was taking on increasing leadership roles. I had been fully assimilated into the attractional way of doing things. Jesus was my Lord and Savior, but my church experience fell far short of the healthy, 24/7 family experience described in Acts 2.

Like most church members inside the Consumer-Driven Operating System, my experience was formed more as a "club member" than a "family member." The "attractional church" term hadn't really been coined yet, so I had no lens for seeing my experience this way. I did understand that church growth is often seen as the currency of church success. I resolved to remain content as a pawn in the game, with my 3% engagement in church (5 hours of my 165-hour week spent in worship, serving, and small groups) as my contribution.

In 1995, things began to shift for me. I began dreaming of starting a company while grappling with questions of significance. I didn't understand it then, but this successful engineer was on the brink of stepping into a new life as an "entrepreneurial engineer" (the term that defines the person I was created to be, my unique "BE" in the BE, DO, and GO framework I wrote about in my book, *More*³. However, the how (DO) and where (GO) remained elusive. At that time, I had no idea that the entrepreneurial life I was seeking could find significant context within vocational ministry. Ironically, the "entrepreneurial era" of the Church Growth Movement was unfolding as I wrestled with my

vocational calling. I was drawn to most of the innovative and pioneering Kingdom initiatives that characterized the “entrepreneurial era.”

But I laughed the first time anyone mentioned the idea of me entering full-time vocational ministry. I could only see the “Institutional” side of this era’s major crosscurrent, blind to the “entrepreneurial” side that would also find its footing. I was certain that becoming the entrepreneurial CEO of a new company was my destination. I thought this new venture would take place in the general marketplace, but God had other plans.

For two years, I wrestled with a messy and confusing set of personal crosscurrents. I wanted a job description to see the career path, but God wouldn’t give me one—fortunately. Had He answered my prayers and revealed the specific path charted for me in vocational ministry, the clarity would likely have scared me away. That’s often how crosscurrents work. I’m reminded of the mystery and potential paradoxes of answered prayers.

Breadth of Change

I’m writing from my front-row seat to help us explore the scope of dramatic change from 1995 to 2005 in both the world at large and the Church Growth Movement. If you’re like me, you’ll be amazed by the number of significant changes and shifts this decade has seen. I thought it might be fun to compare where we were in 1995 to the impact of just ten years of crosscurrents.

In 1995, I had never heard of Donald McGavran, Peter Wagner, Rick Warren, or the Church Growth Movement, yet the movement was institutionalizing and entering its final era. I had never been a member of a megachurch, yet the movement was about to shape my calling into full-time vocational ministry. I had never heard of Rick Warren’s book, *Purpose-Driven Church*,⁴ yet the church I’d be called to serve in full-time vocational ministry was built on that model. Furthermore, by 2005, the model would become the normative operating system and roadmap for church-planting.

In 1995, I had never heard of Bob Buford, the founder of Leadership Network and Halftime, and yet he would become a mentor and the leader who would most impact my life during this closing era. His book, *Halftime: Moving from Success to Significance*,⁵ debuted in 1995 and poured gas on the fire of my career discontent. Buford catalyzed the paradigm shift of millions of marketplace leaders toward Kingdom possibilities. In a strange twist of fate and the sovereignty of God's providence, not only would I enter full-time vocational ministry in 2000 after reading Bob's book, but I would become his personal strategic advisor by 2005.

I wanted what I called a 100X impact, but I was certain that becoming an executive pastor was a dead end, not a path to entrepreneurship. In 1995, there were only a handful of executive pastors, so it was difficult even to figure out what one was. There were no books, conferences, cohorts, or other prominent resources to define exactly what an executive pastor was or what the formula for success was. I was flying blind and wanted clarity. I wanted a job description, but it never came. I attended my first informal retreat with other executive pastors in 2000. It was clear the role was customized to each church's unique needs and could be more entrepreneurial than I had first thought. By 2005, the role had become normative as a vital element in supporting the lead pastor-CEO.

I could never have imagined in 1995 how my vocational life and journey would change just ten years later. By 2005, as an executive pastor, I had started or re-engineered multiple national Kingdom ministries and become a Kingdom-focused, entrepreneurial engineer. The church's enterprise dynamics and entrepreneurial opportunities were attractive.

In 1995, I had never heard of Leadership Network. By 2005, the organization would see its programming activity peak, its impact soar, and its strategic focus narrow to convening Leadership Communities to help pioneering leaders turn their ideas and good intentions into results and impact. They returned to their more intimate and relational roots, focusing on fewer innovations and more "big ideas." By 2005, their championing of church-planting, Externally Focused Churches, and multisite churches had become a primary shaping factor in the next era, 2005 to 2015.

In 1995, my primary forms of communication were in-person meetings, landline phones, fax machines, limited dial-up internet access, and pagers (for urgent needs when I was away from a landline). I had no cell phone, smartphone, laptop, or social media accounts. America Online and Yahoo were about to become things, along with iPhones, Facebook, Twitter, Google, Amazon, eBay, etc. By 2005, nearly everything had changed. Communications went from what we used to call “snail mail” to on-demand information overload. The world became global almost overnight with the opening up of the internet and the development of technologies to exploit it. The postmodern world arrived in a firestorm.

In 1995, the modern-to-postmodern cultural shifts and conversations were a blip on my radar. I could not have told you which one I was. By 2005, these shifts would fuel much of the missional church conversation and lead to the creation of Leadership Network’s Young Leaders Network.

In 1995, missional churches and conversations were utterly foreign to me, and Leslie Newbigin’s missional books would not have even made my top 1,000 list of things to read had I heard of them. Yet, during this crosscurrent era, they would shape the thinking of leaders who would influence subsequent eras beyond the modern Church Growth Movement, including those in Leadership Network’s Young Leaders Network.

In 1995, Leadership Network had not yet convened its Young Leaders Network. By 2005, this Young Leaders Network (which included young, reformed Mark Driscoll before he planted Mars Hill Church, older Brian McLaren before he went radically progressive, and numerous other younger leaders) had formed, done its work, and disbanded into at least three different streams: the young, restless, and reformed stream that found its home base in the founding of Acts 29 Network in 1998 (Mark Driscoll and David Nichols), 9Marks Network in 1998 (Mark Dever), and the Gospel Coalition in 2005 (D.A. Carson and Tim Keller). The Gospel Coalition, in part, emerged to provide a gospel-centered, reformed-theology alternative to the anti-evangelical, progressive work of the second stream of Young Leaders, which evolved into the Emergent Church/ Emergent Village (Doug Pagitt, Brian McLaren, and Tony Jones). The third stream featured Chris Seay, Dan Kimball, and Andrew Jones, who found their

footing between the other streams, opting to remain rooted in traditional Christian theology while seeking improved practices and methods beyond attractational, consumer-driven strategies to reach postmoderns.

In 1995, I was wrestling with purpose and calling. But discovering my unique personal calling and mobilizing as an everyday missionary to engage in my unique mission field outside the church walls was an utterly foreign concept. I had never seen myself in that way, nor had I ever heard a church leader talk about it. Instead, I saw success as a disciple as finding my calling inside the church walls, creating a “come and see” strategy, and growing the church. I had no idea then, but as I wrestled with this crosscurrent of significance and calling in my own life, many mega-minded leaders and younger emerging leaders were also feeling the tension, struggling with the effectiveness of the church’s prevailing Consumer-Driven Operating System and its bias toward attraction over mobilization, and growth over multiplication.

As the Church Growth Movement was institutionalized, success became formulaic, focused on growing large churches and sustaining them. However, nagging questions emerged about whether the inherited attractational models shaped by this consumer-oriented operating system would be effective in reaching postmodern culture. Crosscurrent conversations that would significantly shape subsequent eras beyond this closing era of the Church Growth Movement were simmering below the surface.

By 2005, both missional thought leaders and attractational church leaders were engaging the “Externally Focused Church” paradigm, albeit in very different contexts. During this era, the dichotomy between Missional and Attractational church leaders over an “Externally Focused Church” represented a significant crosscurrent.

In 1995, I’d never heard the term “Externally Focused Church.” By 2005, Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson’s seminal book, *The Externally Focused Church*,⁶ had taken the megachurch world by storm. It was touted as a significant “innovation” for the attractational “come and see” church and became one of Leadership Network’s top programming priorities. The mobilization of the priesthood of all believers as everyday missionaries never found the same contextual footing

among missional church leaders during this era. Their prophetic voices, however, grew in intensity.

By 2005, my main understanding of an Externally Focused Church was the attractional church model. The first book I read after entering full-time vocational ministry as an executive pastor was *The Church of Irresistible Influence*⁷ by Robert Lewis. He raised the thought-provoking question, “Would your community notice if your church disappeared this week?” I wanted the answer to be “yes” for our church. However, my perspective was still rooted in the attractional, growth-oriented context. I admit that back then, I wasn’t asking “How do we mobilize everyday missionaries into the cracks and crevices of society for transformational impact?” (a phrase I later coined for the multiplication/discipleship mission of Exponential). Instead, I was asking, “How do we serve the community in a way that attracts more people to church?” with a focus on transformational impact through church growth.

In 1995, I had never heard of a “multisite church,” and the phenomenon had not yet emerged. By 2000, I helped launch a multisite campus and even served as interim campus pastor for a short season. There were no books, conferences, or seminars to turn to for help. I remember hearing at the time that there were likely fewer than 100 multisite churches in the U.S. We were pioneering new ground.

On September 11, 2001, I attended Leadership Network’s first gathering of multisite church pioneers, where I also met Bob Buford for the first time. As a result, the churches represented at this inaugural gathering became pioneers, creating roadmaps for others through writing books and speaking at conferences about the topic. There were no consulting experts on the subject at the time. By 2005, “multisite” had become a top priority for Leadership Network and was on the verge of becoming a movement. Within a decade, and in the wake of the subsequent Outwardly Focused Era, the number of multisite churches would soar into the thousands.

In 1995, I had virtually no context for understanding church-planting. I had never been part of a church that planted churches, and church-planting was not part of most churches’ conversations. By 2005, I was sold out to church-planting and was aggressively involved in leading a church-planting church, launching

church-planting ministries, and helping hundreds of church plants get started each year. Without knowing it, I was riding a fresh wave of God.

In 1995, most church-planting was accomplished by denominations. By 2005, a new era of church-planting networks had begun. Leadership Network's "Burning Bush" initiative from 1998 to 2002 catalyzed renewed interest in church-planting and accelerated the emergence of numerous new church-planting networks and support ministries. By 2005, church-planting had shifted to become one of the top trends shaping the next era.

Many of today's most influential church-planting networks were launched during this closing era of the Church Growth Movement, including the Association of Related Churches (ARC), Converge, Stadia, New Thing, Acts 29 Network, City to City, GlocalNet, and many more. I was blessed to have a direct role and front-row seat in this significant shift. In 2005, I co-founded the Church Planting Network (later known as Exponential) to support the growing number of independent church-planting networks.

Having become Buford's personal strategic advisor as I was starting the Church Planting Network, I embraced and embedded his values into our ministry. Our mission was to serve as an advocacy group and resource for this budding new sector, using Bob Buford's posture: "You can do it, how can I help?" I frequently told Bob that Exponential was like his adopted child and an adopted sibling sharing the same DNA as Leadership Network. We sought to apply what we saw Leadership Network do so well in the church-planting space. Exponential quickly became, and continues to be, one of the U.S.'s most influential church-planting voices, largely thanks to Bob's influence in its formative years.

The backdrop and bookends of this era are the publication of Warren's seminal book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*, in 1995 and the approach's institutionalization by 2005. This institutionalization functionally tied the model to the consumer-driven, attractional church operating system, making it accessible to churches of all sizes. Most importantly, the model's principles would be so deeply embedded in church culture that they would be inherited by the next generation of church-planting leaders, who would ride the significant wave of church-planting into the subsequent Outwardly Focused Era.

That's a lot to digest in one era, especially given the tension between entrepreneurial innovation and institutionalization. Acknowledging this tension, I'm naming this final era of the Church Growth Movement "The Intrapreneurial Era," referring to someone who acts like an entrepreneur within an institution—someone who innovates and drives change within an established organization's structure and goals. The concept emerged in the marketplace during the 1970s and 1980s, as entrepreneurial church CEOs sought institutional solutions to the challenges posed by enterprise-driven churches. "Intrapreneurship" captures the balancing act between operating an increasingly complex machine and innovating new pathways of growth.

Within this significant tension were many emerging trends and smaller currents that characterized the closing era of the Church Growth Movement—discussions that included the cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity and the related conversations about the missional church. Before we get to the Intrapreneurial Era, however, let's make a pit stop at the Young Leaders Network and look at its impact on accelerating the missional, postmodern, and post-evangelical conversations that would shape the future beyond the Church Growth Movement—and bring us closer to seeing how we got to where we are today.

Reflection Questions

Which Crosscurrent Are You Swimming In?

Four major crosscurrents shaped 1995–2005: (1) Institutional vs. Entrepreneurial, (2) Modern vs. Postmodern, (3) Attractional vs. Missional, (4) Evangelical vs. Post-Evangelical. Which one describes your context? If you're in an established church trying to innovate, you're in crosscurrent 1. If you're a younger leader questioning the effectiveness of attractional church strategies, you're in crosscurrent 3. Identifying your crosscurrent helps explain why you feel turbulence—and shows which conversations and resources might help you navigate.

Are Your Innovations Extending the System or Replacing It?

Look at the last major innovation your church implemented (e.g., multisite campus, church plant, externally focused initiative, or new service style). Ask: Did this innovation help us become better at attracting people to our church (extending the consumer-driven system), or did it help us mobilize people as missionaries into the world (replacing the consumer-driven system)? Most “innovations” in this era extended the attractional paradigm by making it more effective, which explains why they didn’t solve the reproduction crisis.



CHAPTER 19

Emerging Church Conversations

*The Impact of the Young Leaders Network
1995 to 2005*

In the mid-1990s, a young youth pastor stood at the back of a packed sanctuary, watching the closing worship set at a well-known seeker-sensitive church. The lights were dialed in, the band was tight, the message had been clear, and hundreds of people had filled out response cards. On paper, it was everything he had been taught to aim for. Yet as the crowd flowed out to the parking lot, he felt a knot in his stomach he couldn't quite shake. "If this is winning," he wondered, "why do my friends who don't know Jesus have so little interest in any of it?"

Across the country, dozens of younger leaders were feeling the same dissonance. They had grown up in evangelical churches, been shaped by the Church Growth Movement, and admired leaders like Hybels and Warren. They believed the gospel, loved the church, and respected the pioneers who had come before them. But they also sensed that the cultural ground was shifting under their feet—that the attractional models that had reached their parents might not reach their peers. Their questions about postmodern culture, mission, and church form became the spark that would soon ignite the "emerging church" conversations.

A cultural shift was underway as the twentieth century drew to a close. The confidence and predictability of modernity were eroding, replaced by postmodern skepticism toward absolute truth claims and institutional authority. Convictions

that had long anchored evangelical Christianity—such as the claim that “Jesus is the only way”—were now openly questioned, along with attractional models and institutional church priorities. While Boomers continued to shape and defend the Church Growth Movement, their Gen X children increasingly challenged the church’s beliefs, methodologies, and understanding of its mission in a postmodern culture.

The pressure of these questions was felt most directly at the leadership level, where churches were forced to reckon not only with cultural change but with generational succession. The movement’s future depended on whether it could reach and form the next generation of leaders. It was within this context that Leadership Network found itself at a critical crossroads.

Brad Smith joined the Leadership Network team in 1993 and eventually served as its CEO from 1998 to 2002. His initial role was to revive and expand the large church forums—the ministry’s foundation and building blocks. As he did, one of the top needs expressed by large church pastors centered on reaching the next generation (NEXT GEN) of leaders.¹ In the spring of 1994, Leadership Network convened a gathering of approximately forty large church pastors to engage in this conversation.

In my interviews with Smith, he recalled that large churches had three significant felt needs arising from the reality that the average age of church members was increasing by 1 year each year. These strategic boomer church CEOs understood their continued growth, effectiveness, and even livelihoods were tied to mobilizing the next generation of leaders. First, they needed to reach more young leaders. Second, they needed to increase the number of young leaders in their training pipelines to become future staff members. Finally, they needed to mobilize the next generation of younger church planters to reach postmoderns more effectively.

The enthusiasm and response from this first gathering led Smith to conclude that a new initiative—led and coordinated by younger, emerging leaders—was needed. Smith told me that what started with the narrowly focused goal of reaching the next generation of leaders expanded to include how to do ministry more effectively in postmodern culture.²

Building a Team

Smith began traveling the country to connect with, learn from, and recruit younger people to these new forums.³ He was both strategic and focused on finding leaders like Chris Seay, David Crowder, Mark Driscoll, and Dan Kimball before they planted churches and as they were wrestling with how to reach postmoderns effectively.

Smith remembers following Driscoll around for a week before he planted Mars Hill Church and visiting Chris Seay frequently. Kimball recalls meeting and being recruited by Smith. “Brad was looking for successful young leaders in youth and young adult ministry,” Kimball told me. “I had grown a young adults’ program to over a thousand.”⁴ Like the others, Kimball eventually planted a church (Vintage Church in 2004), wrote books on the emerging church, and became an influential leader on the conference speaking circuit.

Smith prioritized finding church planters or leaders who believed in church-planting. The Young Leaders Network would eventually include about fifteen politically, theologically, and pragmatically diverse leaders: Mark Driscoll, Chris Seay, Dan Kimball, Mark DeYmaz, and Doug Pagitt. Others who contributed included Brian McLaren, Andrew Jones, John Burke, Brad Cecil, Rick McKinley, Tim Keel, and Tony Jones. Chris Seay was added to the Network when Smith saw the effectiveness of Seay’s college plant in reaching younger postmodern students. So, what did this seemingly disparate group have in common? Most were youth pastors and/or future church planters who sought to think like missionaries and discover more effective ways to reach postmoderns.

One of Leadership Network’s strengths was its ability to create a peer-to-peer environment of intimacy and safety in which these young leaders could pursue missional and postmodern conversations. With Bob Buford funding the initiative, these young Gen X leaders participated in a series of regular forums with their peers and smaller, more intimate regional connections.

Leadership Network scheduled its first Gen X gathering/forum at the Glen Eyrie Retreat Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in the fall of 1995. The gathering drew four hundred attendees. This first gathering was built around

the great work of Chris Seay and David Crowder in their church plant, Smith says. Tim Celek, the founding pastor of The Crossing Church in Costa Mesa, California, and Dieter Zander, the Gen X ministry leader at Willow Creek, were the keynotes. Seay and Crowder were also speakers.”⁵ Smith noted that Celek and Zander were about ten years older but were leading ministries that effectively reached next-generation leaders. A series of forums for Gen X leaders grew out of this initial gathering and prompted the formation of the Young Leaders Network.

Leadership Network (Carol Childers) published a NETFAX article highlighting the event’s lessons, giving visibility into what happened during this formative gathering. Church leaders began talking, prompting significant interest and more conversations. Leadership Network coordinated several smaller mini-forums in 1996 to keep the conversations moving forward. These more intimate, conversational gatherings featured leaders such as Dan Kimball and Erwin McManus.

Smith hired Doug Pagitt to lead the new Young Leaders Network, including recruiting additional team members and planning future events. Core team members included Doug Pagitt, Chris Seay, David Crowder, Mark Driscoll, Dan Kimball, Brad Cecil, and Tony Jones, Smith said. Tim Celek and Dieter Zander served as advisors. Smith highlighted three purposes for the Young Leaders Network: understanding cultural shifts from modern to postmodern, fostering new methodologies for engaging emerging generations, and providing a platform for promoting peer-to-peer sharing and collaboration.⁶

A decade later, Driscoll reflected on the work of the Young Leaders Network, saying, “American Christianity finds itself in one of those pivotal moments where history is being written for better or worse, and we could see anything from a revival like the Jesus Movement of a previous generation or the decline of the church, as has already happened throughout Europe.”⁷

This group of leaders collectively put a face, language, and discernible characteristics on what became known as the emerging church movement in the U.S. Eventually, the group would splinter, representing at least three distinct but overlapping streams. While their impact was not directly significant during this

closing era of the Church Growth Movement, they did plant important seeds that would influence the future.

The Emerging Church Defined

Driscoll defined the emerging church as a “broad category that encompasses a wide variety of churches and Christians who are seeking to be effective missionaries wherever they live. This includes Europeans and Australians who are having the same conversation as their American counterparts.”⁸

In a 2007 Christianity Today article, after the emerging church conversations had evolved into a more pronounced divide, Scot McKnight offered an insightful, lighthearted description of “emerging Christians.”

“It is said that emerging Christians confess their faith like mainliners—meaning they say things publicly they don’t really believe. They drink like Southern Baptists—meaning, to adapt some words from Mark Twain, they are ‘teetotalers’ when it is judicious. They talk like Catholics—meaning they cuss and use naughty words. They evangelize and theologize like the Reformed—meaning they rarely evangelize, yet theologize all the time. They worship like charismatics—meaning with their whole bodies, some parts tattooed. They vote like Episcopalians—meaning they eat, drink, and sleep on their left side. And, they deny the truth—meaning they’ve got a latte-soaked copy of Derrida in their smoke- and beer-stained backpacks.”*

*Jacques Derrida was a French Algerian philosopher whose theory of deconstruction significantly influenced the humanities and social sciences.

In reflecting on the emerging church, McKnight wrote that it was a “movement or ‘conversation.’” Based on our earlier definition of a movement (a definitive leader, a definitive cause with growing numbers of followers, and sustained generational impact), I believe history shows that the best characterization is “the emerging church conversations.” Important conversations brought the Young Leaders Network together.

In characterizing the emerging church conversations, McKnight used the metaphor of an “emerging lake” with five streams feeding it. I found these five characteristics helpful as I attempted to describe the “emerging Christians” like those in the Young Leaders Network, who were drawn to conversations about the “emerging church.” McKnight summarizes the emerging lake this way:¹⁰

- *Prophetic (or provocative) rhetoric* – The emerging movement [conversation] is consciously and deliberately provocative. Emerging Christians believe the church needs to change ... Since I swim in the emerging lake, I can self-critically admit that we sometimes exaggerate.
- *Postmodern ministry* – While there are good, as well as naughty, consequences of opting for a postmodern stance (and not all in the emerging movement are as careful as they should be), evangelical Christians can rightfully embrace certain elements of postmodernity.
- *Praxis-oriented*—what most characterizes the emerging stream is *praxis*—how the faith is lived out. At its core, the emerging movement [conversation] is an attempt to fashion a new ecclesiology (doctrine of the church). Its distinctive emphases are evident in its worship, orthopraxy, and missional orientation.
- *Post-Evangelical* – The emerging movement [conversation] tends to be suspicious of systematic theology, and many are skeptical about the exclusivist ‘in vs out’ mentality of much of evangelicalism. It is post-evangelical in the way that neo-evangelicalism (in the 1950s) was post-fundamentalist. It would not be unfair to call it postmodern evangelicalism.
- *Political* – Put directly, they are Democrats. And that spells ‘post’ for conservative-evangelical-politics-as-usual.

Not all participants in the Young Leaders Network embraced or exhibited all five of these characteristics. McKnight notes that Dan Kimball and Andrew Jones were more centrist, implying that others like Driscoll and McLaren were more extreme. The diversity of views would become more pronounced after the Young Leaders Network disbanded and the Emergent Village (led by Pagitt and McLaren) focused on the five characteristics above.

I remember Bob Buford telling me the Young Leaders Network members were young, idealistic, generally well-intentioned, and raised important questions, especially about mobilizing the priesthood of all believers. He said, “Like all previous generations, they will eventually get married, buy houses, have kids, and become more realistic, tempered, and productive.” Bob valued their voices but knew the importance of words and ideas translating into tangible results and impact. The strength of Leadership Network’s approach was coming alongside strong, young leaders wrestling with cultural challenges (words and ideas), giving them a platform for engaged peer-to-peer conversations, and then having church plants as their laboratories for application, results, and impact.

A Common Burden: Becoming Missionaries in a Postmodern Context

In my interviews with many of these leaders, it was clear that what brought them together was the interrelated theme of missional conversations and reaching postmoderns. They were wrestling with the Consumer-Driven Operating System as they sought a fresh perspective on the intersection of the gospel’s content and the context of church ministry in a postmodern culture. Like the apostolic Boomer leaders before them, these young leaders were evangelistically driven, essentially asking, “How do we do church, living like missionaries who more effectively reach postmodern culture?” For perspective, these conversations occurred just as Mark Driscoll and Chris Seay were planting their churches, which influenced their approaches.

Reflecting on his time in the Young Leaders Network, Chris Seay told me, “We were united in needing ‘missionary’ and not ‘marketing’ tools. We focused on the writings of missionary Leslie Newbigin. His book *Foolishness to the Greeks* was influential in our thinking. Bringing the gospel to culture uniquely, authentically, and relationally became our priority.”¹¹ For Seay, the impact of this small group of emerging leaders is difficult to quantify, but they did see themselves as prophetic change agents. The group also looked at the writings of missiologists like David Bosch and Roland Allen, Seay said. Alan Hirsch, a prominent missiologist and author, also cites Newbigin, Bosch, and Allen as the most influential thought leaders shaping his early writing and thinking.

John Burke, an engineer who met Jesus through a small group CRU experience during college, left the marketplace to become a missionary. In the early 1990s, he served with Dieter Zander at Willow Creek Community Church, helping with the church's young adult ministry, Axis. John became executive director of ministries at the megachurch and eventually left in 1998 to start Gateway Church in Austin, Texas. Burke told me his biggest burden prompting participation in the Young Leaders Network was the "consumer-driven model's lack of conviction, urgency, and effectiveness in evangelism."¹²

An evangelist and missionary, Andrew Jones worked with digital ministry and ran a unique evangelistic outreach, "Beer and Bible," in 1987. Inspired by Warren and Hybels, he became a youth pastor at one of the country's largest churches. Jones recalls "having a heart for street kids, feeling stuck trying to make everything big in the church, and wanting to return to being a missionary."¹³ After making a presentation with Chris Seay on reaching postmodern young people, Seay told Jones, "You've got to be part of this group of emerging leaders." Doug Pagitt then invited Jones to join the Young Leaders Network.

Kimball recalls, "I was naïve and just wanted to reach the next generation. Our small network was 'tight,' and I had a strong affinity with most of the guys."¹⁴ God did something special in the hearts and minds of this group. Despite their differences, they were united on one important thing that Mark Driscoll captures in his reflections. The group was united by a "missiological conversation about what a faithful church should believe and do to reach Western culture."

Reflecting on the Young Leaders group, Driscoll wrote in 2006 that the truths of Christianity are "constant, unchanging, and meant for all people, times, and places. But the methods by which the truth is articulated and practiced must be culturally appropriated and therefore constantly translated. If both doctrine and practice are constant, the result is dead orthodoxy."¹⁵

While the group did not agree on what constituted faithful doctrine and practice, the Young Leaders Network provided a platform for debate and discernment.

These emerging young leaders were wrestling with important cultural and seminal questions like:

- How is postmodern culture different from modern culture?
- What does it mean to “think like a missionary” to reach people in postmodern culture?
- What does it look like to see the church “as mission” versus “having a mission”?
- How do we shift from an attractional to a missional mindset and mobilize everyday missionaries to be the church where they work, live, and play?
- How must the church’s forms, structures, and methods change in light of the realities of our postmodern future?

Conversation Distinctives

Andrew Jones told me this in reflecting on the time, “In the late 90’s, our argument was that young people were thinking differently, and it was not because they were young but because there was a significant worldview shift. Young people would need a different approach to church because they would not grow out of a postmodern mindset as they get older. Many of us were simply shifting our emphasis from the effective missional work we were doing in youth ministry and applying it to planting various forms of church to reach Gen X.”

Seay told me the group didn’t think they would be “that distinctive” from the Seeker-Sensitive Movement. “Our willingness to engage culture was a shared value with the Seeker movement,” he explained candidly, “but we knew the pragmatic practices had to differ. This created so much resistance, and we felt like we were getting the crap kicked out of us.”¹⁶

Seay and musician David Crowder planted University Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, in 1995. Recalling his and Crowder’s attendance at a Purpose-Driven Conference at Saddleback, Seay said, “We didn’t make it past the second session because we had a really hard time contextualizing the model for effectiveness in our college setting.” Highlighting the key missional questions he and his peers

were wrestling with, Seay said, “We didn’t think the seeker algorithm would work with its funnel toward accumulation into the church. We were looking for an accelerator to mobilize disciple makers into the culture. College students simply were not going to be ‘targeted’ as customers.”

Andrew Jones characterized the work of the roughly 20 leaders in the Young Leadership Network like a learning or R&D laboratory. “There were many forms of church both experimented with and embraced, including house church, monastic communities, intentional living communities, cafe church, and more.” Regarding his own work, Jones recalls, “All the churches I was starting in San Francisco in the 1996 to 1998 period were microchurches in homes, coffee shops, and in the park.”

In these fresh conversations, we see the complexity of the crosscurrents shaping the Church Growth Movement’s closing era. The context was a mix of crosscurrents, ranging from modern to postmodern, from evangelical to post-evangelical, from attractional to missional, and from institutional to entrepreneurial. The prevailing lead pastors who had built their successful large churches on the foundations of modern thinking and the customer-driven paradigm focused on the institutional-versus-entrepreneurial crosscurrent. These leaders were turning their sights to entrepreneurially driven, outwardly focused church innovations, such as Externally Focused Churches, multisite churches, and non-denominational church-planting networks, to drive further growth.

The emerging Gen X leaders in the Young Leaders Network were engaged in a different crosscurrent that inherently fostered the resistance Chris Seay highlighted. These young leaders shared the evangelistic zeal of their elders. Still, they believed reaching postmodern thinkers would require a more missional church context, including rethinking some modern church practices to become more relational and experiential. This created a significant crosscurrent with their elders’ consumer-driven paradigm, opening the door to several decades of missional conversations.

From Traditional (1.0) to Contemporary (2.0) to Emerging (3.0)

In 1997, a second major Gen X gathering/forum was held at the Mount Hermon camp in Mt. Hermon, California. Leadership Network's Smith wanted a dynamic, prophetic speaker to kick off the event. He had previously spent time with Mark Driscoll before he planted Mars Hill. Targeting Driscoll as the possible keynote, Smith asked Driscoll to spend a week with Tim Celek, a more seasoned lead pastor who had keynoted the first major gathering. This was Mark Driscoll's first major speaking engagement. "Mark hit it out of the park," Smith says. "This became 'the moment' for many of us."

A decade after the first gathering, Driscoll wrote a reflective paper titled "A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church."¹⁷ In it, he recalled the Gen X gathering: "In the mid-1990s, I was a young church planter trying to establish a church in the city of Seattle when I got a call to speak at my first conference. It was hosted by Leadership Network and focused on the subject of Generation X. I spoke on the transition from the modern to the postmodern world and on some of the implications this cultural shift was having for the church. Other participants spoke on the various ways that emerging generations were changing and how the church might faithfully respond."¹⁸

For Driscoll, the conversations were significant and began to shift the focus from reaching an emerging generation to a larger issue: being the Church in an emerging postmodern culture. He writes, "The general consensus among us was that a transition within the Church was taking place. Local churches were moving either from a Church 1.0 to a Church 2.0 model or from a Church 2.0 to a Church 3.0 model."¹⁹ Church 1.0 was readily identified as traditional and modern, Church 2.0 as contemporary and transitional, and Church 3.0 as emerging, missional, and postmodern.

Without naming it, these young emerging leaders lived in the Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch context of the church, with discontent toward what was coming next. They planted the seeds for the more broadly engaged missional church conversation.

Writing about the impact of that initial conference, Driscoll said that, as a result, a small team was formed to continue discussing postmodernism and the overarching concern of what mission work would look like in the United States, including the implications for how theology and church are practiced.

“Until then, most of the discussions regarding missions were related to Americans sending their missionaries and dollars overseas to interpret and convert foreign cultures,” Driscoll says. “But our small team believed that America was becoming as thoroughly secular and foreign to the gospel as ‘foreign’ cultures and therefore needed its own missiological agenda.”²⁰

In 1998, Leadership Network hosted the final large-group Gen X gathering at the Glorieta camp near Santa Fe, New Mexico. Doug Pagitt then moved on to other ministry work. From 1999 to 2002, the Network held smaller regional gatherings (about six per year) before concluding the initiative. Bob Buford effectively subsidized the Gen X initiative for six years with minimal revenue.

The Young Leaders Network officially disbanded in 2002, as Leadership Network narrowed its focus and transitioned to a new CEO (Dave Travis). According to Seay, most of the team leaders were very busy balancing the demands of ministry, travel, and raising families. Some stepped out to launch their own groups/conferences, write books, and engage the speaking circuit, while a few disqualified themselves from ministry. According to Driscoll, there were also growing theological differences.²¹

Three Streams

Almost every leader I interviewed highlighted three distinct streams of leaders that emerged from the Young Leaders Network. Dan Kimball and Andrew Jones both described similar streams. Missiologist Ed Stetzer added nomenclature, classifying the streams as the Relevants, Reconstructionists, and Revisionists.²² Based on my research, these are good descriptors:

- *Relevants* – *Theologically conservative evangelicals, not interested in changing theology, but focused on culturally relevant worship styles, preaching styles,*

leadership structures, etc. This group seeks to become more effective in reaching the postmodern culture by becoming more “relevant.” It’s important to note the emergence of a subgroup of “Reformed Relevants” that some leaders I interviewed referred to as the “young, restless, and reformed” group. Driscoll, Kimball, Burke, and Andrew Jones are examples.

- *Reconstructionists* – Generally theologically evangelical but dissatisfied with the current models of the Seeker-Sensitive, purpose-driven, and contemporary church that define winning as becoming “mega.” They seek a greater transformative impact toward gospel saturation via more incarnational, missional approaches. Alan Hirsch and Neil Cole are examples.
- *Revisionists* – Theologically liberal and question key evangelical doctrines, critiquing their appropriateness for the emerging postmodern world. McLaren, Pagitt, and Tony Jones are examples. I found Tony Jones’s podcast “Emerged: An Oral History of the Emerging Church Movement”²³ helpful in understanding conversations within the Young Leaders Network.

Theological Fracturing

After leaving the Young Leaders Network, Pagitt, McLaren, and Tony Jones founded Emergent Village as a resource for emergent conversations. They had a strong connection with Youth Specialties, which gave them brand positioning and a platform to further increase their distribution and impact through conferencing and publishing. In 2002, Rob Bell, an influential progressive pastor, debuted his first Nooma video, which went on to become a huge success. With Bell’s affiliation, the progressive revisionist message of Emergent Village rapidly expanded. The timing coincided with a growing number of Christians, like Donald Miller, questioning the assumptions and foundations of their faith. Emergent Village conversations became a voice for these people, accelerating their impact and laying the groundwork for the epidemic of deconstruction of personal faith that happened over a decade later during the Disruption Era (2015 to 2025; we’ll talk about this in chapter 27).

Reflecting on the progressive revisionist stream, Jones, Burke, and Kimball had specific thoughts. Jones concluded it was mostly about “theological disruption.”²⁴ Burke added, “The theological fracturing was not helpful or productive.”²⁵ Kimball shared that some in the group were trying to “hijack evangelicalism with a common language, in a new direction.”²⁶ He explained: “It caused me grief when practice was prioritized over theology. When you remove the historic gospel and urgency for evangelism, you lose your motivation and get in trouble.”²⁷ Kimball said he eventually became concerned that the progressive revisionists’ philosophy placed less emphasis on Paul’s words and made the gospel more about justice than about Jesus’s sacrifice. “It was like a virus was released within the evangelical community,” he said.²⁸

Driscoll did not mince words. He wrote: “If both doctrine and practice are constantly changing, the result is living heresy, which is where I fear the revisionist emergent tribe of the emerging church is heading. What I find frightening is the trend among some to drift from what I consider to be faithful conservative evangelical theological convictions in favor of a less distinctively Christian spirituality.”²⁹

As the three streams moved their separate ways, the controversy became problematic for many leaders because of the “labels” assigned to the movement and within it. McKnight sought to bring clarity: “To prevent confusion, a distinction needs to be made between ‘emerging’ and ‘Emergent.’ Emerging is the wider, informal, global, ecclesial (church-centered) focus of the movement, while Emergent is an official organization in the U.S. and the U.K. Emergent Village, the organization, is directed by Tony Jones, a Ph.D. student at Princeton Theological Seminary and a world traveler on behalf of all things both Emergent and emerging.”³⁰

By 2005, growing numbers of leaders expressed concerns about the impact and direction of “emergent conversations” and sought to distance themselves from them. The Gospel Coalition was founded in 2005 by influential Reformed pastors D.A. Carson and Tim Keller in response to what the two leaders saw as growing and dangerous trends in the broader evangelical world—including the drift toward theological liberalism, particularly influenced by postmodernism prevalent in the Emergent Church movement.

Before this controversy and confusion, Dan Kimball chose the title *Emerging Church* for his first book in 2003. The book addressed changes needed in the church to reach postmodern culture. Ironically, Rick Warren, a conservative evangelical, and Brian McLaren, the key catalyst for the progressive, revisionist stream, both wrote forewords for Kimball's book.

By 2005, the term “emerging” had become increasingly problematic for those outside the progressive, revisionist stream. John Burke launched the Emerging Leadership Initiative (ELI) in 1997. By 2005, he changed the name to Gateway Leadership Initiative due to the controversy and “baggage” surrounding the “emerging / emergent” language. Leadership Network also sought to distance its work from the divisive labels.

In my closing moments with Kimball and Seay, I asked them to reflect on the positive influences and memories of the progressive revisionist stream. Kimball affirmed their impact in building a sense of community belonging (church as family vs. church as a social club); seeking to get beyond the “surface dressing” of the Seeker Movement; and embracing Dallas Willard's teaching that Christianity must move beyond saying a prayer (conversion) to how we live (transformation).³¹

I asked Chris Seay if the Young Leaders Network could work together again today. “Our relational trust was high,” he said. “We had great conversations. I could live with the theological differences, but it would be hard to work together in this era of political divisiveness unless politics were kept out.”³²

Listening to Kimball and Seay, I was struck by how much these conversations mattered and how much they still do. The questions they raised about authenticity, mission, and the limitations of the attractional model remain largely unanswered. The emerging church conversations opened important doors, but they were only one of several crosscurrents reshaping the movement. Even as these voices challenged the church's direction, the consumer-driven machine they were pushing against was simultaneously building, institutionalizing, and innovating at a pace that would define the era.

Reflection Questions

Can You Separate Prophetic Critique From Progressive Theology?

The Young Leaders Network raised crucial questions: Is an attractional church effective in postmodern culture? Can programs create missionaries? Does consumer Christianity produce reproducing disciples? These are essential questions—but progressive voices (McLaren, Bell) asked them alongside theological questions about exclusivity, hell, and biblical authority. Can you engage the missional critique (methods) without embracing progressive theology (doctrine)? What would it look like to become more incarnational, relational, and missionary while remaining theologically conservative?

Are You Church 1.0, 2.0, or 3.0—And Is That the Right Question?

Driscoll's framework: Church 1.0 = Traditional/Modern. Church 2.0 = Contemporary/Seeker-Sensitive. Church 3.0 = Emerging/Missional/Postmodern. Most churches moved from 1.0 to 2.0 by adding contemporary services. But did they become more effective at making reproducing disciples, or just better at attracting postmoderns? Maybe the question isn't which version you are, but whether any version creates multiplication movements. What if the future isn't 3.0 but a return to Acts 2.0—simple, reproducible, relational?



CHAPTER 20

The Intrapreneurial Era

*Institutional and Entrepreneurial
1995 to 2005*

“If you build it, they will come.” Most people remember the mysterious voice that Iowa farmer Ray Kinsella heard in the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*. He plows over his cornfield to build a baseball field, and long-deceased players miraculously appear. By the end of the film, cars are lined up as far as the eye can see. The message is simple: if you create something of value, people will naturally be drawn to it.

The Church Growth Movement embraced that same logic. If you offer big buildings, fantastic worship, all-star staff and speakers, multiple locations, and world-class programs, people will be attracted to what you offer. And for a season, it worked remarkably well. By the mid-1990s, entrepreneurial church leaders were growing their churches at a rapid pace, and the results were visible. But building it also meant institutionalizing it. The very success that rewarded entrepreneurial risk-taking demanded systems, structures, and sustainability. This chapter explores the crosscurrents that emerged as the movement tried to be both.

Entrepreneurial and Institutionalization

By 1995, the Church Growth Movement was institutionalizing a Consumer-Driven Operating System, characterized by the customer-oriented approach of Rick Warren’s Purpose-Driven Model. “If you build it, they will come” was

certainly a strong descriptor for this era's enterprise-focused, Boomer church CEOs. Their time, talent, and treasures were focused on the activities required to build large churches that would attract seekers and sustain momentum and growth. From this "consuming" priority, we could arguably name this the institutionalization crosscurrent.

As these entrepreneurial leaders overcame successive growth barriers and achieved the coveted status of megachurch, their focus often shifted to innovative, pioneering ways to foster church growth beyond their traditional walls. In the current era, this emphasis has led to the rise of the Externally Focused Church and the multisite church, and to the development of church-planting networks that aim to shape and define the subsequent Outwardly Focused church era. Based on this impactful theme, we could also arguably refer to it as the Entrepreneurial Era or the Institutionalization Era.

It's important to understand that the entrepreneurial activities were primarily motivated by and focused on leveraging innovation for additional local church growth. The player with the most points wins!

Emerging and Missional

Amidst these institutionalization and entrepreneurial crosscurrents, an additional interrelated crosscurrent emerged, as we saw in the last chapter. Emerging church thought leaders stirred important conversations about cultural shifts from modernity to post-modernity and how the church must adapt.

When I met missiologist Alan Hirsch in 2005, he was teaching, "If you build it, at best, less than 40% of the U.S. population will ever come!" He highlighted the likelihood that the 40% figure would continue to decline, as it had in postmodern Europe. He challenged leaders with the question, "What about the 60% who will never enter the doors of the attractional, program-based church?" During this era, Hirsch and UK missiologist Michael Frost published their seminal book, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church*¹.

Hirsch was not a lone voice. By the close of 2005, numerous other missional church thought leaders had sounded the alarm and published books calling for change. These leaders generally shared the concern that the prevailing church was too heavily reliant on programmatically driven, attractional models, which they perceived were increasingly ineffective in a secularized, postmodern culture. In my words, these missional leaders were throwing a penalty flag at the Consumer-Driven Operating System of the church that had become institutionalized and normative. We could arguably call this the missional church era.

Emerging missional concerns cut directly into the heart of the institutionalization and entrepreneurial crosscurrents, creating an additional missional vs. attractional crosscurrent. This crosscurrent is messier and more confrontational, challenging the prevailing model that was being institutionalized. The title of Hugh Halter and Matt Smay's book, *AND: The Gathered and Scattered Church*², would eventually capture the essence of this era's missional vs. attractional crosscurrent.

As a senior leader in one of these enterprise-driven churches from 2000 through 2005, I paid little attention to the emerging missional conversations. I considered them a "distraction" and recall feeling like the leaders were like "small, yappy dogs, barking ferociously, and chasing me down the road on my bike while trying to bite my heels." But now, as I've taken this journey of discovery for this book, I realize that many of these leaders would be widely embraced and considered prophetic if they published their books today rather than twenty-five years ago. We have important things to consider and discern as we move beyond the church's programmatic, Consumer-Driven Operating System by revisiting what these leaders were burdened to change years ago.

Traditional Versus Progressive

Finally, the additional "traditional versus progressive" crosscurrent in Christian theology that we discussed in the last chapter emerged. Doug Pagitt, Brian McLaren, and Tony Jones, participants in Leadership Network's Young Leaders Network, sought to define and champion post-evangelicalism through their work with the Terra Nova Project and Emergent / Emergent Village. Young author Donald Miller's *New York Times* best-selling book, *Blue Like Jazz*:

Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality,³ published in 2003, captured the essence of this crosscurrent. It documented Miller's journey and struggles with the traditional approach to Christianity. This relatable exploration of faith and spirituality resonated with a wide audience, particularly younger postmodern readers who embrace relativism and question traditional religious structures, rigid doctrines, and systemic theology.

While the impact of this “traditional evangelical vs. progressive post-evangelicalism” crosscurrent did not fully bear fruit (or cause damage) until later years, when the personal deconstruction of faith became normative, I included it here to highlight its historical timing. It certainly contributed to the messiness of crosscurrents during the Church Growth Movement's closing era. Just as the “missional versus attractional” crosscurrent was perceived as an attack on the prevailing attractional model of the church, the progressive theology crosscurrent also challenged its prioritization of programs for growth over programs for social, gender, and environmental justice.

While the institutionalization and continued innovation of the consumer-driven system were the major headlines of this Intrapreneurial Era, the additional crosscurrents we examined in the last chapter began to demand greater attention. The terms “emerging church” and “emerging movement” came into use. Adding to the confusion and controversy was a subset of emerging leaders who formed the Emergent Village and curated emergent conversations. Yes, it was a chaotic and confusing time, with an increasing number of books published between 2005 and 2010, trying to explain things. Needless to say, I've struggled to piece together the historical narrative and discern its impact.

We could arguably call this period the “Emerging Church Era,” a picture of the transition from the end of the modern Church Growth Movement to what would come next. While these emerging and emergent church conversations were important leading indicators of the coming “Disruption Era,” the influence center of Western Christianity remained centered on the boomer CEOs of enterprise-driven churches powered by the Consumer-Driven Operating System.

Naming the Core Crosscurrents

As I said earlier, I wrestled more with the name of this era than with any other. Nonetheless, I chose the “Intrapreneurial Era,” concluding that the balancing act between institutionalization and entrepreneurship was a significant shaping force in the subsequent eras. I realize that the title does not fully capture the prophetic voices of the missional and emerging church work during this time period. That’s why I covered the emerging church in the last chapter and the missional church in the next chapter. In the rest of this chapter, let’s review the numerous interviews I conducted and the activities I personally witnessed.

The primary crosscurrent of this era was the institutionalization of the Church Growth Movement, coinciding with the rise of a growing number of entrepreneurial, Kingdom-minded church leaders who launched new initiatives and broke new ground to enhance the impact of their local churches. McGavran’s co-opted church-growth ideals were institutionalized in the Consumer-Driven Operating System that the emerging generations of church-planting leaders inherited. Simultaneously, a new wave of entrepreneurial church leaders began Kingdom-focused ventures to leverage the consumer-driven system and grow the church innovatively.

Missional church conversations increased, particularly as Gen X leaders wrestled with how to plant churches that would more effectively reach postmodern culture. However, the combined effect of this era’s “inward vs. outwardly facing” crosscurrents was to sustain the Consumer-Driven Operating System and reinforce “large” as the primary measure of church success. This crosscurrent set the stage for the Outwardly Focused Era that would come next.

As I began to get my arms around this era, I started to see three primary interrelated crosscurrents that marked and shaped the Intrapreneurial Era:

- *From Here (Attractional) to Here AND There (Outwardly Focused):* Enterprise-focused church leaders institutionalized the dominant Consumer-Driven Operating System as they learned to function as church CEOs. As entrepreneurial leaders, they zeroed in on outwardly focused growth initiatives, such as Externally Focused Churches,

multisite churches, and local church-based church-planting networks. They sought to enhance the church's attractional capacity through innovation.

- *From Modern to Postmodern Culture:* Missional leaders raised concerns that the prevailing attractional operating system was becoming increasingly ineffective in postmodern society. They advocated an outwardly focused, missional church, motivated to reach into culture rather than to attract spiritual seekers. They valued the sending and mobilizing capacity over the attractional capacity of churches.
- *From Evangelical to Post-Evangelical:* Progressives viewed postmodern values and priorities for social, gender, and environmental justice as increasingly incongruent with the more rigid, hierarchical structures and teachings of traditional, conservative evangelical Christianity. They sought to change the evangelical narrative through a postmodern cultural lens. Consequently, the love and grace of Jesus' red-letter words in the Bible were given more weight than Paul's writing, and the inerrancy of Scripture was less relevant.

These significant crosscurrent conversations set in motion what would subsequently become the Outwardly Focused Era, the subject of the next chapter, and the Disruption Era after that.

Leadership Network's Impact

Leadership Network entered the closing era of the Church Growth Movement as one of the most influential and trusted voices supporting the megachurch phenomenon. Its programming activities peaked during the first half of this era, including its Large Church Network; Church Champions to equip teaching churches, denominations, and consultants; Church for the 21st Century conferences; Foundation conferences as a precursor to Bob Buford's Halftime ministry, which launched in 1997; Leadership Training Network; Gen X Forum; and a church-planting project called the Burning Bush Initiative.

By 2002, Leadership Network had significantly narrowed its focus, paving the way to become a key catalyst for the subsequent Outwardly Focused Era. During

this period, they planted seeds and helped catalyze what would eventually emerge as the Externally Focused Church, the multisite church, and the modern era of decentralized church-planting networks. They recognized the need to empower the next generation of young leaders and highlight the postmodern cultural changes that were beginning to affect the church.

I interviewed all former CEOs of Leadership Network, including Fred Smith Jr., Mark Sweeney, Brad Smith, Dave Travis, and Ron Edmondson, as well as some former board members, for this book. Fred Smith Jr., the founding CEO from 1984 until 1996, provided important context for Leadership Network's role before the crosscurrent era. Mark Sweeney followed Smith through 1998, providing valuable insights into Peter Drucker's influence on Bob Buford and the megachurch phenomenon.

Brad Smith, hired in 1993 as the crosscurrent era began, served as CEO from 1998 to 2002. He contributed valuable insights into the history, purpose, and context of the Young Leaders Network, whose missional conversations were significant during the Intrapreneurial Era.⁴ Dave Travis joined Leadership Network part-time in 1995 and transitioned to full-time in 1996. Travis became the longest-tenured CEO, serving from 2002 to 2018. He provided crucial insights into the Intrapreneurial Era and the transitional issues shaping the subsequent Outwardly Focused Era.⁵

Travis was succeeded by Ron Edmondson, who served as CEO from 2018 to 2020. In 2021, I served as the interim CEO of Leadership Network as it merged into Exponential. You can see the number of leaders it took to steer and shift Leadership Network through the changing years.

Institutionalizing the Church Growth Machine

By 1995, Rick Warren's best-selling book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*,⁶ had enshrined the core elements of the Consumer-Driven Operating System with its customer-focused paradigm. Throughout the Intrapreneurial Era, the principles became so normative that thousands of churches would inherit this system without the lead pastor ever reading Warren's book or knowing its origins. The

trajectory and momentum of the modern movement appeared to be up and to the right, even as its final days approached.

The Purpose-Driven methodology was rooted in Warren's experience as a practitioner, and its timing coincided with the overlap of the Seeker-Sensitive and Megachurch eras. As Warren's book's influence soared, growing large churches became the normative success metric for churches in the U.S. By the end of this era, *Outreach Magazine* began publishing its coveted annual list of the largest and fastest-growing churches in America, enshrining the pursuit of "large" as the prevailing definition of success.

Simultaneously, many parachurch ministries that had fueled the earlier eras of the movement were shutting down or losing momentum. According to Gary McIntosh, the Institute for American Church Growth had been the "spark that lit the church growth flame in America."⁷ He notes the Institute reached its peak influence by 1985 and was losing momentum by the early 1990s. Other ministries with similar purposes that helped fuel the movement also lost momentum by 2000, as the movement's methods became the normative way of doing church. The Fuller Evangelistic Association, which had helped fuel the Church Growth Movement, announced plans to shut down in 1995.⁸

The epicenter of church growth shifted from parachurch organizations to local churches. The movement's voice and support shifted to large teaching churches, such as Willow Creek, with its Global Leadership Summit, and Saddleback, with its Purpose-Driven ministry. A growing, specialized consulting industry also emerged, supporting areas ranging from building design to fundraising campaigns. This new support industry partly emerged from initiatives launched by entrepreneurial church leaders who led large congregations. Leadership Network also helped catalyze this shift via their Large Church Network and Church Champions initiatives.

This Intrapreneurial Era embodies the machine or institutionalization reality that often happens at the end of a successful run of any transformative endeavor: from man (McGavran) to co-opted mission (growing large, sustainable churches) to co-opted machine (institutionalizing the intuitive, easily embraceable customer-focused principles of the Purpose-Driven Model to become the Consumer-

Driven Operating System of the church). While its institutionalization was firmly in place by 2005, the entrepreneurial and evolutionary nature from mega to multi, from inwardly focused to externally focused, and the emergence of church-based planting networks blur the finish line of the movement.

Entrepreneurial Church Leaders

The era saw the rise of entrepreneurial church leaders increasingly focused on innovation.

The emerging church leadership sector, along with related conferencing platforms, the publication of leadership and church growth books, and the rapid dissemination enabled by the Internet, mobile devices, and social media during the Intrapreneurial Era, created an opportunity for pastors to impact thousands of leaders beyond their own congregations.

Although subtle and easily overlooked, entrepreneurial and evangelistically gifted pastors, like those Leadership Network focused on from its founding until 2005, increasingly expanded their influence in local churches by establishing national parachurch ministries, authoring books, and impacting thousands through national church leadership conferences. This is particularly evident in the leadership, support services, and church-planting sectors that emerged during the era.

After conquering successive growth barriers, including the coveted “mega” growth barrier, a leader’s focus naturally shifts from the next internal growth barrier to a completely new external hill to conquer. That external challenge is often a natural extension of the proficiency or expertise these practitioner leaders have developed in overcoming growth barriers and pioneering other growth-focused innovations.

Some critics argue that the underlying motivations for leaders to secure influence beyond their local churches contribute to the rise of power-related moral failures we see today. While this is a broad generalization, one scenario is particularly concerning. The rise of the “Church CEO” and the “church as

enterprise” phenomenon has led many churches to adopt policy governance (see the previous chapter). Without prudent caution and due diligence, this shift can diminish oversight and accountability regarding the lead pastor. The issue worsens when the lead pastor establishes a separate parachurch ministry while relying on the church’s decentralized governance for proper oversight.

It’s not coincidental that the multisite seeds planted and sprouting during this era blossomed into the evolutionary “mega” to “multi” movement in the subsequent Outwardly Focused Era. Multisite represented an “innovation” that enabled church CEOs to expand their influence and growth capacity by focusing on a “new growth hill” rather than the next growth barrier.

Together, these themes laid the groundwork for a transition from inwardly focused activities, necessary for sustaining programmatic growth, to outwardly focused efforts that extended beyond the walls of the attractional church. The seeds planted during the Intrapreneurial Era bore fruit in the times that followed.

The End of 50 Years

In parallel with the emerging missional conversations, attractional church leaders were engaging and moving forward with outwardly focused conversations, including the Externally Focused Church, multisite, and church-planting. The attractional megachurch was shifting from internally focused programs for growth to externally focused programs to expand its geographic influence.

Leadership Network narrowed its focus, winding down many of its core programs and returning to its roots of smaller, affinity-based Leadership Communities. The three most significant conversations in this period were the Burning Bush initiative, which focused on church-planting, Externally Focused Churches, and multisite churches.

The era of Outwardly Focused Churches began as the Church Growth Movement came to an end, marking its historic 50-year run!

Reflection Questions

Is your church optimized for the 40% or the 60%?

Missiologist Alan Hirsch says that attractional churches reach less than 40% of the population—and that number is declining. Look at your church's strategy: weekend services, programs, facilities, and marketing. Are these areas optimized for people who might attend church (the 40%), or for reaching people who will never enter your building (the 60%)? If you couldn't count anyone who attends weekend services, what metrics would reveal your effectiveness at reaching the unchurched 60%?

Which innovation stream are you swimming in—and does it create multiplication?

Leadership Network's three priorities (multisite, externally focused, and church-planting networks) shaped the years between 2005 and 2015. Which one describes your current innovation focus? More importantly, does your innovation create multiplication movements (disciples making disciples who plant churches), or does it extend attraction capacity (growing your church larger/wider)? If your innovation requires ongoing investment from the sending church to sustain, you're practicing addition, not multiplication.



SECTION 5

Extending the Movement

Innovation, Expansion, and the Pinnacle of the Church Growth Movement

As we enter the new millennium and the Outwardly Focused Era, we find ourselves at a remarkable convergence in the story of the Church Growth Movement. The previous fifty years set the stage perfectly: the rapid growth of attractional churches in the Seeker-Sensitive Era; the emergence of platformed leaders and business-driven models in the Purpose-Driven Era; and the institutionalization of megachurch culture and a customer-oriented approach in the Enterprise Church Era.

Collectively, these eras helped shape the prevailing culture of church leadership by the early 2000s—a sophisticated, Consumer-Driven Operating System optimized for programmatic growth.

Yet as we emerged from the crosscurrents and intrapreneurial energy of the late 1990s, a crucial question was beginning to bubble up from beneath the surface: *Could this movement, now fully optimized for attractional, programmatic growth, somehow recover a deeper, more biblical expression of discipleship and mission?* Ironically, this tension had the potential to move the church closer to Donald McGavran's original ideals and priorities—mission, multiplication, and evangelistic effectiveness—while operating within the very consumer-driven system that had gradually co-opted them.

The entrepreneurial church leaders we looked at in the Enterprise Church Era—visionary, platformed, CEO-style pastors who successfully built large, growing churches—were naturally positioned to pioneer what came next. They had the resources, platforms, and organizational capacity to drive innovation. They had also inherited and institutionalized the Consumer-Driven Operating System, ensuring that even the most outwardly focused innovations would emerge from and operate within familiar paradigms of attractional growth, programmatic delivery, and brand expansion.

The Catalytic Role of Leadership Network

The story of the Outwardly Focused Era cannot be told without understanding the pivotal role of Leadership Network. By the late 1990s, Leadership Network's staffing and programming had grown significantly, mirroring the energy of the Intrapreneurial Era. But in 2002, a strategic decision was made that would prove prophetic: Leadership Network narrowed its focus to a small set of key priorities, reframing its role as a platform that would identify the next big innovations in the church and curate thought leadership for the pioneering church leaders who would drive these innovations and shape the future.

This focus on “pursuing NEXT” became the backbone of everything that followed. Leadership Network's core priorities—multisite churches, Externally Focused Churches, and church-planting networks—would define the next decade of innovation and experimentation. Warren Bird's 2006 hiring as director of research for Leadership Network formalized this forward-looking posture, creating the infrastructure to identify, study, and disseminate insights into these emerging trends.

These three priorities were not disconnected experiments; they represented an evolutionary stage in the movement's arc, featuring innovative growth strategies that, remarkably, could draw the church closer to McGavran's original missional vision. Church planting networks promised true multiplication rather than mere addition. Multisite strategies could extend gospel reach into new communities. Externally focused ministries could reconnect churches with their surrounding neighborhoods in missional ways.

Personal Reflections

This section is deeply personal for me. My calling to surrender to the lordship of Jesus happened in 1987, under the strong influence of the Church Growth Movement. Many of my family members have been similarly impacted. I'm grateful for the fruit of the customer-focused, programmatically driven paradigm—eternity looks different for millions of people because of it.

My second calling to full-time vocational ministry in 2000 coincided perfectly with the planting of seeds for the Outwardly Focused Era. While I had a front-row seat to the earlier eras we've explored, this second calling placed me squarely in the practitioner's role for all three key innovations that would define this era: externally focused ministry, multisite church development, and church-planting networks.

By God's grace, I've served as an executive pastor in a large, growing church; the architect of our church's multisite strategy; a founder of the externally focused ministry Passion for Community; the church-planting director of a top church-planting church; a founder of several key church-planting ministries like Passion for Planting and Exponential; and a strategic advisor to numerous influence leaders and ministries that shaped the innovations of the Outwardly Focused Era.

It was a series of entrepreneurial ministry initiatives from 2000 to 2005 that connected me with Bob Buford and intertwined our heartbeats for Kingdom impact. Our friendship, his mentorship, and my role as his strategic advisor gave me unique insights into Leadership Network's inner workings and opened doors to Kingdom opportunities. Bob was a huge fan of Exponential and would often ask, "What's the secret of Exponential's success?" My answer was always the same, and I think he just liked hearing it: "Our fruit grows on other people's trees, just like you taught us. We are like your adopted son and Leadership Network's sibling in church-planting."

Writing this section has shown me how my calling positioned me to be the right person at the right time to make small but strategic contributions to accelerating these innovations. I've woven my story throughout these next chapters—not

for self-praise, but as an eyewitness account of how the energy, creativity, and entrepreneurial spirit of this season were unlike anything I've seen in the American church.

As I look back on my journey through this era, deeply involved in these three innovations, I remain profoundly grateful for the leaders and movements I had the privilege of walking alongside. Yet I also carry a sobering awareness of the unresolved tensions that would eventually surface—tensions between Kingdom advancement and the systemic limitations of the Consumer-Driven Operating System we had inherited.

Throughout this book, I've sought to provide a personal, non-authoritative account of the Church Growth Movement's evolution as I've experienced and understood it. We are now entering the final phase of the book, where interpretation becomes increasingly important, and personal convictions become more pronounced. My perspectives are based on direct personal experiences, observations, and involvement during the entire quarter-century of the Outwardly Focused Era. This includes nearly twenty years of leading Exponential, with a unique front-row and behind-the-scenes perspective on the emergence and evolution of the issues covered in these remaining chapters.

As you read these last two sections, remember that “dilemmas and disruptions” are, by definition, subjective and often emotional. Otherwise, they wouldn't exist. I believe wise leaders should engage with and grapple with these dilemmas and disruptions so they can more effectively contend for the future of the church and lead people into what's next beyond the fracturing of evangelicalism. These final sections seek to help you do that.



CHAPTER 21

The Externally Focused Church

*From Invisible to Irresistible: Building Bridges to a Skeptical Culture
2000 to 2010*

There's a question that haunted a generation of church leaders during this era, one that cut through all the metrics of growth and success: "If your church disappeared tomorrow, would your community notice?"

For many pastors willing to sit with that question, the answer was uncomfortable. They had built thriving Sunday experiences, filled auditoriums, launched small groups, and hired talented staff. But outside their walls, their cities barely knew they existed. The church had become an event people attended, not a presence their neighbors felt. The Externally Focused Church Movement emerged from that honest reckoning and would reshape how thousands of churches understood their relationships with the communities around them.

The language and framing may have been new, but the impulse to serve the city was deeply biblical and historically rooted in the church's mission.

For entrepreneurial leaders of large, outwardly oriented churches, externally focused ministry offered a fresh lens for engagement—one that could energize congregations, open new relational doors with civic leaders, and further extend the church's brand and influence in its community. In this way, Externally

Focused Churches became an important “front porch” for the attractional model, helping to build visibility and credibility in an increasingly skeptical culture.

The movement was not a reinvention of the church’s mission; it was a reframing and re-emphasis of long-standing biblical priorities. Yet what made it particularly significant during this era was its provision of both a theological framework and a practical approach to addressing the growing disconnect between American churches and their surrounding communities. This disconnect would prove especially acute as American society experienced rapid cultural changes, technological advancement, and increasing skepticism toward organized religion.

Origins and Historical Context

The Externally Focused Church Movement emerged from a recognition of what leaders termed “the great chasm” between churches and their communities at the turn of the twenty-first century. Churches found themselves increasingly irrelevant to their communities despite often experiencing internal growth and success.

The movement’s formal origins date to Leadership Network’s Urban Church Network, which began in 2000 under Eric Swanson’s direction.¹ Through systematic site visits, gatherings, and conversations with more than 150 churches, Leadership Network researchers discovered they were identifying a distinct genre of churches that were “thinking differently about what a church could be and should be.”

The timing of this movement was significant, occurring during what one observer called “a turbulent decade” marked by events from Y2K to 9/11, economic boom-and-bust cycles, and major cultural shifts. As Swanson later observed, “Sometimes movements have a beginning point, as the ripples from a pebble dropped into a pond. Externally Focused is different.” The movement appeared to be emerging simultaneously across multiple contexts, leading leaders to interpret it as divine timing rather than human orchestration.

The foundational insight driving the Externally Focused Movement was that many churches had become what critics termed “internally focused”—concentrating primarily on getting people into church buildings and generating activity there. While these internal activities were valuable, they were deemed insufficient for healthy church function. Leaders recognized that worship not manifested in relationships with others could become hollow, echoing Isaiah’s critique of faith that focused on loving God while forgetting to love humanity.

Key Leaders and Foundational Literature

Robert Lewis and The Church of Irresistible Influence

No leader framed the deeper tension at the heart of this movement better than Robert Lewis in his watershed book, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*.² As pastor of Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, Lewis introduced the concept of “irresistible influence” (eventually coined “i2”), using bridge building as the central metaphor for connecting churches with their communities. The book emerged from Fellowship Bible Church’s own transformation in the 1990s, when, despite dramatic membership growth to around 2,500, the church’s leadership felt they had become too self-absorbed and had grown distant from their community’s needs.

In a prophetic passage that many leaders would quote repeatedly, Lewis wrote:

“The first ‘big idea’ driving many churches is to create a church that meets the needs of its members. And since so many people have deep spiritual needs, there is much good in this approach. But often it also leads to unhealthy consequences. Needs soon turn to wants. A toxic self-absorption can easily develop. ‘Us’ becomes all that matters. Spiritual impact is rarely contemplated beyond the borders of the church property. Like a star that has collapsed into a black hole, refusing to release its light, a ‘need-meeting church’ can unknowingly come to exist for nothing bigger than itself.”³

Lewis’ metaphor of the church as a collapsed star convicted many leaders who realized they had focused inward, building large, programmatically driven

ministries. His vision of becoming an irresistible influence—a church that a city would miss if it disappeared—became a rallying cry for Externally Focused ministry.

The practical impact of Lewis' book was demonstrated through Fellowship Bible Church's participation in Little Rock's "ShareFest" initiative, which eventually mobilized more than 100 churches, 4,300 volunteers, and invested \$400,000 in community improvement projects. This model became a template for similar communitywide church collaborations across the United States.

Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson's Defining Work

The publication of Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson's 2004 book *The Externally Focused Church*⁴ provided the movement with its definitive theological and practical framework. Rusaw, senior pastor of LifeBridge Christian Church in Longmont, Colorado, partnered with Leadership Network's Swanson to create what became the movement's most influential text.

The authors provided a comprehensive definition that became widely adopted: "Externally Focused Churches are inwardly strong but outwardly focused. They integrate good deeds and good news into the life of the church. They value impact and influence in the community more than attendance. They seek to be salt, light, and leaven in the community. They see themselves as the 'soul' of the community."

This definition emphasized the paradox of internal strength enabling external focus, challenging the common assumption that community engagement would weaken internal church life. As Rusaw and Swanson wrote: "Externally Focused Churches are convinced that good deeds and good news can't and shouldn't be separated. They are showing and telling, telling and showing, the love of Christ to a skeptical and watching world."⁵

My Personal Journey: From Leading an Invisible Church to Irresistible

When I stepped into full-time ministry as executive pastor at New Life Christian Church in early 2000, I brought with me an engineer's mind and an entrepreneur's heart. But I also carried a burden. New Life was a six-year-old portable church that had already planted one church, yet we faced a humbling reality: we essentially disappeared from our community six days a week.

Every Sunday, we transformed a school gymnasium into a vibrant worship space, reaching hundreds of people with the gospel. But by Monday morning, we were gone—no building, no visible presence, no tangible footprint in the community we felt called to serve. While effective for growing our church, this approach left us wrestling with deeper questions about our role in the community's life.

We had developed a rhythm of running large community outreach events—drawing thousands of people—at least twice a year. These events featured free food, games, inflatable rides, and other family-friendly activities. They gave us brand visibility and relationship bridges into the community.

To explain how our externally focused efforts at New Life were intentionally integrated into our overall growth strategy back in 2000, I created the following simple diagram (yes, Yellow Page ads were still part of our strategy back then, before the era of broadband internet and social media). This strategy, as summarized below, is consistent with most attractational, growth-oriented churches of the era.

New Life's Externally Focused Outreach Pathway (circa 2000)

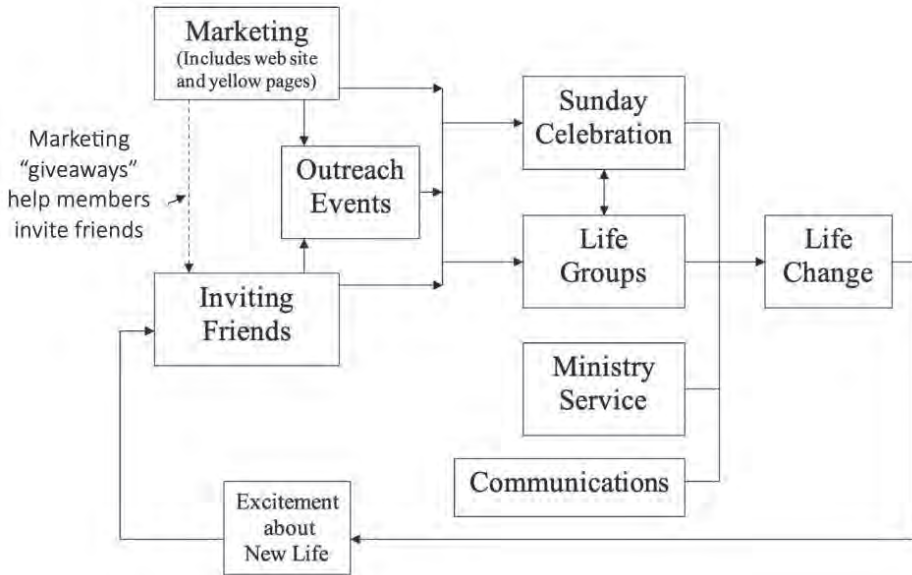


Figure 1 - Typical Attraction Outreach Strategy

At New Life Christian Church, this outreach strategy reflected a classic, externally focused, attractional model designed to build relational bridges from the community into the church's primary environments: Sunday Celebration and Life Groups. We believed that life change and spiritual maturity occurred most reliably when people became engaged in those two core settings.

To move people into these environments, we deployed marketing and personal invitation as our primary entry points: advertising, giveaways, and other promotional efforts were aimed mainly at helping people take the next step of attending an outreach event or weekend service, while members were encouraged to invite friends directly to outreach events, Sunday Celebration, and, to a lesser degree, Life Groups. Outreach events served as highly visible community touchpoints that made it easy for members to invite friends and for us to "get our name out" in the neighborhood. In part because we had no

permanent facilities, our externally focused engagement continually fed the church's internal life.

Recall in Chapter 10, Tim Hawks described an almost identical strategy. In fact, thousands of churches were embracing some form of this customer and purpose-driven strategy.

Looking back, our model demonstrates both the strengths and the limits of the Externally Focused Church in this era. On one hand, we genuinely cared about serving our community and built real relational bridges through events and service. Many spiritually lost people came to know Jesus through our strategy. On the other hand, those bridges were almost always designed to lead people into our centralized programs rather than to make disciples relationally and generationally producing new churches as McGavran had originally envisioned. Our scorecard was primarily attractional, measuring how effectively our external activities filled Sunday services.

The Question that Changed Everything

In 2001, our lead pastor, Brett Andrews, handed me a book that would fundamentally reframe our understanding of church and community. Robert Lewis's *The Church of Irresistible Influence* posed a simple yet sobering question: *"If your church ceased to exist this week, would the community notice?"*⁶

As a portable church that vanished from the community six days a week, Lewis's question weighed heavily on us. We asked ourselves: "If New Life disappeared tomorrow, would anyone in our community notice or care?" The honest answer was, "Probably not." That realization prompted a strategic shift.

We took three significant steps in response:

Step 1: Innovation Born from Necessity - The Ice Cream Truck Ministry

Our portable status created both constraints and catalysts. We couldn't rely on a building to establish community presence, so we had to innovate. My engineering background led me to analyze how we were spending money on

marketing, particularly our substantial investment in direct mail postcards. What emerged from that analysis was a completely new approach: instead of just marketing to the community, what if we could serve the community in ways that naturally built our brand and opened doors for relationships?

The breakthrough came in the form of an ice cream truck. We purchased a truck and wrapped it in a colorful, branded design featuring our Passion for Community logo, turning it into a rolling billboard for our church. But this wasn't just about visibility—we equipped it with everything needed to create high-quality community events: a generator, an inflatable moon bounce, portable games, and even an inflatable drive-in movie screen with transmitters to show movies in any parking lot.

The ice cream truck ministry was revolutionary for us. We could show up in any neighborhood on a Saturday afternoon, give away free ice cream and fliers for a movie in the park that evening, then return with the full setup for a drive-in movie experience. We managed to integrate marketing and outreach in a way that genuinely helped families while building relationships that opened doors to gospel conversations.

Even better, the model was decentralized. Individual ministries or families in our church could take the truck to their own neighborhoods, extending our reach far beyond what centralized events could accomplish. Our vision expanded from two major outreach events per year to more than 30 decentralized community touchpoints.

We may have been the first church in the United States to implement this kind of ice cream truck ministry as part of a broader outreach strategy. The innovation caught national attention—*USA Today* featured it in the early 2000s.⁷ More importantly, hundreds of other churches eventually copied the idea, and many of our church plants adopted the model to accelerate their outreach in new communities.

The gospel impact was immediate and personal. I remember an Easter Eggstravaganza our church hosted when a non-Christian family came for free hot dogs. Soon after, they visited one of our weekend services, became regulars,

and eventually surrendered their lives to Jesus. Years later, one of their sons became one of our church planters.

One of my favorite memories was an outreach event where two young boys ran through a crowd yelling, “Free ice cream! Free ice cream!” Their enthusiasm drew other intrigued bystanders to our truck. When their skeptical mother came to investigate, her defensive posture melted into genuine curiosity: *What kind of church gives away free ice cream?* That was exactly the kind of brand experience we wanted to create—an Externally Focused Church whose generosity provoked curiosity about the gospel.

Step 2: Creating Passion for Community

The success of our ice cream truck ministry opened doors throughout the community, giving us access to schools, businesses, and local government events. However, cultural hostility toward churches was increasing, and we found that partnership opportunities were increasingly limited and even shuttered simply because we were identified as a church.

This challenge sparked the creation of Passion for Community in 2004, New Life’s 501(c)(3) nonprofit that served as our outreach arm. We established this separate community-impact organization to serve as an extension of the church’s outreach arm. This allowed us to access spaces where a church sometimes faced barriers (schools, businesses) and to engage in purely service-oriented partnerships without overt marketing.

Because it was structured as a separate community-impact organization rather than a church ministry, we gained broader access to partnerships throughout the community. The nonprofit structure opened doors that had previously been closed to us as a church, enabling us to serve in schools, partner with businesses, and collaborate with local government in ways that would have been impossible under our church identity alone.

Step 3: Strategic Community Engagement and the nZone

Beyond creating the nonprofit structure, we recognized the need to think more systematically about community engagement. As we began dreaming about a permanent facility, we were compelled to create something that would serve the broader community, not just our church.

As the Externally Focused Church Movement matured, we learned to conduct comprehensive community needs assessments rather than simply assuming we knew what our communities needed. At New Life, I led the design and implementation of a detailed, six-month assessment that included more than 100 interviews with civic, business, and community leaders across all key domains of society. This process served multiple purposes: it created significant goodwill with community leaders, provided the information we needed to design specific programming that met the community's top needs, and gave us a reproducible process that other churches and all of our church plants could use.

We worked closely with David Mills, an expert in community needs assessments, who coached us through his Rapid Community Assessment process⁸ and helped us refine our approach. Mills had developed a sophisticated methodology that went far beyond informal conversations. The systematic nature of this work reflected the movement's evolution from ad hoc community service to strategic community engagement grounded in research and relationship-building.

That research ultimately led us to purchase an 80,000-square-foot former Budweiser distribution center and convert it into The nZone—a full-service community center, gym, and sports complex that serves as both a community hub and our venue for weekend worship services. The facility hosted youth sports leagues, fitness programs, and community meetings and events that drew thousands of people to the building each week, with many only discovering its connection to a church after using it.

Later, when we launched our second multisite campus, the ice cream truck became an invaluable tool for pre-launch marketing and community engagement. The assessment process also became a fantastic way for church planters to make strategic connections in their communities.

Learning from Other Pioneers

Our growing commitment to externally focused ministry led us to visit other churches pioneering this approach. One of the most influential was LifeBridge Church in Longmont, Colorado, where Rick Rusaw served as pastor. As I noted earlier, Rusaw had co-authored *The Externally Focused Church* with Eric Swanson, making him one of the foremost experts on the approach we were joining. Rick became a friend and an informal coach, helping us understand the broader theological and practical foundations of externally focused ministry.

We also visited Community Christian Church in Naperville, Illinois, led by Dave Ferguson, which embodied an externally focused ministry that fused real estate development with church strategy, embedding mission into the neighborhood's physical and social fabric. In 1998, they launched a new campus in Romeoville through a partnership with a commercial developer, co-founding the Institute for Community to serve as the relational and spiritual center of a master-planned development.⁹ At its heart was the Friendship Center—a 27,000-square-foot hub offering “FRESH” programming (Family, Recreation, Education, Spirituality, Health), making the church a daily presence in community life rather than just a Sunday gathering.¹⁰

The new Romeoville campus was led by campus pastor Troy McMahon, who had introduced me to Jesus back in 1983, long before either of us imagined we would one day help pioneer externally focused ministry together. Community Christian's experiment proved both impactful and reproducible: its presence in the neighborhood drew many previously unchurched people, helped launch additional campuses across the region, and inspired other churches to explore similar partnerships with developers. Rather than simply attracting people to a distant facility, Community Christian helped design a neighborhood where everyday life, community relationships, and spiritual formation were intentionally intertwined—one of many stories that also set the stage for the Multisite Revolution explored in the next chapter.

National Movement and Expansion

I began working as Bob Buford's strategic advisor in 2005, as externally focused ministry was becoming one of Leadership Network's top priorities. Bob would show me dashboard metrics tracking the dramatic increase in externally focused hours being deployed by churches across the country. Leadership Network was running learning communities focused on externally focused ministry, and the metrics showed remarkable results.

The growth was unprecedented: While a Google search for "Externally Focused Church" returned relatively few results just a few years earlier, by 2008 it yielded tens of thousands. The movement had spread across denominational boundaries, appearing in churches of all types while maintaining their distinctive characteristics.

What made the Externally Focused Movement so timely was its recognition that traditional approaches to community engagement were losing effectiveness. American society was undergoing rapid cultural change and growing skepticism toward organized religion. Churches needed fresh strategies to build credibility and trust before gospel conversations could begin.

The movement provided both a theological framework and a practical approach to addressing this challenge. For entrepreneurial leaders of large, outwardly oriented churches, externally focused ministry offered a compelling framework that could energize congregations, open new relational doors with civic leaders, and extend the church's brand and influence in authentic ways.

The movement transcended traditional denominational boundaries, appearing in what Eric Swanson described as "Seeker-Sensitive churches," "purpose-driven churches," "megachurches," "equipping churches," "multiethnic churches," "house churches," "connected churches," and "multisite churches"—all maintaining their distinctive characteristics while adopting externally focused principles.

Churches across the country began building partnerships with civic leaders, nonprofit organizations, and community groups to address practical community

needs, including education, housing, and economic development. Multi-church collaboration became a hallmark of the movement, with initiatives such as Grand Junction, Colorado's "ShareFest," Omaha, Nebraska's "Step Out and Serve," and various "The Church Has Left the Building" events.

By the mid-2000s, the Externally Focused Church Movement had achieved remarkable geographic and denominational penetration. Eric Swanson reported encountering the movement's principles during travels to Europe, Asia, Latin America, and India, suggesting global rather than merely American appeal.¹¹

Tensions and Limitations

Yet even as the externally focused approach flourished and opened new doors for gospel impact, it operated within the same Consumer-Driven Operating System that characterized the broader Church Growth Movement. Many externally focused ministries functioned as sophisticated marketing tools, designed to build brand credibility and drive attendance. The underlying model remained fundamentally attractional, with community service serving as the "front porch" to Sunday-centric programming.

By 2005, both missional thought leaders and attractional church leaders were engaging the "Externally Focused Church" paradigm, albeit in very different contexts. The dichotomy between Missional and Attractional church leaders over an "Externally Focused Church" represented a significant crosscurrent during this era.

This tension revealed a fundamental question that would loom large in the years ahead: *Was externally focused ministry a genuine expression of biblical mission, or was it primarily a strategy for church growth?* The answer often depended on the underlying motivations and operational systems of the churches embracing this approach.

In 1995, I'd never heard the term "Externally Focused Church." By 2005, Rusaw's and Swanson's seminal book had taken the megachurch world by storm. It was touted as a significant "innovation" for the attractional "come and see"

church and became one of Leadership Network's top programming priorities. I admit that my perspective was still rooted in the attractional, growth-oriented context that had become familiar to me. My viewpoint was not yet, "How do we mobilize everyday missionaries into the cracks and crevices of society for transformational impact?" Instead, at this point, I was still asking: "How do we serve the community in a way that attracts more people to church?" The transformational impact focused on church growth.

Impact and Tension

The Externally Focused Church phenomenon represented both the best impulses and the inherent limitations of the Outwardly Focused Era. At its best, it called churches back to their biblical mandate to love their neighbors and serve their communities with no strings attached. It provided practical frameworks for strategic community engagement and helped countless churches build meaningful relationships with civic leaders and community organizations.

The movement's emphasis on integrating good deeds with good news reflected a mature understanding of holistic gospel witness. Churches learned to conduct systematic community assessments, develop sustainable partnerships, and measure impact beyond attendance metrics. The collaborative models pioneered during this era—from ShareFest initiatives to "The Church Has Left the Building" campaigns—demonstrated the power of unified Christian witness in addressing community needs.

Yet the movement also illustrated how even the most biblically grounded innovations could be co-opted by the prevailing Consumer-Driven Operating System. Many churches embraced externally focused ministry primarily as a growth strategy, using community service as a sophisticated form of marketing to attract new attendees. The focus remained largely on drawing people into centralized programming rather than mobilizing them as everyday missionaries into their unique spheres of influence.

As the Outwardly Focused Era continued to unfold, the Externally Focused Church Movement would be joined by two other major innovations—multisite

expansion and church-planting networks—that would further test the tension between authentic mission and attractional growth. Each would offer genuine opportunities for gospel impact while revealing the persistent influence of the consumer-driven paradigm that had shaped the Church Growth Movement for more than fifty years.

Reflection Questions

Is your community engagement motivated by love or growth?

Robert Lewis asked, “Would your community notice if your church disappeared?” But there’s a deeper question: Would they notice you loved them sacrificially, with no strings attached, or would they notice your programs that attracted their participation?

List your church’s top three community engagement initiatives, and for each one, honestly assess the primary motivation behind it. Are you serving because Jesus commanded neighbor-love regardless of church growth outcomes? Or are you serving as a strategic “front porch” designed to build credibility that drives attendance? Bottom line: If every person you served through community initiatives never attended your church, would you still do it?

Does your externally focused ministry mobilize missionaries or recruit volunteers?

The Externally Focused Movement offered two competing visions: 1) Attractional version—church serves community through centralized programs requiring volunteer support, or 2) Missional version—church equips everyday missionaries to incarnate the gospel in their unique spheres. Which version describes your practice? Look at your community engagement strategy. Is it primarily centralized (church-organized events, staff-led initiatives, facility-based programs) or decentralized (equipping members as missionaries in neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools)? If your church had no building, no budget, and no staff, could your community engagement continue through mobilized members?



CHAPTER 22

The Multisite Revolution

*Scaling Influence and Impact Through Strategic Expansion
2000 to 2015*

I still remember walking into Leadership Network’s first multisite forum in September 2001 feeling like an imposter. The hallway buzzed with conversations between pioneering pastors whose churches were already making headlines. I had just stepped into full-time vocational ministry the year before, and was still trying to get my bearings in a world that felt very different from engineering. Our church had been invited as one of fewer than fifty congregations, but I didn’t know many of the leaders in the room—names that, in hindsight, would become synonymous with the Multisite Revolution.

I found myself in one breakout with Jim Tomberlin from Willow Creek Community Church. Tomberlin had started down the multisite path at Woodmen Valley Chapel in Colorado Springs in the mid-1990s, casting a vision for “one church in two locations” in 1997. That experience led to his being invited to lead the multisite initiative at Willow Creek in the Chicago area. Tomberlin eventually became a premier advisor in multisite strategy and founded MultiSite Solutions, which he still leads today.

Like Tomberlin, many other leaders at that first Leadership Network gathering became pioneers who helped fuel the Multisite Revolution that would eventually see the number of multisite churches grow from well under a couple of hundred to many thousands in just twenty-five years. Larry Osborne from North Coast Church, Greg Surratt from Seacoast Church, Dave Ferguson from Community Christian, and Craig Groeschel from Life.Church was among the participants.

As we watched the news of the 9/11 attacks unfold during that gathering, I had no idea that these conversations would catalyze one of the most significant innovations in extending the modern Church Growth Movement—or that my own ministry story would be woven into it.

Leadership Network’s decision to bring a small group of pioneering churches together around this emerging idea poured gas on what God was already stirring—significantly accelerating the growth and spread of the multisite movement over the next few decades. That forum embodied what Leadership Network did best: acting as scouts for the church’s future, naming an emerging pattern before most of us could see it, and then fanning it into flame among a small group of experimenters.

Few innovations captured the imagination of entrepreneurial church leaders during the Outwardly Focused Era as much as the multisite model. While non-denominational church-planting involves starting new autonomous churches that can establish additional autonomous churches, multisite extends one church into multiple locations under a single governing structure. This innovation was perfectly suited to extending the megachurch’s growth capacity and to appealing to the entrepreneurial instincts of the era’s evangelical, outwardly focused pastors.

At its core, multisite is “one church in two or more locations, under one overall leadership and budget,” a definition popularized by Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird in *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*.¹ In this model, a single congregation expands into multiple geographic locations while retaining a common identity, governance, and teaching ministry. The lead pastor’s sermons are typically delivered live or via video to all campuses, while worship, programming, and systems are replicated to ensure consistent DNA across sites. Warren Bird’s later research confirmed how attractive this “one church in many locations” model became for churches seeking to extend their influence while maintaining a unified brand and leadership culture.²

Long before multisite became a mainstream strategy, a first wave of pioneers began experimenting with multiple locations and video venues. Larry Osborne at North Coast Church in Vista, California, developed one of the earliest and

most influential video-venue models in the 1990s, using multiple worship environments on the same campus and eventually beyond it to reach different audiences with the same teaching. Seacoast Church in Charleston, South Carolina (Greg Surratt), and Community Christian Church in Naperville, Illinois (Dave Ferguson), joined North Coast as laboratories for a model that moved from “radical idea” to “new normal” over the next two decades. In the 2000s, churches like Life.Church in Oklahoma City, led by Craig Groeschel, would demonstrate how far a well-executed multisite strategy could scale across regions and states.

For leaders of large, growing churches, multisite offered a compelling value proposition: scale the church’s influence and impact faster and at lower cost than building ever-larger facilities or pursuing traditional church-planting. It provided a scalable way to “go wide” without sacrificing the church’s brand cohesion. As Leadership Network framed it, multisite was one of the clearest “NEXT” innovations of the Outwardly Focused Era, representing what *Outreach* magazine referenced as “the single most profound change in American congregations in the past century.”³ By 2006, Surratt, Ligon, and Bird described this shift as nothing less than a “revolution” in how churches thought about geography and growth.⁴

Multisite Churches: From Experimental Innovation to Strategic Scaling

My introduction to multisite came through an unlikely pathway. My friend Troy McMahon and I entered the Navy on the same day and served our first five years in the same command. During that time, Troy helped me come to know Jesus as my Savior. We were both engineers with promising careers in the marketplace, but God had different plans for both of us.

Troy felt called to full-time vocational ministry and joined the team at Community Christian Church in Naperville, Illinois, under Dave Ferguson’s leadership. In 1997, Community Christian opened its first multisite campus in Romeoville, Illinois, making it an early pioneer in what was still a largely

experimental approach to church expansion. Troy had a front-row seat as the Romeoville campus pastor.

When I felt God's clear affirmation of my calling to ministry at New Life Christian Church in early 2000, I brought with me not only an engineer's project management background but also exposure to multisite as a potential strategy for church expansion. Through Troy's experience, I had witnessed firsthand how multisite could work—and some of the challenges it presented.

A Strategic Pivot to Multisite

Entering full-time ministry as executive pastor at New Life, I had two primary priorities: 1) extending our externally focused community engagement and 2) accelerating our church-planting efforts to launch at least one new church each year. Our first target was Loudoun County, located in the Washington, D.C., suburbs, one of the fastest-growing counties in America in 2000.

However, as we began planning, Troy and Dave suggested we consider a multisite approach, since New Life would be within 12 miles of the new location. Their pitch was compelling: “You can reach more people at lower cost and with higher quality through multisite than through church-planting.” The metaphor that sold us was powerful: church-planting is like launching a rocket—it requires a lot of fuel to get off the launch pad. Multisite, by contrast, is like releasing a satellite from a ship already in orbit—requiring far less energy and potentially offering a wider reach.

Motivated by this potential, we moved quickly. I was tasked with leading the planning and launch of our first multisite campus in 2000. The decision represented a significant strategic pivot from New Life's original church-planting vision, but the economic and efficiency arguments were compelling.

Pioneering in Uncharted Territory

We began planning in spring 2000 for a spring 2001 launch, right at the beginning of what would soon become explosive multisite adoption across the

country. During this period, there were no books, conferences, or expert models for implementing a multisite approach. All we had was coaching from Troy and the Community Christian team. These were truly experimental, entrepreneurial days.

While the multisite concept traces back to many sources, including Dr. Lee Roberson's Highland Park Baptist Church in the 1940s, the model remained largely experimental for nearly five decades. In 1990, there were fewer than 100 multisite churches in the United States, according to researcher Warren Bird. We were joining what was still a largely untested approach.

Running about 800 people at the time, we thought we could start another campus by hiring just one additional staff person. We launched the site with 400 people on opening day, representing a 50% increase in total attendance. But as a relatively small church without mature processes in place, we weren't ready for that much growth so quickly. Our attendance dwindled to approximately 200, and we struggled to maintain momentum. Even more concerning, our original location had been on a strong growth trajectory until we launched the second campus, but we saw momentum stall there as well—a classic example of what I later learned was “sideways energy.”

The experience taught us crucial lessons about multisite. Like any replication process, multisite operates on what could be called “the photocopy principle”—a copy never exceeds the quality of the original and typically degrades. We learned that multisite requires replicating existing systems, processes, structures, and culture to new campuses, so if the original church's systems aren't healthy and robust, those weaknesses are magnified in new sites.

Our early struggles weren't unique. When I later connected with other multisite pioneers through Leadership Network, I discovered we were all learning similar lessons about the complexities of this emerging model.

The Multisite Forum

When our first campus pastor quit within weeks of the launch, I stepped in as interim campus pastor, gaining firsthand experience with the day-to-day complexities of campus leadership. This experience proved invaluable when Brett Andrews and I were invited to Leadership Network's first-ever Multisite Forum on September 11, 2001.

That gathering is forever burned into my memory—not just because of the historic significance for multisite, but because we watched the news of the terrorist attacks in New York City unfold while meeting with other pioneering multisite leaders. At this event, I met Bob Buford for the first time, beginning a relationship that would profoundly shape my ministry for years to come.

Leadership Network played a pivotal role in catalyzing the Multisite Revolution. In many ways, that forum was classic Leadership Network: identify a small but promising pattern, convene the early innovators, and then connect them in ways that accelerate learning far beyond what any single church could have achieved on its own. Coming in the shadow of 9/11, it also arrived at a moment when churches across America were rethinking how to steward their influence—multisite became one of the primary vehicles through which that rethinking took organizational form.

Historical Origins and Explosive Growth

From Highland Park Baptist to National Movement

As I went on this journey for this book, I found it difficult to find trustworthy information about the historical origins of the modern Multisite Phenomenon. Many writers trace the idea back to Highland Park Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where Lee Roberson began launching multiple ministries and off-campus sites as early as the 1940s. Under Roberson's four-decade pastorate, Highland Park became a pillar in the Independent Baptist movement. By the early 1980s, the church's membership had reached about 57,000, with worship held across multiple auditoriums and locations—what some observers now recognize as an early form of multisite.

Dr. David Bouler, the senior pastor of Highland Park in the early 2000s, told NPR that the church began developing multiple ministries in 1942 and, by 1970, had around 70 off-campus sites, lending credibility to the claim that it was among the earliest pioneers.⁵

Yet, as Surratt, Ligon, and Bird point out, the modern multisite movement as a reproducible strategy did not really take shape until the 1990s. In their analysis, “in the 1980s there were well under 100 [multisite churches] and in the 1990s at most 200,”⁶ underscoring how rare and experimental the model remained for nearly five decades after Highland Park’s experience. For most of that period, multisite was seen as an exceptional response to unique circumstances rather than a broadly transferable church-growth strategy.

The Acceleration Phase

The 1990s marked the beginning of exponential growth in multisite adoption. Key thought leaders emerged who would shape the movement’s trajectory. In particular, Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird played a unique role in interpreting and advancing the movement, drawing heavily on the experiences of early practitioners. Jim Tomberlin led Willow Creek’s multisite efforts and later became one of the best-known multisite consultants through his MultiSite Solutions organization. Leadership Network championed multisite and helped platform the work of pioneer practitioners, extending the “low-control, high-accountability” experimentation Bob Buford had envisioned in its earliest days.

arren Bird’s definition of multisite—“one church in two or more locations, under one overall leadership and budget”—helped distinguish true multisite from multi-venue churches that simply offered several services on a single campus.⁷ By 2012, the National Congregations Study, as reported by Bird, found roughly 5,000 churches that fit a strict multisite definition, and about 8,000 congregations that met a broader definition that included multi-venue churches on a single campus. Collectively, these congregations served approximately 5 million weekly worshippers, representing 9% of all U.S. Protestant attenders across 3% of Protestant churches.⁸

Bird's 2013 Multisite Church Scorecard—the largest cross-denominational survey of multisite churches to that point, with 535 congregations representing 1.8 million weekly attenders—concluded that “the multisite movement today shows no signs of slowing down.”⁹ According to his findings, 85% of multisite churches were growing, at an average rate of 14% per year, and new campuses were experiencing median growth of 28% in their first year and 25% in their second.¹⁰

Among megachurches, Scott Thumma and Warren Bird documented a similar trajectory. The share of megachurches that were multisite rose from 23% in 2000 to 39% in 2011, then to 62% in 2015 and 70% by 2020, with another 10% “not yet multisite but... thinking about it.”¹¹ In the five years leading up to 2020, nearly half of all megachurches (47%) opened one or more new satellite or branch locations, underscoring how thoroughly multisite had become the dominant organizational model among the nation's largest churches.¹²

Church-health analyst Thom Rainer has suggested that the total number of multisite churches in North America may have approached 10,000 by the late 2010s, though he presents this as an informed estimate rather than a formal census.¹³

By the mid-2020s, the multisite church phenomenon had clearly become one of the most significant organizational innovations in American Christianity. While precise counts are elusive, national surveys and expert estimates suggest that the number of multisite congregations likely reached into the high thousands, encompassing millions of weekly worshippers.

Understanding the Complexities and Limitations

The Conservation of Momentum Principle

In physics, momentum is defined as the product of an object's mass and its speed. In a church, “mass” is often measured by attendance, while “speed” reflects the church's spiritual vitality—life change, discipleship, and missional engagement. When a church adds a new campus, its mass immediately increases. Physics

teaches us that as mass increases, an object's speed naturally decreases unless an external force is applied.

For churches, this can translate to an inevitable period of lost momentum after a significant expansion. The greater the percentage change in mass (attendance), the more pronounced the slowdown in momentum will be. Larger churches can typically absorb this change with minimal impact on momentum because the percentage increase in mass is relatively small. Smaller churches, however, often experience a dramatic shift. Adding a campus that increases overall attendance by 50% or more places a massive strain on existing systems and leadership capacity, often slowing both organizational momentum and spiritual vitality.

This can be further amplified when smaller churches attempt multisite without the organizational maturity needed to support it. I have observed numerous cases in which smaller churches experienced a decline in quality and overall health, both in their original and new locations, as leadership became stretched thin.

Matrix Structure Challenges

Traditional churches without multisite operations typically operate within a hierarchical structure, with most staff reporting vertically to a single supervisor. In multisite models, this changes. Multisite inherently requires a matrix organizational structure—a model used in project management and marketplace environments in which staff reports to two bosses.

In this structure, an employee may report vertically to a functional ministry leader (for example, the central worship pastor) while simultaneously reporting horizontally to the campus pastor for day-to-day campus execution. This dual reporting structure is necessary to achieve the financial efficiencies that make multisite scalable. Centralizing support allows staff positions to be shared across campuses rather than duplicated. However, this efficiency comes at a cost to leadership, as staff wear multiple hats and/or report to multiple supervisors.

Operating in a matrix structure requires advanced leadership capacity, role clarity, and trust—elements that are often underdeveloped in many churches. This matrix structure introduces a level of leadership complexity that many churches, especially smaller ones, are ill-equipped to navigate. Pastors and church staff often lack the experience and training required to lead or function effectively in matrix organizations.

Recall our conversations from Chapter 15 about the shift from church as mission to church as enterprise, and all the related complexities that come with that. While multisite has the proven potential for growth acceleration, especially amongst larger churches, it does add new complexities.

The Communication Factor

Most of the prominent multisite models rely on delivering the lead pastor's teaching via video to one or more campuses. The effectiveness of this approach is directly tied to the lead pastor's communication strengths. Large churches typically have highly gifted communicators whose teaching draws people in even when delivered via video. Their personal brand and platform help drive attendance and engagement across campuses.

Smaller churches, however, often lack communicators of this caliber. In these cases, reliance on video delivery can be a liability rather than an asset, reducing campus vitality and failing to generate the desired outreach momentum. Once again, the very factors that enable a church to grow large enough to consider a multisite strategy—strong systems, mature leadership, clear organizational identity, and gifted communication—are the same factors that make it more likely to succeed with that strategy.

Multisite success depends heavily on foundational clarity. Jim Tomberlin notes that “the most successful multisite churches are clear on their mission, vision, values, and execution.”¹⁴ In their joint work, Tomberlin and Warren Bird describe the campus pastor as the local “DNA carrier,” responsible for embodying and transmitting the sending church's mission, values, and culture on each campus. Bird's 2015 campus-pastor research lists seven “musts” for the

role: “high-capacity leader, team player, people magnet, mobilizer, multi-tasker, communicator, and DNA carrier.”¹⁵

Learning from the Practitioners

The Radical Multisite Learning Community

In 2015, I co-led a Radical Multisite Learning Community with Jim Tomberlin. Our cohort included 10 megachurches, each averaging more than 5,000 in attendance and with 5 or more campuses.

Surprisingly, nearly every church in the group was wrestling with “sideways energy”—the constant need to adapt staff structures, support systems, and leadership frameworks as new sites were started. Some churches even questioned if further expansion was worth the organizational complexity it introduced.

During one session, a participant asked Jim if he thought any church would ever successfully manage 100 campuses. Without hesitation, Jim replied, “No.” The complexity of managing that many campuses, combined with the leadership talent required, would make it nearly impossible. His insight confirmed what I had already begun wrestling with in our experience at New Life. While multisite can be a powerful evangelistic tool, it is not a multiplication engine—it is a growth strategy. And like any growth strategy, it eventually reaches its natural limits.¹⁶

At New Life, we struggled to lead three campuses with a collective attendance of 2,000. But in church-planting, we helped plant hundreds of churches that, collectively, have reached over 50,000 in attendance. Simultaneously, I was a practitioner and champion for multisite, but I was also increasingly concerned about it as a sustainable, generational strategy for multiplication.

In 2007, The Washington Post published a feature article on McLean Bible Church’s strategy to open 10 multisite campuses over 10 years in the Washington, DC, metro area. The church anticipated a \$3,000,000-per-year budget for the initiative, in addition to their two-year-old \$93,000,000 sanctuary at their main campus. I recall being burdened by the math: \$3,000,000 per year (\$30,000,000

over ten years) to produce 10 campuses. In 2007 dollars, that represents 100 (or more) funded church plants over ten years. I confess that I continue to wrestle with this math in churches today.

McLean never finished that ten-year plan; it released or shut down several campuses and shifted to a church-planting strategy. The paradox is that a disproportionate number of churches reproducing through church-planting are also multisite. Research by Warren Bird affirms that when a church does one, it is more likely also to do the other. For many outwardly focused churches, the issue is not a “tyranny of the OR” but rather a “genius of the AND,” with an aggressive approach to both church-planting and multisite.

Strategic Decisions and Outcomes

At New Life, after launching two multisite campuses and wrestling with these structural tensions, we made the strategic decision to release one of our campuses to become an autonomous church and not pursue further multisite expansion. Our narrowed focus has reached more than 300 church plants, with a collective attendance far greater than we could have achieved with multisite alone, thanks to the generational reproductive capacity of autonomous churches. Exponential was birthed from this commitment, impacting 1,000s more churches.

This decision reflected a deeper understanding of the distinction between growth strategies and multiplication strategies. Multisite adds campuses but does not generally empower those campuses to reproduce autonomously. The underlying model is fundamentally centralized and programmatic, aligning with the prevailing Consumer-Driven Operating System of the era. This is why even the most aggressive multisite churches begin to slow or even plateau in the rate of adding sites once they reach 10 or more.

Over time, my personal posture toward multisite evolved. I remain a strong supporter of multisite as an evangelistic strategy, especially when used to reach new communities with the gospel. But I am also equally passionate that churches should not allow multisite to become a substitute for church-planting.

A 2020 study found that 70% of American megachurches had multisite campuses, with another 10% actively considering them. This study affirmed that multisite had become the dominant organizational model among the largest American churches.¹⁷ While only 48% of these same churches reported having helped start other autonomous churches (church-planting), this percentage had increased significantly from just 15% five years earlier—a shift documented in the same 2020 megachurch study. We see a connection here: the outward focus required to open new campuses appears to correlate with increased church-planting. That is good news!

Success and Tension

The Multisite Revolution represented one of the most visible and influential innovations of the Outwardly Focused Era. At their best, multisite churches can extend their reach into new communities, engage diverse populations, and experiment with innovative forms of local ministry. Millions of people encountered the gospel through multisite campuses, and the movement created new pathways for leadership development and missional engagement. The model's emphasis on replication allowed successful churches to export their DNA to multiple locations while maintaining brand consistency and operational efficiency.

Multisite also highlighted the persistent influence of the Consumer-Driven Operating System that had shaped the broader Church Growth Movement. Despite its outward focus, multisite remained fundamentally a growth strategy rather than a multiplication engine. The model's reliance on centralized programming, celebrity pastors, and sophisticated organizational structures reflected the same attractional paradigms that had characterized the movement since its earliest days.

The multisite success formula was largely dependent on the same factors that enabled megachurch growth: exceptional leadership, robust systems, significant resources, and gifted communication. For smaller churches lacking these prerequisites, multisite often proved more problematic than beneficial, sometimes hampering rather than helping their growth and vitality.

Among large churches, the revolution continues, with many expanding their multisite activity. Others are choosing to “right-size” their multisite presence, often releasing campuses to become autonomous churches or capping their expansion at a sustainable number. The tension Bob Buford identified in outwardly focused churches between “catch” and “release” also applied to multisite. While highly effective at attracting and accumulating people across multiple locations, the model remained fundamentally focused on drawing people into centralized programming rather than releasing them into their unique callings and mission fields. This is not a problem unique to, or caused by, a multisite church, but it was made more visible by it.

As the Outwardly Focused Era continued to unfold, the Multisite Revolution would be joined by another equally significant innovation: church-planting networks. Together, these movements would test the boundaries between authentic missional engagement and sophisticated church growth strategies, setting the stage for deeper questions about multiplication and discipleship that would define the era’s ultimate legacy.

Reflection Questions

In what ways do you see the Multisite Revolution extending the legacy of the Church Growth Movement?

The modern Church Growth Movement was winding down by 2005, as the outwardly focused innovation of multisite emerged. Why do you think the emergence of this approach to church growth took 50+ years after the introduction of McGavran’s original church growth principles?

What are your motives for multisite?

There are several reasons for doing multisite. What is your most core motive? Movements multiply through generational reproduction (disciples who make disciples, who plant churches that in turn plant churches). Multisite is an amazing programmatic strategy for growing your church and expanding its reach. It can also help create a culture of outward and evangelistic thinking. But, as we learned

earlier, how you add makes all the difference relative to multiplication. Programs simply can't reproduce generationally; they only consume. If multiplication is your goal, how will multisite help you attain it?



CHAPTER 23

Church-Planting Networks

*The Rise of Entrepreneurial Church Planting
2000 to 2015*

For most of the twentieth century, starting a new church meant one thing: a denomination decided it was time, sent a pastor, and funded the effort. The local church had little say and even less ownership. When I entered vocational ministry in 2000, that model was being turned upside down. Across the country, entrepreneurial church leaders were no longer waiting for their denominations to plant churches. They were doing it themselves, often partnering with other like-minded churches to share the load.

What happened next was one of the most energizing seasons I've witnessed in my lifetime. In less than a decade, an entirely new ecosystem of church-planting networks emerged, driven not by institutional hierarchy but by relationships, shared mission, and the conviction that churches plant churches. It was messy, fast, and unmistakably a move of God.

The period between 2000 and 2010 marked one of the most significant organizational shifts in the Church Growth Movement, fundamentally reshaping how new churches were established, supported, and scaled.

Recall that for Donald McGavran, church growth and church-planting were inseparable. It was the collective impact and numerical growth of church-planting that McGavran sought as evidence of effectiveness in evangelism and disciple-making. In an ironic twist, after fifty years of witnessing McGavran's

original ideals and principles evolve, church-planting emerged as a strong focus of the Church Growth Movement as it drew to a close.

Church planting represents the process of establishing new local Christian congregations, distinguished from church development, which involves integrating new services or expressions into existing congregations. Furthermore, it is distinguished from multisite by its autonomy and decision-making independence, enabling biblical and mathematical multiplication. C. Peter Wagner (the face of the Church Growth Movement post-Donald McGavran) famously said, “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.”¹

The theological foundation for church-planting is rooted directly in the Great Commission, in which Jesus commands, “Go and make disciples.” The fruit of this disciple-making should result in the establishment of new churches, as seen throughout the New Testament. The apostle Paul’s missionary journeys always left a trail of new communities of faith. As New York City pastor and church planter Tim Keller articulated, church-planting represents “the focal point of Christ’s call, in the Great Commission, to make disciples of all nations.”²

The numbers tell a remarkable story. In 1995, most church-planting was accomplished by denominations, with limited networking and scarce resources. By 2005, dozens of influential church-planting networks had emerged, supported by a thriving infrastructure of books, conferences, coaching, and online resources. Church planting networks, such as Acts 29, Association of Related Churches (ARC), City to City, GlocalNet, NewThing, and dozens of others, emerged during this decade, often growing from the work of a single church into a family or network of thousands of churches.

Many entrepreneurially biased, evangelically driven church leaders championed church-planting, looking beyond outwardly focused, attractional strategies aimed simply at growing their churches larger. The scorecard began to shift toward sending capacity rather than seating capacity, and the collective attendance of churches planted, rather than the growth and size of individual churches, became a priority for those aggressively engaged in church-planting.

The Burning Bush Initiative: Catalyzing Interest in Church Planting

The transformation didn't happen by accident. Bob Buford and Leadership Network played a pivotal catalytic role through the Burning Bush Initiative, launched in the late 1990s.³ Buford was seeking the most leveraged opportunities for equipping and mobilizing the next generation of leaders, and church-planting represented the perfect convergence of his priorities.

The Burning Bush Initiative provided targeted investment and platforming to accelerate the equipping and mobilization of next-generation leaders to lead the church. According to former Leadership Network CEO Dave Travis, it was created to mobilize the type of emerging leaders participating in the Young Leaders Network, as we discussed in chapter 18. Early discernment steered the focus away from academics and toward large, growing, teaching churches with leadership residencies and active church-planting.

Buford and businessman Phil Anschutz invested \$2 million—a visionary investment that would unintentionally help catalyze a new, entrepreneurial era in American church-planting. The initiative became an exclusive, invitation-only journey for small cohorts of leaders representing the most promising church-planting ministries.

Leadership Network's selection standards were rigorous, and the results were extraordinary. Tim Keller co-founded City to City in 2001, which has helped start over 2,000 churches.⁴ Mark Driscoll co-founded Acts 29 Network, which has helped start thousands of churches.⁵ Bob Roberts founded GlocalNet in 2002, which has planted over 300 churches.⁶ Billy Hornsby and Greg Surratt started ARC in 2000, which has now planted over 1,000 churches.⁷ Leadership Network was not just “pursuing NEXT”; they were catalyzing and accelerating change. Their role always remained true to Buford's vision of seeing his fruit grow on other people's trees.

The following image illustrates the rapid growth of church-planting networks during this era. Leadership Network platformed and served many of these

networks. Each of the network founders I've spoken with highlights Leadership Network's role in accelerating their impact.

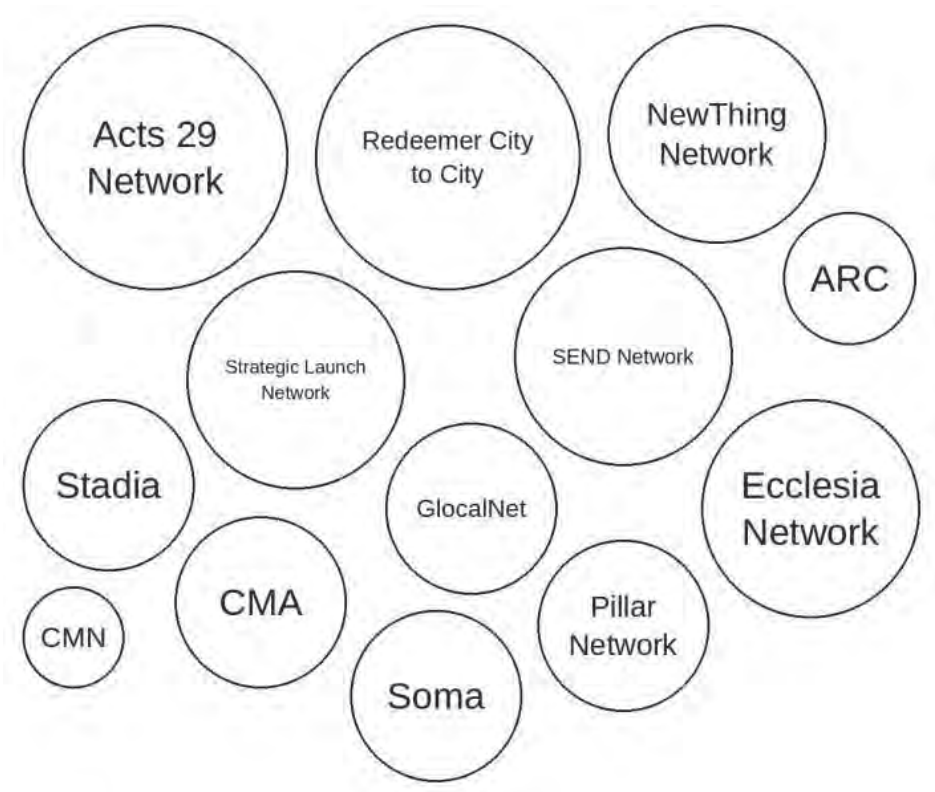


Figure 1 - Church Planting Network

The Initiative's greatest contributions lie in helping leaders dream bigger, turn ideas into impact, and fostering collaborative learning environments among participating churches and networks. This collaborative ethos would become a defining characteristic of the new church-planting era, helping it overcome the territorialism and competitiveness that often accompany growth-driven, programmatic megachurches.

A Personal Note

In 2000, I had virtually no context for understanding church-planting. I had never been part of a church that planted churches, and most churches weren't talking about church-planting. By 2005, I was fully committed to church-planting, including leading a church-planting church, founding church-planting ministries like Passion for Planting and Exponential, and helping hundreds of church plants get started each year. We were riding a fresh wave of God—but didn't yet know it.

Brett Andrews founded New Life Christian Church with the vision of becoming a church-planting church. When I joined the staff in early 2000, New Life had planted its first church, but we wanted to significantly scale our impact. One of my top priorities was to accelerate our church-planting efforts to at least one new church each year. By God's grace, that number quickly accelerated to more than ten supported church plants per year. I'm convinced this blessing was a direct result of Brett's early sacrifice in sending two of the three staff members and a significant portion of our budget to start our first church, even before we had our own land or building. That's a memorable image to characterize the best of the Outwardly Focused Era for me.

Because we were not part of a denomination, we networked with other churches and groups to figure things out. I read everything I could on church-planting and aggressively connected with leaders across the country to learn from them. I was not afraid to call anyone, including Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, Bob Logan, Ed Stetzer, and many others. This was before the modern internet era, and church-planting resources were scarce.

Like so many others with similar stories, we were naturally drawn to the entrepreneurial work of other leaders and the emerging networks. With my head to the ground seeking to learn and scale our local work, I didn't yet see the innovative season about to emerge.

In 2002, we founded Passion for Planting, a unique and innovative project management service for church planters.⁸ We recognized that planters were often overwhelmed by the 400-plus actions required to start a new church, and

observed the consequences of unsupported planters, having high failure rates, and weak systems. We assigned a specialized church-planting project manager to each plant to help them develop and manage their plans and complete up to half of the tasks. This ministry experienced rapid growth, supporting more than twenty-five church plants annually. This service garnered the attention of influential leaders such as Bob Logan and Bill Easum and connected us relationally with the leaders shaping the emerging church-planting networks.

The Shifting Posture

By the early 2000s, the center of church-planting was shifting rapidly from denominational control to local church-based planting networks, accelerated by the Burning Bush Initiative and the emergence of local church-based parachurch ministries. These networks emphasized relationships, collaboration, and shared values rather than institutional hierarchy, leveraging the success of local churches to attract church planters.

As I was starting Exponential and beginning my strategic advising work with Bob Buford, Leadership Network CEO Dave Travis shared something simple yet profound with me. He said, “Todd, as you seek to engage the church-planting space, never forget that churches plant churches, not institutions.”

Historically, churches relied on the expertise, leadership, and financial capacity of their denominations to plant churches. Denominational approaches often operated with a “we can do it, you can help” posture. The emerging networks flipped this dynamic completely, operating on the assumption that entrepreneurial local churches were the primary engines of church-planting, with networks serving, supporting, and amplifying what churches were already called to do.

The shift represented a fundamental change in posture and reliance on collaboration. What Bob Buford often called “latent capacity being released into active energy” was happening in a manner unlike anything else in the prior eras of the Church Growth Movement.

By 2003, conversations about decentralized church-planting networks were accelerating, and a growing number were poised to launch. The strength of these networks was clearly their ability to create communities of leaders on a mission to plant churches, but their potential weakness was the infrastructure support needed to scale their work.

The Emerging Leadership Initiative (ELI), founded by John Burke, a member of the Young Leaders Network, modeled this powerful relational collaboration.⁹ Four or more churches could partner over a three-year period, bringing together the necessary funds and leadership to plant a healthy church. New Life was invited to participate, in part, because of the infrastructure support we cultivated, largely provided by Passion for Planting.

This front-row seat to ELI's first collaborative pilot project in 2003 would profoundly shape my planting paradigm and my future. The strength of this approach was its ability to enable any church to participate in church-planting without having to do it alone. From that initial ELI pilot project, New Life formed a network to plant churches in the Washington, D.C., area. Other participating churches applied their learnings to launch new networks, and the collaborative model became a template that ministries like Stadia and Vision 360 adopted as their future direction. The experience shaped a point paper I wrote on the future of collaborative planting networks, becoming the catalyst for Exponential.

I recall the energy of sitting and dreaming about the future of networks with entrepreneurial leaders like Dave Ferguson, who started NewThing Network in 2005. Dave and I sat at a cafeteria table in 2004, dreaming about how new church-planting networks like NewThing should be designed to be effective, sustainable, and multiplying. These conversations were taking place across the country in various contexts, but with a common goal and move of God. It was just one example among hundreds of similar conversations and stories that have evolved during this energizing era in church-planting.

The Rise of Network Pioneers

The list of leaders who helped shape the modern church-planting phenomenon is extensive, and their collective energies during this period represented a fresh wind of the Spirit. Westridge Church, planted by Brian Bloye, recently celebrated its 125th church plant in twenty-five years. The following summary of their story illustrates the accelerating energy of this era and the ripples of impact that began happening from individual churches looking beyond their own walls and growth:

“In the late 1990s and early 2000s, many people were coming out of student ministry excited about planting churches. One of them was Pastor Brian Bloye. After moving to Dallas, Georgia, in the summer of 1997, he planted West Ridge Church. Five years later, the church had experienced some growth, but Bloye felt a strong call to shift West Ridge’s focus from church growth to Kingdom expansion and church multiplication. And this change of vision took off in ways he never expected.

In 2003, West Ridge started a church-planting residency program, and the following year, it launched The West Ridge School of Church Planting. Bloye hired Mac Lake in 2009, and together with several other churches, they started a national church-planting network called LAUNCH Network of Sending Churches. They also built an assessment, training, and coaching system that they gifted to the North American Mission Board in 2015.

Next came Engage Churches, started by Bloye to plant churches in Georgia and invest in the health and spiritual vitality of church planters and their spouses. In the state, sixty to seventy churches are working together to plant churches. They are divided into local networks all over the state, each consisting of six or seven churches. Together, they plant churches collectively as Engage Churches.”¹⁰

This remarkable story of God’s hand at work, through an entrepreneurial leader in the church, is not an isolated case. God was raising many leaders with stories

like Bloye's. Look at everything that emerged—such a visible representation of how God used willing people to build His Church:

- Steve Snider founded Fellowship Associates in 1999 alongside Robert Lewis, Bill Wellons, and Bill Parkinson of Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock.¹¹
- Mark Driscoll, a participant in Leadership Network's Young Leaders Network, and David Nicholas founded Acts 29 Network in 1998, which emerged from their local churches, Mars Hill and Spanish River.
- Tim Keller founded City to City in 2001, emerging from Redeemer Presbyterian Church. Keller quickly emerged as one of the "fathers of the modern planting era."
- Billy Hornsby and Greg Surratt (and their friends) founded the Association of Related Churches (ARC) in 2001, originating at Seacoast Church.
- Bob Roberts founded GlocalNet in 2002, which originated at Northwood Church.
- Brett Andrews and I co-founded Passion for Planting in 2002 and the Church Planting Network (CPN) in 2005, which later became Exponential, which originated at New Life Christian Church.
- Dave Ferguson co-founded NewThing Network in 2003, emerging from Community Christian Church, and partnered with me to co-lead what grew out of CPN to become Exponential.
- Steve Stroope founded the Strategic Launch Network in 2003, which originated at Lake Pointe Church.
- Shawn Lovejoy co-founded churchplanters.com with David Putman in 2006, which originated at Mountain Lake Church.
- Ron Sylvia, lead pastor of The Springs Church, led Purpose-Driven Church Planting for over a decade, impacting thousands of churches.
- Many more!

All these leaders shared an evangelistic, outwardly focused, missionary mindset, with an entrepreneurial bias. Some would say this happened in a manner unlike anything else in the Church Growth Movement's prior eras.

Sensing God's Blessing

What unified leaders across this diverse landscape was a shared sense that God was orchestrating something unprecedented. In 2005, I made this journal entry: “Over the past two years, it’s been impossible to be involved in church-planting without sensing that God has some big plans. We are on the leading edge of an explosive growth in new churches.”

This sense of divine momentum was shared by leaders across the movement. The convergence of entrepreneurial church leadership, collaborative networks, emerging technologies, and substantial financial investment created what many experienced as a fresh wind of the Spirit. Bob Buford’s oft-repeated phrase “latent capacity being released into active energy” perfectly captured what was happening.

The pace of change was breathtaking. Networks that started with a handful of churches went on to plant hundreds within a decade. Resources that didn’t exist in 2000 became industry standards by 2005.

Watching this landscape develop, I felt a growing conviction that these emerging networks needed better support infrastructure while maintaining their autonomy. This led me to write the point paper I mentioned. In it, I proposed a “network of networks” approach that could provide common infrastructure and preferred service providers for emerging networks while keeping them decentralized.

The response was overwhelming. Enough energy emerged around the concept that I launched a new nonprofit called Church Planting Network, with the stated purpose of “championing involvement in church-planting networks, including connecting churches, church-planting organizations, and church planters with church-planting networks, and equipping and resourcing church-planting networks.”

The vision was to create a supportive ecosystem where individual networks could maintain their autonomy and distinctiveness while sharing common infrastructure, preferred vendors, and collaborative learning opportunities. This approach would allow smaller networks to access resources and expertise typically available only to larger organizations, while enabling all networks

to focus on their core mission of planting churches rather than building administrative infrastructure. It embodied the same decentralized, collaborative spirit that was driving the broader shift away from denominational control toward entrepreneurial church-based initiatives.

Key Characteristics of Church Planting Networks

Several distinguishing characteristics emerged as hallmarks of the church-planting networks of the Outwardly Focused Era:

1. Relationships and Collaboration

At the heart of most planting networks was a relational core—a charismatic or influential leader of a local church, who gathered like-minded churches and leaders into a collaborative community. Networks like Acts 29 (Mark Driscoll), GlocalNet (Bob Roberts), ARC (Greg Surratt and Billy Hornsby), and NewThing (Dave Ferguson) leveraged relationships, trust, and shared values to attract affiliated churches to plant churches together collaboratively.

A strong collaborative ethos also emerged, consistent with Leadership Network's posture. Many networks fostered churches collaborating to do together what they could not do alone—pooling financial, leadership, and support resources.

2. Residency and Training

Developing a robust pipeline of planters was essential to fueling the growing church-planting movement. Planters and dollars are the two critical currencies that fuel church-planting. As the growing number of networks competed for the critical resource of future church planters, and the pool of available, experienced student ministers began to drain, residencies became an essential lifeline to the future.

Many networks were either birthed from or championed residency programs within local churches to recruit and train church planters. Models like Fellowship Associates (Bill Wellons and Robert Lewis), West Ridge School of Church Planting (Brian Bloye), and NewThing Network (Dave Ferguson) became

leading examples. Fellowship Associates was founded in 1999 and served as an example of the type of local church-based ministry that Buford and Anschutz sought to accelerate.

3. Outsourced Support Services

Before 2000, church-planting support was largely denominational and underdeveloped. As decentralized networks emerged, a market response quickly filled the gap. As planting accelerated, planters needed comprehensive support, including assessment, training, project management, coaching, and practical services (such as marketing, branding, equipment, legal, and financial services). By 2010, a robust ecosystem had formed, encompassing bootcamps, residencies, coaching, project management, marketing, branding, staffing, and more.

I vividly remember touring Bob Logan, creator of the Church Planter's Toolkit¹², through the Exponential conference vendor area in 2010. Seeing the sector's growth, he remarked, "None of this existed when I was planting. Now there's an entire service sector to support church-planting leaders. We've come a long way in such a short time."

4. Thought Leadership

Decentralized networks with low overhead and small staff needed content and equipping resources to help planters and planting churches. Rick Warren used Pastors.com to equip leaders, establishing online forums and discussion boards. Ed Stetzer's NewChurches.com became an early resource hub, in partnership with Passion for Planting. The site became a comprehensive list of clickable online resources to support church-planting.

Books, conferences, and cohorts were also scarce in 2000 but proliferated rapidly. By 2005, as online technology emerged, a comprehensive ecosystem of church-planting thought leadership developed rapidly. Significant foundational books emerged from leaders such as Ed Stetzer, who wrote the books *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*¹³ in 2003 and *Planting Missional Churches*¹⁴ in 2006. Partly in response to my own frustration with the lack of resources,

I contributed a chapter to Tom Jones's 2004 book, *Church Planting from the Ground Up*.¹⁵ Conferences, online courses, coaching programs, and peer networks proliferated to meet growing demand.

National Advocacy

In 2005, the Church Planting Network identified a strategic opportunity to significantly expand its reach. The National New Church Conference, with a remarkable 35-year history, had plateaued at 250 attendees and was seeking to grow in size and impact. At the same time, the Church Planting Network needed broader distribution channels to reach a wider audience and amplify its message about church-planting networks.

This created a natural win-win partnership. I agreed to lead the conference and bring it under the Church Planting Network umbrella, providing us with a distribution platform to reach thousands of church-planting leaders annually. Our vision extended far beyond just operating a conference—we intended for the Church Planting Network to develop multiple distribution channels to serve the growing number of emerging networks.

As the conference grew rapidly, New Life graciously agreed to release the Church Planting Network, recognizing that the broader church-planting movement needed this kind of dedicated national advocacy across multiple distribution channels.

The transformation of the National New Church Conference into the Church Planting Network became a powerful barometer of the explosive energy building across the church-planting movement. The conference's growth from 250 to over 5,000 attendees within just a few years reflected the broader momentum that God was generating throughout the movement, not the other way around.

Dave Ferguson co-founded NewThing Network in 2005 and partnered with me to co-lead what grew out of CPN, becoming Exponential. This partnership combined Dave's church-planting expertise with the platform and infrastructure we were building to serve the broader movement. In 2009, we adopted the assumed name "Exponential" to better reflect our mission to accelerate multiplication.

The conference's rapid growth gave the movement national visibility. As Ed Stetzer observed, "If you can only attend one church-planting event in a year, you should go to Exponential." This wasn't because Exponential was driving the movement, but because it had become the most comprehensive gathering place for seeing what God was doing across the church-planting landscape. We were in the right place at the right time, with the right advocacy message to join God in something big. The conference became a visible gauge of the energy characterizing church-planting during this era.

Over the past twenty years, Exponential has developed a comprehensive, multi-channel approach that includes annual conferences, book publishing partnerships, learning communities, online courses, multiplication frameworks, and content distribution across multiple platforms. The monthly *Outreach* magazine column alone reached hundreds of thousands of church leaders. Exponential has grown into an international family of ministries, with Exponential Europe, Exponential Australia, and Exponential Español.

Exponential became what Bob Buford often referred to as Leadership Network's sibling in church-planting, sharing the same DNA but focusing specifically on multiplication. In 2022, Leadership Network was acquired by and merged into Exponential, a testament to their shared values and history. Today, Exponential is recognized as one of the most influential voices and advocacy groups in church-planting.

As a founder, I believe Exponential's most significant influence is through championing what it calls "the 16% Mission." Currently, fewer than 7% of U.S. churches prioritize healthy church reproduction. Sociologists suggest that 16% is required for a priority to become normative. Exponential is laser-focused on moving this needle to 16%, where reproduction becomes the normative measure of success in the church. Exponential is one of the few nonprofits in the world that knows exactly what the outcome needs to be for the ministry to shut down in victory (no one needs us anymore because we accomplished our mission).

Denominational Adaptation

As emerging local and national networks thrived, some denominations adopted network-like structures to stay competitive and relevant in the church-planting space. Most denominations' strength had been their ability to recruit and mobilize church planters, their strong financial base, and their support infrastructure. However, as independent networks began to thrive and denominational budgets and infrastructure support declined, church planters were increasingly drawn to independent planting networks.

The largest and most impactful example of denominational adaptation is the SEND Network, the church-planting arm of the Southern Baptist Convention. Launched in 2011 under the North American Mission Board (NAMB), the SEND Network has become the largest and most effective denominational planting network in the United States. Shortly after his election as president of NAMB, Kevin Ezell shared his vision with me for establishing the SEND Network. He hoped to maintain the best support systems available in church-planting, mobilize a growing number of church-planting churches, and establish these churches as the catalytic engine for church-planting.

The Church Multiplication Network (CMN) of the Assemblies of God was launched in 2008 under the visionary leadership of George Wood.¹⁶ Their shift got the attention of other denominations and the church-planting community. Steve Pike, the director of church-planting, led the team in implementing CMN. Because of his participation in Exponential and our relationship, I was honored when Steve asked me to serve as the only non-Assemblies leader on the CMN founding team. Like the SEND Network, their model was to attract church planters from within the Assemblies of God tribe, maintain strong support systems for planting, and mobilize local churches to plant.

During this season of renewal and pioneering in church-planting, many other denominations followed suit. The Wesleyan Church initiated the Church Multiplication Collective (CMC), the Evangelical Free Church of America established the CreoCollective Network (later renamed ReachNetwork), and the Baptist General Conference evolved into Converge.

The Unresolved Tension

The emergence of church-planting networks represented the most dramatic organizational transformation in the Outwardly Focused Era. From a denominationally controlled landscape in 1995 to a thriving ecosystem of entrepreneurial networks by 2005, this shift altered how new churches were conceived, launched, and supported. The movement's emphasis on relationships, collaboration, systematic support, and thought leadership created momentum for church multiplication.

As I look back on my own journey through this era, deeply involved in each of these three innovations, I remain profoundly grateful for the leaders and movements I had the privilege to walk alongside. The energy, creativity, and entrepreneurial spirit of this season were truly unique for the American church.

As the Outwardly Focused Era reached its peak, all three of its major innovations—externally focused ministry, multisite expansion, and church-planting networks—had demonstrated a remarkable capacity to extend gospel reach and energize entrepreneurial leaders. Yet each had also revealed the persistent influence of the consumer-driven paradigm that would soon face its greatest challenges in the compound fracturing of evangelicalism that lay ahead.

The networks pioneering new organizational approaches often perpetuated familiar programming approaches, resembling the Seeker-Sensitive, purpose-driven, and megachurch models that dominated previous eras. Many of the early leaders driving this movement planted churches using the Purpose-Driven Paradigm. Their networks and ministries helped thousands of new churches get started, resulting in the DNA of prevailing consumer-minded models being deeply embedded in much of the modern church-planting era.

In my book, *Multipliers Dilemma: Understanding the Consumer-Driven Church Operating System* (a sequel to this book that I'm currently working on), I refer to this as the "dilemma of inheritance." Will new churches continue perpetuating the inherited operating system? Or will they embrace fresh, new wineskins rooted in disciple-making, mobilization of the priesthood of all believers, and truly missional ecclesiology? This question will loom large in the chapters ahead

and is at the core of the evolution and co-opting of Donald McGavran's original principles and ideals, as well as the intensifying voice of the missional church.

This Dilemma of Inheritance is one of twelve interconnected dilemmas that function together like a flywheel, perpetuating the Consumer-Driven Operating System—a framework we'll explore in depth in Chapter 26.

By the end of the era, new planting networks like V3 Movement and 100 Movements were emerging to pursue more missional and movemental models, pushing back on the prevailing programmatically driven models:

“The church is in a major season of upheaval. Sunday-centric, sermon-focused, program-driven approaches are increasingly becoming irrelevant in post-Christianity. We need new but rooted ways of being the church.” (from V3 Movement)

The very innovations that advanced the gospel also risked perpetuating the limitations of the inherited system. Like a tree with roots in depleted soil, much of the fruit of this era grew within structures optimized for attracting, programming, and platforming, not necessarily for disciple-making and Kingdom movement.

Yet the unresolved tension between Kingdom advancement and systemic limitations would soon surface in ways none of us anticipated. Even as these networks flourished, a growing chorus of missional voices was pushing back, insisting that the attractional paradigm was not just insufficient but fundamentally at odds with Jesus' model for reaching the lost. And a parallel movement was emerging to confront one of the church's most persistent and painful failures: the racial divide.

Reflection Questions

Are you planting churches or replicating your model?

The “dilemma of inheritance” asks: Will new churches perpetuate the inherited operating system or embrace fresh wineskins? Look at the last three churches your church/network planted. What DNA did they inherit?

If you conducted an honest assessment, would you discover they inherited:

- programmatic growth engine (weekend services, small groups, programs as a disciple-making strategy);
- attractional scorecard (attendance, giving, facilities as success metrics);
- consumer posture (optimized for serving attendees rather than mobilizing missionaries)?

Or did they inherit?

- relational disciple-making (disciples making disciples as a growth engine);
- reproductive scorecard (churches planted, disciples sent, movements sparked);
- missional posture (optimized for sending everyday missionaries into culture)

The honest answer reveals if you're multiplying movements or scaling the system.

What would change if you could only count multiplication?

The church-planting explosion included impressive numbers: ARC (1,000+ churches), City to City (2,000+ churches), and Acts 29 (thousands of churches). But if you could only count reproductive multiplication—churches that planted churches that planted churches across three generations—how many would qualify?

If your scorecard shifted from “How many churches started?” to “How many reproducing movements sparked?” would your strategy change? What if success meant not “We planted fifty churches” but rather, “We sparked movements where churches routinely plant churches that routinely plant churches”? The willingness to ask this question determines if you're building an organization or catalyzing a movement.



CHAPTER 24

Missional and Attractional

Hopeful and Entrenched: Pursuing Revolutionary Impact with Evolutionary Security

In the mid-2000s, missiologist Alan Hirsch invited me to a gathering of about thirty missional thought leaders meeting in Colorado. I almost didn't belong in the room. Just a few years earlier, I didn't know what "missional" meant and had no felt need to.

I had come to know Alan through his books *The Shaping of Things to Come* (2003)¹ and *The Forgotten Ways* (2006)². We became good friends. One of the first things that struck me was that he considered himself a missionary, from Australia to the United States. My paradigm was U.S.-centric: missionaries were people we sent from here to somewhere else.

Alan believed his mission was to help U.S. pastors shift from an attractional posture to a sending posture. Not international sending, but rather mobilizing everyday, disciple-making missionaries into the cracks and crevices of society to reach people who would never come to church.

At the time, I had invited Alan to participate in our Future Travelers cohort, a gathering of influential megachurch pastors scheduled to meet in Chicago. He agreed—but first, he invited me to spend a day with his missional tribe in Colorado.

I had no idea how much energy and passion were bottled up inside these leaders. Alan spent several hours going around the room. Each person shared their heart,

excitement, burdens, and challenges. Introductions were hardly needed. This group was like a family, and the gathering felt like a reunion. They sincerely believed they had the key to the church's future in America. Their burdens were heavy.

I was one of the last to speak. "I'm Todd Wilson," I said, "a megachurch leader in the attractional church system." I had experienced two competing emotions throughout the morning. The first was irritation. There was a lot of complaining about the megachurch, a lot of criticism of the attractional model. These were the voices I would later describe as "yappy dogs" nipping at my heels. But the second emotion surprised me. Beneath the complaints, I heard something else. What most of them were really saying was, "If we just had a larger platform, a microphone to broadcast our message, and money to fuel what we're doing, we could accelerate our work." I told them so. And I pointed out that those three things—platform, voice, and funding—were the very strengths of the attractional church they were criticizing.

From that experience, I pressed Alan hard over the coming months and years to see the megachurch not as an enemy but as a potential ally. Why not come alongside influential megachurches, help them experience a paradigm shift, and then leverage those churches to accelerate the missional message? I became an advocate and champion for Alan, helping amplify his message. The next day in Chicago, Alan was sitting with eleven influential megachurch pastors I'd convened, telling them that if they leaned into the missional conversation, they could change the course of Christianity in the United States. The leaders were intrigued and committed to a journey of discovery.

Those days in Colorado and Chicago marked a turning point for me. It planted the seeds of a conviction that would shape the next decade of my work: the missional conversation and the attractional church needed each other. However, I didn't yet understand just how resistant the existing system would prove to be.

From Extension to Critique

Throughout Section 5, we've seen how the Church Growth Movement was extended through growth-oriented innovations—the Externally Focused Church, the Multisite Revolution, and the birth of modern church-planting networks. Each of the Future Traveler leaders who met with Hirsch in Chicago was a pioneer in one or more of these areas. Each of these innovations was built on the same Consumer-Driven Operating System that evolved from Donald McGavran's original insights. The methods adapted, and the reach expanded, but the underlying programmatic approach to growing churches remained the same.

Yet during this same period, a different conversation was emerging—one that would challenge not just the methods of the Church Growth Movement, but the underlying operating system itself. As the founding CEO of Exponential, I had a front-row seat. I was a practitioner, a learner, and a cheerleader for thousands of leaders. Over the next decade, I watched the conversation shift—from mega to multi to missional to mobilization, and eventually to micro and meta. Each shift revealed the same uncomfortable truth: the Consumer-Driven Operating System was far more entrenched than any of us realized.

The previous innovations of this era extended the reach of the existing paradigm. The missional conversation was different. It wasn't another tool to add to the attractional toolkit—it was a fundamental critique of the entire system that had powered fifty years of church growth. Was the paradigm itself flawed?

Understanding the Missional Church

The missional conversation in the early 2000s emerged from the work of leaders like Lesslie Newbigin, a British missionary who spent decades serving in India. When Newbigin returned to post-Christian Europe in the 1970s, he made an unsettling argument: the West itself had become a mission field. The church's posture needed to change—from centering around programs and buildings designed to attract people, to becoming a community sent into the world to embody the Kingdom in daily life.³

In retrospect, the missional conversation in the West unfolded in three discernible waves.

The first wave was catalyzed by Lesslie Newbigin in the 1970s and 1980s. His writings raised an unsettling question: Had the assumptions of Christendom so deeply shaped how we understood the church that we no longer knew how to live as a missionary people in our own culture? As Michael Goheen has shown, Newbigin's real impact went beyond saying that the West had become a mission field. He insisted that the Western church needed a "missionary encounter" with its own culture—an encounter in which the gospel would both affirm and confront Western idols, and the church would recover its identity as a sent people rather than a religious institution at the center of society.⁴

Brad Brisco underscores just how deep Newbigin's critique cut: the problem was not simply outdated methods but an entire way of thinking about church still shaped by Christendom assumptions. Brisco's work provides one of the best historical summaries of the missional church conversations in the U.S. that I could find.⁵

A second wave emerged in the 1980s and 1990s through the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN), led by George Hunsberger and Darrell Guder. The GOCN became a bridge between Newbigin's theological insights and the practical realities of U.S. churches. Through newsletters, consultations, and a steady stream of books, they convened a broad conversation among pastors, theologians, and practitioners—exploring what it would mean for American congregations to see themselves as "a missionary people" in their own culture. Many later missional leaders were shaped, directly or indirectly, by this network's work in reframing the church's identity around God's mission.

A third wave emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s as leaders influenced by Newbigin and the GOCN began pressing theological insights into practical questions about church leadership, identity, and mission in a post-Christian culture. As we saw in Chapter 19, the emerging leaders in Leadership Network's Young Leaders Network shared a common pursuit—putting Newbigin's teaching into practice. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of books, articles, and conferences focused on missional church practice grew steadily.

This third wave sparked what would become known as the missional church conversation. Leaders like Alan Hirsch, Neil Cole, Reggie McNeal, Michael Frost, Ed Stetzer, and Hugh Halter began translating missional theology into pointed questions: What does it mean to be the church in a post-Christian culture? How do we recover a vision of the church as God’s “sent” people, not merely a gathering of consumers? How do we move from attracting people to church to sending people into the world as missionaries?

Among these voices, Reggie McNeal pressed the conversation into territory that made attractional leaders particularly uncomfortable: the scorecard. In *The Present Future* (2003)⁶, McNeal posed six tough questions that challenged the church’s institutional assumptions, asking whether we had confused growing the church with growing the Kingdom. His later work, *Missional Renaissance* (2009)⁷, made the challenge explicit. McNeal argued that the church needed three fundamental scorecard shifts: from an internal focus to an external focus, from program development to people development, and from church-based leadership to Kingdom-based leadership. These weren’t abstract ideals. They struck at the metrics that drove every staff meeting, board report, and annual budget in the attractional world.

Leonard Sweet helped prepare the soil for this conversation. Through books like *SoulTsunami* (1999)⁸, *AquaChurch* (1999)⁹, and *Postmodern Pilgrims* (2000)¹⁰, Sweet made a straightforward argument: the culture had fundamentally changed, and the church hadn’t kept up. People no longer responded to programs and presentations the way previous generations had. They wanted experience, participation, relationships, and authenticity. Sweet wasn’t primarily a missional theologian, but his cultural diagnosis reinforced what missional leaders were saying—the attractional model was built for a world that was disappearing.

Leadership Network played a significant role in amplifying these voices. Beginning in the late 1990s and accelerating through a partnership with Jossey-Bass, they published dozens of books that carried the missional conversation into the hands of practitioners: Minatrea’s *Shaped by God’s Heart* (2004)¹¹, Roxburgh’s *The Missional Leader* (2006)¹² and *Missional Map-Making* (2009)¹³, Halter’s *The Tangible Kingdom* (2008)¹⁴, Cole’s *Organic Church* (2005)¹⁵ and *Church 3.0* (2010)¹⁶, Creps’ *Off-Road Disciplines* (2006)¹⁷, Bergquist’s *Church Turned*

Inside Out (2009)¹⁸, Hirsch's *The Permanent Revolution* (2012)¹⁹, Fitch's *Prodigal Christianity* (2013)²⁰, and multiple titles from McNeal. This was Leadership Network doing what it had always done—identifying and platforming innovators—but now the innovation was the missional conversation itself.

At the heart of the missional church was the concept of *missio Dei*—the mission of God. Missional theologians insisted that “mission is not primarily an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation.”²¹ As Christopher Wright argues, “It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world.”²² This shift moved the focus from institutional maintenance to participation in God’s redemptive work.

Missional and Attractional

Missional leaders like Hirsch offered a prophetic critique of the attractional models that had dominated the Church Growth Movement. They argued that the consumer-driven model had created a clergy-laity divide—professional staff led the ministry while congregations remained passive recipients. Programs drove the church. Success was measured by numerical growth, facility expansion, and budgetary growth. Faith became privatized—reduced to personal spirituality disconnected from public life or cultural transformation.

Hirsch warned, “I have come to believe that the major threat to the viability of our faith is that of consumerism. This is a far more heinous and insidious challenge to the gospel, because in so many ways it infects each and every one of us.”²³

Missional leaders championed a different vision of success—one centered on sending rather than attracting. Rather than expecting people to come to church to be evangelized, believers would be sent to embody the gospel in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and networks. Guder and Hunsberger sought to help leaders see the church as a community organized around God’s mission to the world, with mission—rather than programs or institutional maintenance—as its organizing principle.²⁴

The missional approach calls every member to be a disciple-making missionary in daily life—not just a weekend attender or program volunteer. This blurs the line between professional staff and everyday believers, resulting in more decentralized expressions of the church and less hierarchy. Missional leaders envision the church as a countercultural community that models justice, reconciliation, hospitality, and sacrificial love in a fragmented culture.

The missional conversation identified key weaknesses in the attractional approach:

- In valuing seeker-sensitivity, churches had become culturally captive—shaped more by societal norms than by the gospel.
- Ministry had turned inward, focused on institutional maintenance and insider needs rather than equipping members for mission.
- Programs and events failed to form deep disciples. Volunteering inside the church was valued over mobilizing everyday missionaries into their workplaces, neighborhoods, and networks.

As society became more secular and pluralistic, attractional churches lost cultural influence and struggled to connect with those outside the faith. These weaknesses left the American church vulnerable to the disruptions that lay ahead.

The Missional Pursuit

Within the attractional models, we had built our success on drawing people in. The missional conversation was about sending people out. The ideas felt fresh and energizing—more disruptive than typical evolutionary change, but not yet calling for the revolutionary overhaul that some would later demand.

Early in the Exponential journey, we didn't focus on the disruptive challenges of the Consumer-Driven Operating System. We didn't even use those descriptors. Instead, we were drawn to what the missional conversation promised—restoring the priesthood of all believers and mobilizing everyday missionaries where they worked, lived, studied, and played.

What we didn't yet understand was that the missional conversation represented more than different strategies—it required a different operating system and organizational capacity. This insight would prove to be a key in understanding why the transformation was so difficult.

Alan Hirsch built on this foundation and identified what he called “missional DNA”—the elements that enabled movements to reproduce and multiply. His research pointed to six factors that distinguished reproducing movements from accumulating institutions:

1. the foundational confession that Jesus is Lord (not just Savior);
2. intentional disciple-making that creates reproducers instead of consumers;
3. a missional-incarnational impulse that sends rather than attracts;
4. *communitas* forged through shared mission rather than comfort-driven community;
5. apostolic leadership that pioneers instead of just pastors;
6. organic systems that reproduce rather than accumulate.²⁵

For the leaders in Exponential's Future Travelers cohorts, Hirsch's framework became a diagnostic tool. They could hold it up against their own churches and see the gap: their systems were optimized for accumulation, not multiplication. The contrast was clear. The question was whether they could do anything about it.

The Operating System Challenge

As we probed deeper, a fundamental challenge became clear. The missional approach required a different operating system than the one that had built large churches. Hirsch hypothesized that at least 60% of people would never attend an attractional church service, and that this percentage would continue to decline, as it had in Europe.

Reaching this skeptical, increasingly postmodern culture would require an incarnational presence, not better marketing. To me, Hirsch's insights pointed to a clear pattern: decentralized ministry, not centralized programming. Mobilizing

missionaries, not recruiting volunteers. Organic systems over institutional structures. Apostolic leadership over pastoral maintenance.

In other words, fully embracing the missional approach would require revolutionary change—dismantling the existing consumer-driven system and replacing it with something fundamentally different. For churches that had invested decades in building attractional capacity—staff, buildings, programs, budgets, and membership expectations—and were evangelistically reaching people, this felt overwhelming and risky.

I confess that I had initially resisted this conversation. As a senior leader in a large, growing church from 2000 through 2005, I had paid little attention to the emerging missional voices. I considered them a “distraction” and recall feeling that these leaders were like small, yappy dogs, barking ferociously, and chasing me down the road on my bike, trying to bite at my heels. I just wanted to dropkick them and stop their noise.

My dismissive attitude was common among successful attractional church leaders during the early years of the missional conversation. We were too busy celebrating growth metrics and managing organizational complexity to take seriously the voices questioning our fundamental assumptions. From my perspective, these missional leaders were criticizing systems that worked while pursuing alternatives that seemed unsustainable.

Hindsight brings revelations. In revisiting their work, I’ve come to see what we largely missed at the time: many of these leaders were genuinely prophetic voices, yet their insights remained mostly marginalized for twenty-five years. While we attractional leaders were asking, “How do we get bigger?” the missional leaders were asking, “How do we penetrate, saturate, and transform?” Their diagnosis of the Consumer-Driven Operating System was accurate, even if we weren’t ready to hear it. I also came to understand why we struggled to hear them: they were diagnosing real problems without offering practical solutions to overcome the power of the established system.

The Hybrid “AND” Approach

By 2010, our learning had crystallized into the Exponential theme book for that year, simply titled “Exponential,” with the subtitle “How you and your friends can start a missional church movement.” This wasn’t just clever marketing. It reflected a growing conviction: the Church Growth Movement had successfully built large churches. Now the question was whether those churches could become launching platforms for missional movements.

At this time, most attractional leaders hadn’t embraced the missional call. Those who excelled in the Consumer-Driven Operating System didn’t see it as urgent. A few leaders were beginning to catch the vision for gospel saturation and the mobilization it would require. Yet even for those of us who embraced it, the implementation challenge loomed large. How could churches pursue missional transformation without the chaos and risk of revolutionary change?

These challenges forced a question: What type of change was actually possible? I’m naturally drawn to the revolutionary option. Why settle for a flawed operating system that won’t deliver the “movemental” results we were made for? I remember thinking, *Let’s get on with this and stop messing around!*

New Life, my sending church, was a solid attractional congregation with 50 to 100 baptisms and 10+ church plants per year. Eternity looks different because of their faithful work, and the same is true for thousands of other successful attractional churches. But I felt God nudging me with a question: What if the answer for existing churches is not evolutionary or revolutionary? What if it’s somewhere in between? What if we can press toward revolutionary impact while taking evolutionary risk? Wouldn’t this be more practical and scalable for the more than 300,000 churches in the U.S.?

Colorado church leaders Hugh Halter and Matt Smay had planted such a church. They had been wrestling with the same tension we were discovering in our cohorts. Hugh approached me in 2009 about writing a book that would capture what we were all sensing: churches didn’t have to choose between Missional and Attractional approaches. They could be both—gathered AND scattered, accumulating and sending.²⁶

Focusing on Three Core Dimensions of the Missional Conversation

The missional conversation was theologically and biblically sound, but many attractional church leaders had become resistant to the term “missional.” The revolutionary shifts it called for were simply impractical at scale. Some leaders would argue they were already “missional,” even when they clearly weren’t. Others saw it as criticism rather than enhancement. At Exponential, we chose to focus on the practical core of what missional leaders had championed—distinctives that any church leader could embrace.

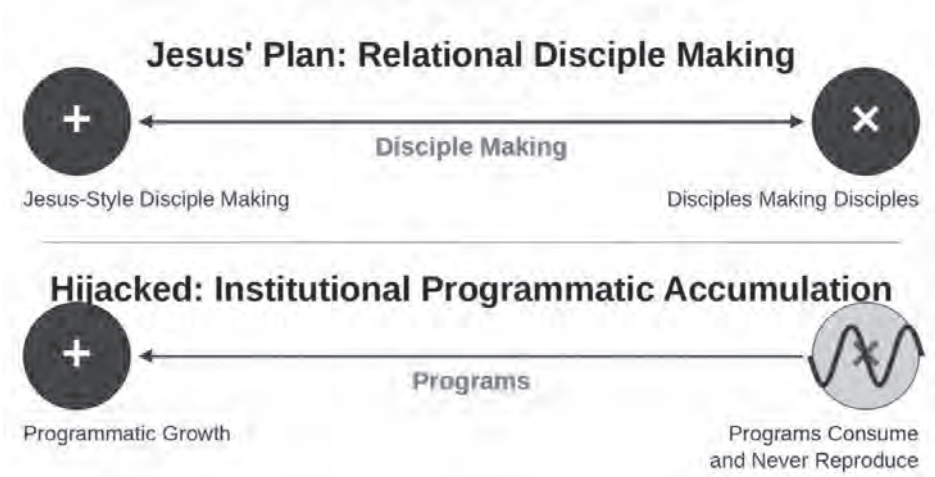
Through our work with cohorts and hundreds of churches, we assembled a team of about twenty leaders who spent eighteen months researching what distinguished multiplying churches from those that were simply growing programmatically. We identified roughly fifteen behavioral characteristics and grouped them into three core dimensions that captured the essence of what missional leaders had championed. What struck me was how closely these aligned with Hirsch’s six elements of missional DNA, providing both credibility and practical application to the missional insights.

From this research, the “Three Dimensions of Multiplication” emerged as a core framework for Exponential. This simple diagnostic tool helps leaders see both the key ingredients of multiplication and how McGavran’s original ideals were co-opted by the Consumer-Driven Operating System.

Disciple-Making: The Hijacked Foundation

Disciple-making is the core dimension influencing the other dimensions. Jesus modeled the pattern: disciples who make disciples, as both the mission and the growth engine of His intended movement. When this kind of relational disciple-making spans three to four generations, multiplication happens naturally. McGavran had originally championed this as the foundation for reaching new people and starting movements.

But in our zeal for rapid growth, we replaced relational disciple-making with institutional programmatic growth—excellent weekend experiences, compelling programming, and sophisticated marketing. These weren't bad things, but when they became our primary growth engine rather than a support for relational disciple-making, something fundamental changed. Programs consume and accumulate; disciples reproduce and multiply. When the disciple-making dimension gets hijacked, the other dimensions follow.



Mobilization: From Missionaries to Volunteers

Mobilization captured what the missional leaders meant by “sending” rather than “gathering.” Jesus’ words in Matthew 28 show that He intended every believer to be an everyday disciple-making missionary—where they work, live, learn, and play. As Neil Cole stated in his influential book, *Organic Church*: “We need to take church to the world rather than bring the world to church.”²⁷

Instead of mobilizing everyday missionaries, we became experts at mobilizing volunteers to fuel internal programs. The U.S. church became, perhaps, the largest mobilizer of volunteers in history. But when volunteerism replaces the mobilization of everyday missionaries, you cut off the potential for multiplication. We shifted from the posture of “You can do it, how can we help?” (mobilization) to “We can do it, you can help!” (volunteerism).



Capacity Building: The Central Paradox

The third dimension, capacity building, recognized that sustainable multiplication required organizational and structural support. This is the local church's "platform" capability for scaling disciple-making and mobilization. The consumer-driven system excelled at capacity building: buildings, budgets, staffing, and leadership pipelines. But all this capacity was aimed at growing our own church—think of cultivating a single apple tree. The missional vision called for something different: sending everyday missionaries to pursue gospel saturation—think of growing an apple orchard.

Here is what makes capacity building critical. Any individual believer can make disciples. Any individual believer can live as an everyday missionary in their workplace, neighborhood, or school. The first two dimensions don't require a church budget, a building, or paid staff. But capacity building—the organizational platform for training, equipping, deploying, and sustaining disciple-making missionaries at scale—is something only the local church can provide. And that is exactly where the consumer-driven system was misdirected.

This paradox explained why transformation proved so difficult. Attractional churches had the capacity-building expertise but aimed it inward at programmatic growth. Missional leaders had the right insights about disciple-making and

mobilization, but lacked the organizational infrastructure to scale them. Most operated from coffee shops and living rooms, with volunteer teams and minimal budgets. They had prophetic clarity but not the organizational infrastructure to act on it at scale.

When Exponential launched *missional.com* to platform these leaders, we invested significant time and resources—but struggled to gain traction. Churches that attempted to add missional programming often found themselves spreading resources thin without achieving either attractional excellence or missional effectiveness.

The financial dynamics made the gap even clearer. Attractional models have a built-in financial flywheel: programs produce numerical growth, growth adds revenue through increased offerings, and increased offerings fund more staff and programs. The system fuels itself.

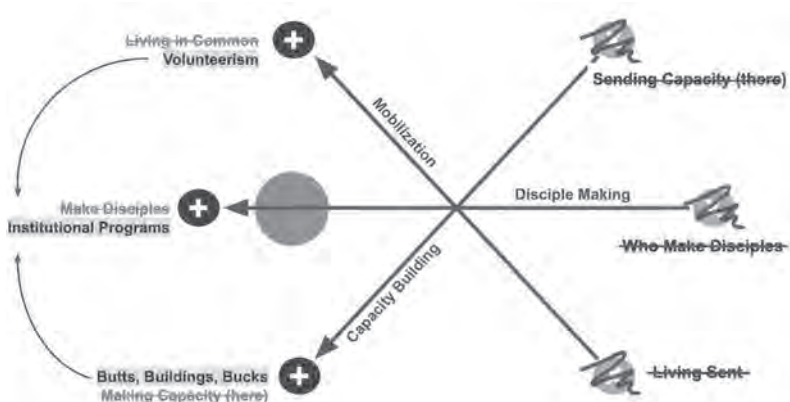
Now consider missional capacity, rooted in Jesus' style of relational disciple-making. The growth engine is relational, organic, and slow to form. Jesus spent three years with twelve disciples. This timeline is incompatible with the financial demands of full-time vocational staff, large building debt, and program-driven budgets. Attractional church pastors face two ornery realities: a scorecard issue that disrupts their inherited definitions of ministry success, and a financial engine that aligns more naturally with bivocational than full-time vocational ministry.

Building capacity for the missional vision is difficult—some would say impossible—within a system designed for programmatic growth. The Consumer-Driven Operating System's power wasn't just methodological; it was organizational. It created a gravitational pull that made alternative approaches nearly impossible to sustain.



The three dimensions of multiplication served as a practical diagnostic, helping leaders understand what had been hijacked during the Church Growth Movement's evolution. In each area, we could see how McGavran's original ideals had been co-opted by the Consumer-Driven Operating System. The framework revealed what was needed to move from addition to multiplication—but it also exposed why change was so difficult within the existing system.

Sunday was always coming. It required preparation and resource allocation, leaving little margin for missionary mobilization. Staff expectations, board pressures, and denominational scorecards kept pulling leaders back toward familiar patterns.



The Disciple-Making Paradox

During this period, ministry leader Dr. Gailyn Van Rheenen was experiencing what many of us were. After serving as a missionary in East Africa and teaching at Abilene Christian University, he founded Mission Alive in 2004 to help North American churches recover their sense of mission. But by 2010, his team realized that few church planters and local church leaders had developed the ability to intentionally disciple people. The missional conversation had correctly identified the problem—churches weren't missionary-minded—but the practical challenge was deeper: they weren't making disciples who could make disciples.²⁸

I recall a conversation with my friend Bobby Harrington where the realization hit me: Exponential could never fulfill its church-planting and multiplication mission unless disciple-making became the church's functional mission. Our emphasis at Exponential began to shift from the word "missional" to the core elements that missional leaders had championed.

In 2013, we made "DiscipleShift" the annual theme for Exponential, centering on disciple-making as the foundation for any church transformation. Bobby Harrington and I then co-founded discipleship.org to provide a national platform for continuing this conversation beyond the annual theme.

Over the coming decade, interest in discipleship and disciple-making grew significantly, with numerous parachurch and support ministries emerging. However, most churches treated discipleship as a programmatic add-on to their existing activities. Our research revealed that fewer than 5% of U.S. churches had a vibrant disciple-making culture—a consequence of decades in which programs had replaced disciple-making as the church's primary growth engine.

The statistic helped explain why the missional conversation struggled to gain traction—you can't mobilize everyday missionaries if you're not making disciples who understand their missionary calling. The changes needed went deeper than strategy. They required establishing a culture and growth engine grounded in relational disciple-making.

Mobilization Focus and Platform Development

By 2019, Exponential was leading a national conversation on mobilization through our “Made for More” theme and launching “The More Collective” as a nonprofit to champion healthy mobilization cultures. We published our largest-ever library of annual theme books on the topic, including *Made for More*²⁹ and *The Mobilization Flywheel*.³⁰

While most attractional churches struggled to implement these missional elements, a new generation of microchurch leaders was emerging, armed with scorecards rooted in disciple-making, mobilization, and gospel saturation. In Florida, the Tampa Underground Network, founded by Brian Sanders, embodied this vision: a decentralized ecosystem of microchurches, each focused on a specific pocket of people or place. Ordinary believers were released as frontline missionaries in the places where they lived, worked, and played. At Exponential, we organized cohorts of leaders to see the Tampa Underground firsthand.

Sanders captured this impulse in his book *Microchurches: A Smaller Way*, arguing that the church must be reimagined as something smaller, simpler, and more widely shared among ordinary believers. He writes, “My prayer is that every committed disciple would imagine themselves responsible for the future formation of the church... to make the fundamental shift from believing the church is something someone else starts and runs that we choose and consume, to believing the church is something like a family that each of us pursues in the course of our life with God.”³¹

In Kansas City, Rob Wegner and his team built on similar convictions, designing a sending church paradigm that fused disciple-making, mobilization pathways, and citywide gospel saturation. These and other microchurch networks became living laboratories for the missional imagination, showing that when the operating system shifts, multiplying expressions of church can emerge from everyday people rather than centralized programs.

Wegner often contrasts the attractional culture with Jesus’ sending impulse: “Jesus said Go, but most churches are built around Come.” In describing their vision in Kansas City, he insists that leaders must stop seeing people as attenders

or volunteers and instead “look at every single person and go, they’re a disciple maker.”³²

The Unresolved Tensions

Looking back, our journey represented a sincere attempt to bridge the gap between missional insights and attractional realities. We moved from pursuing revolutionary transformation to a hybrid “AND” approach, focusing on the disciple-making and mobilization elements championed by missional thought leaders.

Each phase of our journey emerged naturally from the limitations we discovered, but none overcame the fundamental paradox of capacity building. The challenge wasn’t a lack of better strategies or frameworks—it was systemic entrenchment.

Despite genuine commitment and real insights, most leaders found their transformations more limited than they had hoped. By the late 2010s, churches had become more sophisticated in their programming. The Multisite Phenomenon and church-planting networks continued to expand. But most new churches inherited the same Consumer-Driven Operating System that shaped their parent organizations, further entrenching the very system that missional leaders had sought to change.

The unresolved tensions between missional calling and attractional practice—between discipleship ideals and consumerist realities, between missionary identity and institutional maintenance—became fault lines. Though largely hidden beneath continued numerical growth and institutional success, these weaknesses were about to be exposed by forces none of us saw coming.

But before we reach the fracturing of evangelicalism, there’s one more conversation that gained momentum during this era—one that challenged the movement at an even deeper level than methodology. Mark DeYmaz, co-founder of Mosaix Global Network, recalls missiologist Michael Frost telling him and Alan Hirsch, “If the missional movement doesn’t become multiethnic, it will stunt.” As Mark told me in an interview, you can be missional without being multiethnic, but you can’t be multiethnic without becoming missional. As emerging generations began to value diversity more than previous generations,

this conversation accelerated, forcing the church to confront one of its most persistent and painful blind spots.

Reflection Questions

Can you afford the missional church, or only the attractional church?

The capacity paradox names an uncomfortable truth: attractional models have built-in financial flywheels that scale (programs → growth → revenue → more programs), while missional models operate on relational, organic, slow-forming patterns incompatible with full-time staff salaries and building debt.

Look at your church's financial reality honestly—could you sustain operations if the growth engine shifted from programs to disciple-making? If Sunday attendance decreased by 50% because you focused on mobilizing everyday missionaries rather than attracting weekend attendees, could you still pay staff and the mortgage? The honest answer reveals whether your infrastructure allows missional transformation or requires attractional maintenance. This isn't about faithfulness or vision—it's about whether the system you've built permits the change you desire.

Are you in the 5% with a vibrant disciple-making culture?

Research shows that fewer than 5% of U.S. churches have a vibrant disciple-making culture—a systemic consequence of 50 years in which programs replaced disciple-making as the growth engine. Assess honestly: Is relational disciple-making (disciples making disciples who make disciples across three to four generations) the primary way people come to faith and grow in your church? Or are weekend attendance and program participation the primary pathway? If you removed all programs tomorrow and could only grow through relational disciple-making, would your church multiply or plateau? If someone asked, "Show me your disciple-making culture," what evidence would you present? The 5% statistic suggests that most churches think they're making disciples when they're actually running programs.

Which one are you?



CHAPTER 25

The Multiethnic Church

Pioneering a Different Kind of Diversity

I never noticed who wasn't in the room.

When I first visited Willow Creek as a high school student in the late 1970s—back when the church still met in a movie theater—I was captivated by what happened on the stage. The music, the drama, and the relevance of Bill Hybels' teaching to my everyday life. It felt like church had finally caught up with the world I lived in. What I didn't notice, and couldn't have noticed, was the ethnic composition of the audience.

I attended a suburban Chicago high school with 3,200 students—800 in my senior class alone. To my knowledge, fewer than five were people of color. I didn't know a single person of color during my entire high school experience. Not because I was avoiding them, but because they simply weren't there. The world I inhabited was overwhelmingly white, and because that was all I knew, I had no frame of reference for asking “who is missing?”

When I sat in that movie theater watching Willow Creek's early services, I assume—given the demographics of the northwest suburbs—that there were virtually no people of color in the audience. But I have no idea. It wasn't something I paid attention to. The memorable thing was the experience itself.

Today, in 2025, a young person attending that same service would immediately notice the lack of diversity. They would ask questions I never thought to ask. This generational shift represents one of the most significant changes in how

we evaluate church effectiveness—and it would eventually force a reckoning with assumptions that had powered the Church Growth Movement from the beginning.

While the missional conversation we explored in the previous chapter challenged *how* we did church, the multiethnic movement would challenge *who* we did church with and for. If missional leaders exposed the limitations of our attractional methods, multiethnic advocates exposed the limitations of our attractional assumptions about the audience. Both revealed the same underlying problem: the Consumer-Driven Operating System was built around targeting specific demographics with specific preferences, and that foundation couldn't easily accommodate fundamental shifts.

The Demographic Reality

The modern Church Growth Movement found its American traction in places like the suburbs where I grew up—areas that were, in the 1970s and 1980s, overwhelmingly white. When pioneering leaders like Robert Schuller, Bill Hybels, and Rick Warren conducted their famous door-to-door surveys to discern the felt needs of their communities, they were hearing from white suburbia. It's hard to fault them for listening to their communities and responding to what they heard.

This approach was consistent with Donald McGavran's teaching. His homogeneous-unit principle—often misinterpreted as promoting segregation—argued that people are most easily reached in groups of those who share similar backgrounds. “Do, I beg of you,” he wrote, “think of it primarily as a missionary and an evangelistic principle.”¹ He believed missionaries of a similar culture would be more effective at reaching people within that culture.

When I graduated from high school and went to college, my roommate was black. Suddenly, I was exposed to a whole new life and living context. My university was more diverse, with people of color representing approximately 10% of the student body. For perspective, forty years later, that number is approximately 25%. Yet even in that more diverse setting, natural affinities persisted. My white

friends hung out together. My roommate's friends hung out together. We were friendly across those lines, but the lines existed, nonetheless.

This is what McGavran had observed and tried to leverage. People naturally gravitate toward others who share their background. The question was whether the church should accommodate that tendency or challenge it.

The Forerunner Stage

The prophetic voices challenging racial division in the American church had been present for decades, though often marginalized within mainstream evangelical conversations.

In his book, *Leading a Healthy Multi-ethnic Church*, Mark DeYmaz identifies a “forerunner stage” in the multiethnic church conversations stretching from the late 1960s through 2000.² During this period, theological conversations about racial reconciliation were being developed by leaders emerging from the civil rights movement—voices like John Perkins, Samuel Hines, and Tom Skinner.

John Perkins, born in 1930 into a Mississippi sharecropping family, had experienced Jim Crow's brutality firsthand, including witnessing his brother's murder by a police officer. Rather than abandoning the church, Perkins spent more than fifty years challenging white evangelicals to embrace racial reconciliation. In 1989, he founded the Christian Community Development Association, built around what he called the “Three Rs”: relocation, redistribution, and reconciliation.³

Alongside these developments, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship was also engaging racial and ethnic diversity, deliberately cultivating a multiethnic community among students and faculty. In the early 1970s, InterVarsity created a position for vice president of multiethnic ministries and amended its purpose statement to commit to including students of every ethnicity; by the late 1970s, its multiethnic student demographics had grown significantly.⁴

Nevertheless, relatively few intentionally multiethnic congregations were planted or sustained during the Forerunner Stage. One early experiment in integrated

urban ministry was Circle Church in Chicago, planted by David Mains in 1967 with a small group and growing to approximately 500 congregants within four years. Mains chronicled the early years in his book *Full Circle* (1971),⁵ and later reflected that the church did not catalyze a broader wave of similar congregations as he had once hoped, humbly acknowledging the limits of that pioneering effort.

By contrast, Charles Ware had been building infrastructure for multiethnic ministry since the 1970s, when he founded Revival Baptist Church, a multiethnic inner-city congregation, while still in college. In the 1980s, Ware launched the Voice of Biblical Reconciliation and, throughout the 1990s, organized seven national multiracial ministry conferences, laying critical groundwork for the movement's later expansion.⁶

Ken Hutcherson, a former NFL player, launched Antioch Bible Church in the Seattle area in 1984 as an intentionally multiethnic congregation grounded in biblical reconciliation. Drawing on his public platform and prophetic preaching voice, Hutcherson addressed racial division directly from the pulpit while calling the Church to repentance, unity, and shared mission. Through Antioch Bible Church and his broader ministry, Hutcherson remained a prominent and often prophetic voice for gospel-centered, multiethnic ministry from the late twentieth century until his passing in 2013.

These forerunners laid essential groundwork. But their voices remained on the margins of mainstream evangelical thinking, which focused on church-growth strategies that produced such visible results in white suburbia.

By the mid-1990s, the conversation began to surface more broadly. At its peak, Promise Keepers made racial reconciliation a central theme. Bill McCartney declared that “racism is an insidious monster. You can’t say you love God, then not love your brother.”⁷ Billy Graham called racial and ethnic hostility “the foremost social problem facing our world today.”⁸

But as megachurch pastor Tony Evans observed, “the concerns of black Americans are not of dominant concern by and large to white evangelicals.”⁹ The

forerunner voices were being heard, but the church growth engine continued running on its existing fuel.

The Pioneer Stage

As far back as the late nineteenth century, critics noted that the Sunday morning Protestant worship hour was “the most segregated time of the week.”¹⁰ In 1952, Helen Kenyon, a leader with the National Council of Churches, labeled 11:00 a.m. on Sunday as “the most segregated time” in America, a lament Martin Luther King Jr. repeated in sermons and speeches throughout the Civil Rights era.¹¹

Things began to shift around 2000. Sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith published *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*.¹² Their research provided empirical grounding for what many had suspected: evangelical theology’s emphasis on individualism and personal relationships, while sincere, was structurally inadequate for addressing systemic racial issues. DeYmaz identifies the book as marking “the end of the Forerunner Stage and the beginning of the Pioneer Stage of the Multiethnic Church Movement.”

Three years after the publication of *Divided by Faith*, two leaders who would become central to the movement’s next phase met at a 2003 gathering in Indianapolis organized by Ware and Hutcherson through Leadership Network. DeYmaz, a church planter from Arkansas who, together with his wife, Linda, had launched Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas in 2001 as an intentionally multiethnic congregation, connected with George Yancey, a sociologist whose research focused on multiracial congregations. DeYmaz told me that their conversation that day led to a partnership that would shape the movement’s infrastructure for the next two decades.¹³

That same year, Oxford University Press published *United by Faith*¹⁴, which made the positive case for multiethnic congregations. Yancey’s book *One Body, One Spirit: Principles of Successful Multiracial Churches*¹⁵ provided practical

research on what made multiracial churches succeed. The movement now had both diagnosis and prescription.

Building the Mosaix Global Network

In 2004, under the name Mosaix, Yancey and DeYmaz hosted the first local multiethnic church conference in Dallas. The attendance revealed just how early the movement was, with approximately thirty people, including the church secretary, sound tech, and pizza deliveryman.

But momentum would soon build. In April 2005, the cover of Christianity Today declared “All Churches Should Be Multiracial.”¹⁶ Later that year, a second Mosaix conference in Dallas drew 100 people, showing modest growth, but progress, nonetheless.

I first met Mark DeYmaz in 2004 as I launched Exponential and he started Mosaix. We partnered for my entire 18 years as CEO. Mark participated in our first Future Travelers group that helped shape Exponential’s direction. We called him the “Energizer Bunny” for the multiethnic church—he could turn virtually any conversation toward the need for multiethnic churches. Twenty years later, it’s a blessing to see Mosaix’s impact on Christianity in the U.S. I’m proud of my friend’s persistence. In researching this book, I haven’t found any leader or group that has shaped this conversation since 2000 more than Mark DeYmaz and Mosaix Global Network.

Between 2006 and 2008, Mosaix formalized its structure, becoming a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with Jim Spoons as its first executive director. The network promoted a “2020 Vision”—the goal of seeing 20% of churches achieve 20% diversity by the year 2020. In 2007, Jossey-Bass and Leadership Network published Mark DeYmaz’s *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church*¹⁷, which became a finalist for Christianity Today Book of the Year. The book articulated the theological foundations of the movement and identified seven core commitments, offering pastors practical guidance for turning hopes into reality.

The 2008–2009 financial crisis threatened the fledgling organization. When Spoons’ support dwindled and he resigned, DeYmaz stepped in as Mosaix’s next executive director. After consulting nearly thirty leaders from around the country, and with support from his own church in Little Rock, he agreed—and went to work organizing a national conference.

In November 2010, Mosaix hosted its first National Multiethnic Church Conference in San Diego. Four hundred people from thirty-one states and three foreign countries attended. Main sessions were livestreamed and viewed by nearly 500 additional people in fourteen countries. The theme was “On Earth as it is in Heaven.”¹⁸

Ed Stetzer identifies this moment as “the midway point of the Pioneer Stage of the Movement.”¹⁹ The multiethnic church conversation had moved from scattered forerunners to an organized infrastructure. The question now was whether it could achieve broader diffusion.

Institutional Breakthrough

The years following the 2010 conference saw what Stetzer calls “institutional and organizational breakthrough.” Multiracial and multiethnic tracks began appearing at large conferences like the Exponential Conference, the Purpose Driven Network, and the Willow Creek Leadership Summit. Denominations created new departments and positions to advance multiethnic churches. Prominent denominations leading the way included the Evangelical Covenant Church, the Evangelical Free Church of America, and the Reformed Church in America, creating new departments and positions to advance multiethnic churches.

It is worth noting the similarity between this institutionalization and the early days of the modern Church Growth Movement. When denominations commit to something and make it a priority, traction often begins to build.

Leadership Network, which has played such a catalytic role in many of the innovations we’ve explored in this book, invested in the multiethnic church as one of its future church initiatives. In partnership with Mosaix, Leadership

Network launched a two-year learning community focused on the multiethnic church, involving twelve churches and thirty leaders.

Beginning in 2006 and continuing for nearly a decade, Mosaix partnered with Exponential to host pre-conference workshops at both the East and West Coast annual events. This partnership brought multiethnic concerns directly into conversation with the church-planting networks we explored in Chapter 23.

In 2003, Efrem Smith planted Sanctuary Covenant Church in Minneapolis and, in 2012, authored *The Post-Black and Post-White Church: Becoming the Beloved Community in a Multi-Ethnic World*—a title that captured where younger generations were already heading.²⁰ Bryan Loritts founded Fellowship Memphis in 2003 and later launched the Kainos Movement with the mission of “making multiethnic church the new normal.”²¹ Brenda Salter McNeil brought more than thirty years of reconciliation teaching, first with InterVarsity and later at Seattle Pacific University. Derwin Gray founded Transformation Church in South Carolina in 2010 and became a strong proponent and national voice.

Many other leaders impacted the movement during this pioneering phase in the 2000s. Examples include: David Anderson, founding pastor, Bridgeway Community Church (Columbia, MD) in 1992 and author of *Letters Across the Divide* (2001) and *Multicultural Ministry* (2004), Miles McPherson, founding pastor of The Rock Church (San Diego) in 2000, Dave Olsen, of the Evangelical Covenant Church and Author of *The American Church in Crisis* (2008), Korie Little, sociologist at The Ohio State University and author of *The Elusive Dream* (2008), Soong-Chan Rah, author of *The Next Evangelicalism* (2009) and *Many Colors* (2010), Wayne Schmidt, General Superintendent of The Wesleyan Church who in the early 2000s was modeling multiethnic church-planting, and Alejandro Mandes who was the Executive Director of the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA)’s All People Ministry. This list illustrates the strong voices championing the budding multiethnic church efforts in the early 2000s.

By 2013, the second National Mosaix Conference in Long Beach drew more than 1,000 attendees from thirty-one states and three foreign countries. Sixty speakers led plenary sessions, tracks, and workshops. The conference was broadcast live,

attracting more than 1,000 unique viewers from twenty nations.²² The pioneer stage was transitioning toward diffusion.

The Harder Conversation

Despite this momentum, the multiethnic church conversation proved far more difficult for the established attractional church than the other innovations of this era.

Consider the contrast. Multisite expansion could be implemented through strategic planning and technological investment. Church-planting networks could be launched by entrepreneurial leaders using proven models. Externally focused ministry could be added as a program without fundamentally changing weekend services. These innovations worked within the Consumer-Driven Operating System rather than against it. They extended the system's reach without challenging its core assumptions.

The multiethnic conversation was different. It raised uncomfortable questions about the very foundations of how most successful churches had been built.

Becoming genuinely multiethnic meant questioning who your church was designed to reach. It meant potentially losing members who preferred homogeneity. It meant changing worship styles, leadership structures, and measures of success. For churches that had been built—and whose pastors had been trained—within the consumer-driven paradigm, the multiethnic conversation felt less like an invitation to extend their ministry and more like a challenge to everything they had built.

The suburban megachurch, optimized for reaching white middle-class families, couldn't simply add multiethnic programming the way it added a second campus or a community service initiative. The system itself was built on assumptions about who the "customer" was and what that customer wanted. A multiethnic ministry required rethinking the customer, and the Consumer-Driven Operating System wasn't designed for such a fundamental change.

A Generational Shift

Yet something else was happening that would prove more significant than any conference or book.

Remember my high school experience—3,200 students, virtually no diversity, and I never noticed who was missing? My children's generation couldn't be more different. Millennials and Gen Z came of age with fundamentally different assumptions about diversity. For them, inclusion across racial and ethnic lines isn't an initiative to embrace or a hurdle to overcome. It's simply how life works. They grew up in integrated schools, consumed media that celebrated diversity, and formed friendships across racial lines without thinking it remarkable.

Their core values include diversity and inclusion as natural expectations rather than aspirational goals. Values don't determine what we do—they shape everything we do. For younger generations, the question isn't whether churches should be multiethnic, but why they aren't already.

Here's the provocative implication: today's young people would choose diversity even if a multiethnic strategy resulted in reaching fewer people and having smaller churches. They value the diversity piece so highly that many would accept the tradeoff. This represents a fundamental shift from the church-growth calculus that had driven the movement for 50 years.

Efrem Smith's book title, *The Post-Black and Post-White Church*, articulated what many younger believers already felt. The racial categories that had defined their parents' and grandparents' churches simply didn't resonate with their experience of the world.

This raises a question about the multiethnic church movement of the 2000–2025 period. How much of the progress was the result of intentional advocacy—the books, conferences, networks, and courageous leadership—and how much was simply generational change that would have happened regardless?

The honest answer is probably both. Perkins, Ware, DeYmaz, Loritts, Smith, and others provided language, framework, and permission for churches to pursue

multiethnic ministry. They created resources and built networks that accelerated adoption. But they were also articulating values that emerging generations were embracing. The multiethnic church conversation was positioned to gain traction in ways that other challenges to the Consumer-Driven Operating System were not, partly because younger generations already valued diversity.

Emerson affirms this assessment, identifying two important factors shaping this dynamic. First, he notes that churches had increasing opportunities to become more diverse as the United States grew more ethnically diverse. As the ethnic diversity in the United States, in general, and within Christianity, specifically, increased, he also notes that “various parachurch organizations and denominations explicitly embraced increasing the number of diverse congregations as a concrete goal. Mosaix, for instance, hosted conferences attended by thousands, in addition to supplying an abundance of materials and local networks in support of diverse, socially just congregations.”²³ Emerson also acknowledged the impact of the growing number of denominations, like the Evangelical Covenant Church, in the early 2000s, which were championing multiracial congregations.

The Pioneering Energy

As I reflect on the 2000–2015 period explored in Section 5, I’m struck by the common thread running through each chapter and by the escalating challenges posed to the existing system.

Church-planting networks like Acts 29, GlocalNet, ARC, and City to City channeled entrepreneurial energy toward multiplying congregations. The Multisite Revolution enabled churches to extend their reach across geography without losing their distinctive culture. The Externally Focused Church Movement pushed congregations to look beyond their walls toward community transformation.

These first three innovations extended the attractional model without fundamentally challenging it.

The missional conversation raised the stakes by challenging the attractational assumption that people would simply come to us. It exposed the system's inability to mobilize everyday missionaries rather than accumulate volunteers for internal programs. And the multiethnic church movement confronted perhaps the most deeply embedded assumption of all—that churches grow best when they target homogeneous audiences.

Each of these movements shared a pioneering spirit. Each emerged from leaders who recognized limitations in the existing system and believed something better could be achieved. They built infrastructure—conferences, networks, books, training—to spread their vision. And each operated within the broader context of the Church Growth Movement's consumer-driven system, sometimes expanding it, sometimes challenging it, but always engaging with it.

But beneath the surface of all this pioneering energy, tensions were building that none of these innovations could fully resolve. The missional conversation exposed methodological limitations. The multiethnic movement exposed foundational assumptions. Together, they revealed that the Consumer-Driven Operating System had its limits.

The multiethnic movement was unique in one important respect: it was the only innovation that some leaders perceived as directly challenging any of McGavran's foundational principles. Church planting networks could embrace the homogeneous unit principle as they plant more churches. Multisite could extend homogeneous congregations across multiple locations. Externally Focused Churches could serve diverse communities while maintaining homogeneous weekend services. Even the missional conversation focused more on posture than on the congregation's composition.

But the multiethnic movement said the homogeneous unit principle—whatever its merits in cross-cultural evangelism, discipleship, and missionary contexts—had produced something in American evangelicalism that contradicted the gospel's reconciling vision. Sunday morning shouldn't be the most segregated hour. The church should look like the kingdom it proclaimed.

To be clear, Donald McGavran did not intend for what he called the “HU principle” to create segregation or racial division. He saw it as an evangelistic and disciple-making principle for individual Christians to reach their spheres of influence most effectively. From my study, I don’t believe he saw it as a corporate church strategy to segregate the community. The mosaic of individual believers, mobilized on mission to make disciples, should be reaching the diversity of their mission fields outside the church. The church should then represent the mission field.

In 1978, McGavran himself cautioned against misapplication of the homogeneous unit principle, warning in a letter that “there is danger, of course, that congregations (whether established according to the HU principle or not) become exclusive, arrogant, and racist. That danger must be resolutely combated.”²⁴

Whether the Consumer-Driven Operating System could accommodate this challenge remained an open question. Progress was real but slow. By 2020, according to research co-authored by Emerson, 22% of evangelical churches had achieved multiracial status—up from 7% two decades earlier.²⁵ The needle was moving, significantly, realizing Mosaix’s ambitious “2020 Vision” of seeing 20% of churches reach 20% diversity in their attending membership.

By 2025, the percentage of U.S. congregations meeting this definition had risen substantially, increasing from approximately 6% in the late 1990s to roughly 22%.²⁶ When broken down by Christian tradition, growth in multiethnic congregations followed a similar upward trajectory:

- Catholic: 17% (1998) to 22% (2024)
- Mainline Protestant: 5% (1998) to 17% (2024)
- Evangelical: 7% (1998) to 24% (2024)

Emerson concludes, “The first quarter century of the Multiethnic Church Movement produced a demographic miracle. We should shout it from the mountain tops. God is working!”²⁷

In reflecting on this progress and looking to the future, DeYmaz told me, “If the first twenty-five years of what I believe to be a one-hundred-year movement brought initial integration, the next twenty-five must bring the movement to full maturity. Churches that meet demographic benchmarks will need to move beyond assimilation—integrating individuals into a dominant culture so that differences are minimized or eliminated—and toward accommodation, adapting structures, practices, and expectations so that difference is not merely absorbed but genuinely sustained and empowered.”

Regarding the challenges of creating cultures where we do notice who’s not in the room, DeYmaz says, “Pastors and ministry leaders, churches, networks, and denominations alike will need to set aside lingering fears and embrace faithful interaction with all people, not just some people, for the sake of the Gospel and the glory of God.” Toward this end, DeYmaz cast the vision for a new movement goal at the 2025 Mosaix Conference. Chuck Mingo and Troy Jackson articulated the vision this way: “By 2050, eleven o’clock on Sunday morning will be known as the most undivided hour of the week.”

Section 5 Reflections

As Section 5 of our historical journey concludes, we see a movement that successfully extended through external focus, multisite expansion, church-planting networks, and multiethnic and missional engagement. Yet all these innovations, impressive as they were, had been built upon and operated within a Consumer-Driven Operating System that had gradually evolved over fifty years from Donald McGavran’s original ideals.

This programmatic approach proved remarkably adaptable and persistent. It incorporated business management principles, embraced marketing strategies, institutionalized leadership development, and even attempted to accommodate missional insights. However, the core tensions remained unresolved.

The next phase of our story moves beyond extension and innovation to confrontation with fundamental systemic limitations. Beneath the surface of all this pioneering energy, tensions were building that none of these innovations

could fully resolve. The Consumer-Driven Operating System had proven remarkably adaptable, capable of absorbing new programs and strategies without fundamentally changing its core dynamics. The question was whether adaptation would be enough—or whether the system itself was approaching limits that no amount of innovation could overcome.

That question was about to be answered. The American church was heading toward a wall.

Reflection Questions

Do you notice who's missing?

Think back to the last church service you attended. Could you describe the ethnic and cultural composition of the room? If you're like me in that movie theater decades ago, you may not have noticed—because you weren't trained to notice. Younger generations see immediately what older generations often miss. What would it take for you to develop eyes that see not just who is present, but who is absent? And what might that awareness reveal about assumptions embedded in how your church has been designed?

Is your church positioned for where generational values are heading?

Today's young people would choose diversity even if it meant smaller churches and slower growth. They value a multiethnic community so highly that they would accept the tradeoff. Is your church prepared for a generation that evaluates effectiveness differently from its parents? What would change if you measured success not just by how many people you're reaching but by whether your congregation reflects the diversity of the kingdom you proclaim?



SECTION 6

The Next Movement

Beyond the Limitations of Success

The innovations and extensions we explored in Section 5 represented the pinnacle of the modern Church Growth Movement's adaptability. Through externally focused ministry, multisite expansion, church-planting networks, and even attempts to accommodate multiethnic and missional insights, the Consumer-Driven Operating System has proven remarkably resilient and persistent.

Yet beneath the surface of continued numerical growth and institutional success, fundamental tensions remained unresolved. The very foundations that had powered fifty years of church growth were about to be tested by forces none of us saw coming. What began as extensions and innovations would soon reveal themselves as symptoms of deeper systemic challenges that could no longer be ignored or managed away.

The next phase of our story moves beyond extension and adaptation to confrontation with immovable obstacles. The American church was about to discover what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object.



CHAPTER 26

Hitting the Wall

Facing Our Operating System Dilemmas

In one of cinema's most memorable scenes, Neo sits across from Morpheus in *The Matrix*, facing a choice that will determine the course of his existence. Morpheus reveals that Neo's reality—everything he has known, worked for, and trusted—is an elaborate illusion designed to keep him captive.

In Morpheus' outstretched hand lies a pill. The blue pill offers safety, captivity, and continued illusion—Neo can return to his comfortable but false reality, never knowing the truth. The red pill offers risk, freedom, and harsh truth—Neo will be awakened to reality, but can never return to the safety of not knowing.

“This is your last chance,” Morpheus warns. “After this, there is no going back.” Neo must choose between remaining enslaved to a sophisticated system that feels real or paying the enormous cost of freedom.¹

Now imagine you're sitting in that same position as Neo, but instead of Morpheus across from you, it's someone who claims to see a fundamental flaw in the system that has powered your entire ministry career. Everything you've known, understood, and worked for, everything that has brought you success and recognition, everything that feels meaningful and effective—all of it may be built on a foundation that is subtly but profoundly flawed. And, it's a system that blinds you to reality.

You've been *living in the safety of not knowing*, and now you're being offered a choice like the one Neo faced.

The first option: Continue perfecting the art of attractational ministry and drawing people to compelling programs and services. Keep measuring success by attendance, giving, groups, volunteers, calendar activity, services, sites, staff, and buildings. Continue building local institutional capacity to enable your church to scale, sometimes by adding new sites. Focus on building growth momentum and on discovering the “silver bullet” to overcome your next growth barrier. Dwell in the predictable, proven methods that deliver the results you’ve defined as personal success. Avoid sleepless nights wrestling with the burden of owning the lostness of your geography and the disorientation of wondering why the kingdom you’re building lacks the movemental impact you’ve read about in history.

Your scorecard of accumulation and the adrenaline rush of church growth will always be just enough to keep you living in the safety of not knowing.

The second option: Acknowledge that, despite numerical success and institutional health, something fundamental about your operating system may be constraining your ability to see the movements you long for. Face the brutal facts about the consumer-driven system that has shaped your ministry, even if it means questioning everything you’ve invested your life building. Accept the discomfort of admitting that what has gotten you where you are might be holding you back from where God wants you to go. Risk the safety and predictability of the proven system in pursuit of something that aligns more closely with Jesus’ original design for His followers.

The unresolved tensions we explored in Chapter 24 between missional calling and attractational practice were not merely theological debates or strategic differences. They were symptoms of something deeper—systemic dilemmas embedded within the Consumer-Driven Operating System that had powered fifty years of church growth.

Our Prevailing Operating System Dilemmas

A dilemma is a situation in which a choice must be made between two or more equally good or bad alternatives. Of course, our angst in making decisions is

higher when we perceive two equally bad options or when we believe the right option is risky, unsafe, or personally painful. Stated simply, a dilemma is a difficult choice with impactful consequences.

My diagnosis of the systemic issues with our prevailing operating system takes the form of 12 dilemmas—critical decision points that have shaped American church culture over the past 50 years. These dilemmas help explain how McGavran’s original vision gradually evolved into something quite different.² They weren’t the result of bad intentions or theological compromise. They emerged from well-meaning leaders making difficult choices in complex circumstances.

These twelve dilemmas work together like a circular flywheel, each one naturally flowing into the next, creating and maintaining the Consumer-Driven Operating System. When leaders resolve these dilemmas in favor of attraction, accumulation, safety, familiarity, and consumer growth, the resulting inertia becomes increasingly difficult to overcome.

The twelve dilemmas in their natural narrative order:

1. **The Listening Dilemma** – Do we start with Holy Spirit discernment or human strategy?
2. **The Inheritance Dilemma** – What models, systems, and assumptions have we inherited without questioning?
3. **The Legacy Dilemma** – Is our inherited endgame shaped more by “large” or “saturation”?
4. **The Success Dilemma** – How does our endgame shape our definition of success?
5. **The Mission Dilemma** – Are we making converts or disciple-makers?
6. **The Lordship Dilemma** – Are we making church consumers or surrendered disciples?
7. **The Programmatic Growth Dilemma** – What is our primary growth engine?
8. **The Doctrine Dilemma** – Does the Bible or culture shape our worldview?
9. **The Volunteer or 3% Dilemma** – Are we mobilizing missionaries or recruiting volunteers?

10. **The Leadership Dilemma** – Does our system rely on all-stars?
11. **The Economic Dilemma** – Do we have a liberated or resource-dependent financial engine?
12. **The Entrenchment Dilemma** – Are we immunized from revolutionary change?

Let's explore several of these dilemmas in detail. For a comprehensive treatment of all twelve dilemmas and how they work together systematically, see my forthcoming book, *Multipliers Dilemma: Understanding the Consumer-Driven Church Operating System*.³

Naming Your Angst!

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as the Church Growth Movement reached unprecedented heights, many leaders began to feel a growing sense of angst, although most couldn't quite identify what was troubling them. They had mastered the attractional model. They had built influential ministries and impacted thousands of lives. By every measure that mattered to their peers, they were succeeding.

And yet, something deep within them whispered that they might be winning the wrong game.

My friend Robert Lewis wrestled with this experience. Robert has been a friend and mentor for many years, and I asked him to write the foreword to this book because of his deep involvement across many facets of the Church Growth Movement. He was an entrepreneurial lead pastor involved in the early Leadership Network gatherings, a proven practitioner growing and leading a megachurch, a pioneer in the Externally Focused Church Movement, a thought leader helping fan the flames of church growth, a longtime board member of Leadership Network, and a personal pastor to Bob Buford.

Like many others who helped shape the movement, Lewis sought to honor God, reach lost people, and grow the church—things that would make Donald McGavran smile. However, around 2005, toward the end of his tenure

as lead pastor, Lewis began to feel a persistent unease about the direction of evangelicalism and the broader movement. He sensed something was wrong, but couldn't quite articulate or identify his concerns. He was one of the first leaders I asked to read this book for feedback. He described the first twenty-four chapters of this book as a walk down memory lane, but the remaining chapters (which cover the dilemmas and disruptions that led to the compound fracturing of evangelicalism) as "therapeutic." He said he wished he could have named these dilemmas and their impacts much earlier in his career, so that he could have sought adjustments.

Lewis's experience illustrates a pattern I've observed in hundreds of leaders—a growing awareness that something fundamental needs to change, coupled with difficulty in naming exactly what that "something" is.

Robert is not alone. Many leaders have felt and continue to feel the same unease. They sense that despite impressive numerical growth, something fundamental might be amiss. My prayer is that this chapter will help you name something you've been feeling, overcome the safety of not knowing, and understand why I've been so persistent in identifying the programmatic, Consumer-Driven Operating System as an unintended consequence of the Church Growth Movement.

The Dilemmas of Success and Inheritance

In chapter 27, we'll look at what I'm calling the "Disruption Era" (2015 to 2025), which saw the compound fracturing of evangelicalism. I was surprised by the number and convergence of disruptions that occurred during this period. Disruptions often follow seasons of success. If it's true that history repeats itself, as it often does, then a fresh wind of revival and renewal is certainly headed our way. That likely means new wine requiring new wineskins, soon. Are you ready? If not, the safety of not knowing is the most unsafe place you can be.

Before we delve deeper, let me reiterate a key point. Words matter, and the terms I use throughout this chapter—"consumer-driven," "programmatic," "attractional"—aren't meant as attacks on well-intentioned leaders seeking to

advance God's Kingdom. Like the familiar metaphor of a frog slowly boiling in gradually heated water, these dilemmas evolved gradually through the decisions of evangelistic leaders. The challenge is that we've collectively become unintentional participants in a system that may be working against our deepest Godly desires.

This represents the *Dilemma of Success*—rooted in the safety of not knowing. Our programmatic approach has been so highly successful at producing church growth that it's difficult to see the truth and face the brutal facts that our prevailing system is simply not capable of producing multiplication that leads to disciple-making movements. We become content with something much less than the explosive capacity of the gospel to fill every crack and cranny of our neighborhoods, cities, and regions. This contentment with the status quo, in turn, keeps us from recognizing the deeper tensions we'll explore in this chapter.

When success becomes our primary reference point, we naturally want to replicate and institutionalize what works, leading to the *Dilemma of Inheritance*. What is proven, successful, and widely embraced becomes our new normal. What we consider important gets embedded in the DNA of the ministries and churches we start.

Consider the small label on your computer that reads, "Powered by Intel" or "Intel Inside." This is a symbol of brand trust, which means I can have confidence in what is inside controlling my computer. For the past thirty years, most of our U.S. church plants have carried a functional label that reads, "Powered by the Programmatic, Consumer-Driven Operating System."

What is perceived as successful and not challenged is poised to become an inheritance for the future. But inheritance isn't neutral—it shapes our destination. What we inherit influences what we aim to build, creating a third tension or dilemma. This brings us to a critical question: What legacy are we pursuing?

Gospel Saturation and a ‘Movemental’ Mindset

Church-planting networks had the potential to be different from other outwardly focused innovations. They required leaders to look beyond their own scorecards and invest resources in planting new churches rather than simply growing existing ones. This fostered a different mindset, later termed “movemental”—one oriented toward multiplication rather than accumulation.

Jeff Leake, founding pastor of Allison Park Church in Pittsburgh, exemplified this shift in thinking. In 1996, Leake was frustrated because his church had grown to 750 members but was constrained by facility limitations. He focused on solving what he saw as “his problem”—finding space for his church to grow. This is one of many tensions facing the attractional church model. In this context, “our problems” tend to center on our local church paradigm of success, rooted in growing larger ... here, where we are.

During a season of prayer, Leake sensed God asking him, “Will you put ‘My problem’ first?” God’s burden, Jeff realized, wasn’t just his individual church’s growth but the saturation of the entire Pittsburgh region—every community and town that lacked life-giving churches. Jeff shared that God showed him, *“If I solve your problem (needing more space), and your church grows into the thousands, that still doesn’t solve My problem, because all these towns and communities will still be without a life-giving church.”* The revelation shifted Jeff’s focus from growing a single large church to a movemental approach aimed at gospel saturation.

Jeff’s story highlights the ***Dilemma of Legacy***. The adage “start with the end in mind” is particularly applicable in this dilemma. What legacy and endgame are you pursuing for your church? For most leaders, the answer is rooted in growing large, sustainable churches, possibly even mini kingdoms. But that’s a significantly smaller vision than the movemental capacity we have within our grasp. Gospel saturation represents a much larger vision that requires a different scorecard and approach compared with what the attractional, programmatically biased, Consumer-Driven Operating System can deliver.

Do we pursue a legacy of “large” or “saturation”? One is proven; the other is risky and uncertain. The choice between pursuing “large” or “saturation” isn’t

just philosophical—it fundamentally determines our growth strategy and what we invest in most heavily.

Championing Movemental Thinking

By 2006, Dave Ferguson and I were at Exponential, increasingly focused on where we envisioned the emerging networks would head. We set out to inspire and equip church-planting leaders, like Jeff Leake, with a multiplication and movemental mindset.

Our annual Exponential conference themes reflected this progression: “Risk the Ride”⁴ in 2006 challenged leaders to take their churches on a journey toward movements. “Transformation Starts in the Heart of One”⁵ (2007) emphasized the power of each believer to initiate a movement. “The DNA of Reproducing Churches”⁶ (2008) focused on the idea that movements start with churches practicing generational reproduction repeatedly. We were calling and inspiring people to more than “one-off” church plants. “The Art of Movements”⁷ (2009) captured the mystery of movements and the need to engage in the journey without having everything figured out.

But we discovered a troubling gap. Even the most successful practitioners were struggling to break free from the very system that had grown their church. This dynamic played out dramatically in an Exponential gathering I facilitated in 2009 called “Future Travelers.”

Future Travelers: The Red Pill Moment

The retreat was supposed to be informal—no agenda, no schedule, just rest, great conversations, good food, and fellowship among peers. I had been hearing from pastors at large churches that the bigger their churches got, the lonelier they felt. So this gathering was designed as a respite from the pressures of ministry leadership. Ironically, but providentially, we also had missiologist Alan Hirsch participate.

We quickly realized God had brought us together for a purpose. I get chills thinking about how the Holy Spirit showed up in that gathering.

The participants weren't struggling church leaders—they were among the most successful practitioners in the Church Growth Movement and emerging church-planting networks. Several other influential churches would later join the ongoing Future Travelers cohort that emerged from this retreat.

These leaders were living what most pastors wanted. Greg Surratt had built Seacoast Church into a multisite network, co-founded the Association of Related Churches (ARC), written books, and been on the speaking circuit. Dave Ferguson was pioneering innovative approaches at Community Christian Church and the NewThing Network. Shawn Lovejoy, Brian Bloye, and Mark DeYmaz had all built large, influential churches and networks. Most had similar résumés of accomplishment.

What united them wasn't just their success, but their hunger for something beyond individual church growth. Yet they sensed a gap between their dreams of movements that inspired them and the reality of their experience.

Your Biggest Angst

Let me take you inside this watershed gathering. I started the retreat with a simple question: "What is your biggest angst or challenge across all the domains of your life?" Something remarkable then happened.

Steve Andrews, founding pastor of Kensington Church, went first. "Oh, that's easy," he said. "I planted my church and, by God's grace, grew it to mega status. We've done almost all the right things, including externally focused ministry, multisite, and church-planting. But there aren't enough years left in my life to keep building this thing bigger. I'm interested in changing the conversation from 'Where's the next campus?' to 'How do we mobilize and release 400 of our members to take our city?'"

As we went around the circle, every leader echoed some version of what Steve said. "That's mine too!" The next leader, and the next leader, and the next

leader—all the way around the circle—expressed unanimous agreement on a common burden. They all felt the same angst about the institutional realities that seemed to pull them back toward accumulation. In retrospect, this is the same angst that so many other leaders, like Robert Lewis, also felt.

One leader captured the moment perfectly: “I feel like I’ve been climbing the ladder of success, higher and higher, and as I look around this room, I think I have the ladder against the wrong wall.” Then it happened. Another leader declared, “This is our red pill moment!”

They could continue riding the momentum of what had brought them success, or they could acknowledge that something fundamental might be limiting their ability to see the movements they longed for. At one point, Alan Hirsch, in his Australian accent, leaned forward and said, “If you guys put your minds to it in this area of shared burden, you can change the course of Christianity in the West.” I get goosebumps thinking about it because we all believed it, and the Holy Spirit was at work in our conversations.

While “change the course of Christianity” sounds idealistic, presumptuous, or even arrogant, if you had been there with us in that anointed moment, you would have believed it, too. Each of us wanted it to be true and embarked on a journey of discovery. These leaders wanted to experience the joy of seeing movements in our context and lifetimes. Unfortunately, we weren’t seeing a trajectory in that direction, despite their commitment to church-planting and reproduction.

The Level 5 Framework

Let me introduce a simple framework that explains the angst these leaders were feeling. Think of church health and growth in five mathematical levels:⁸

- Level 1: Subtraction (declining)
- Level 2: Plateau (stagnant)
- Level 3: Addition (growing)
- Level 4: Reproduction (church-planting)

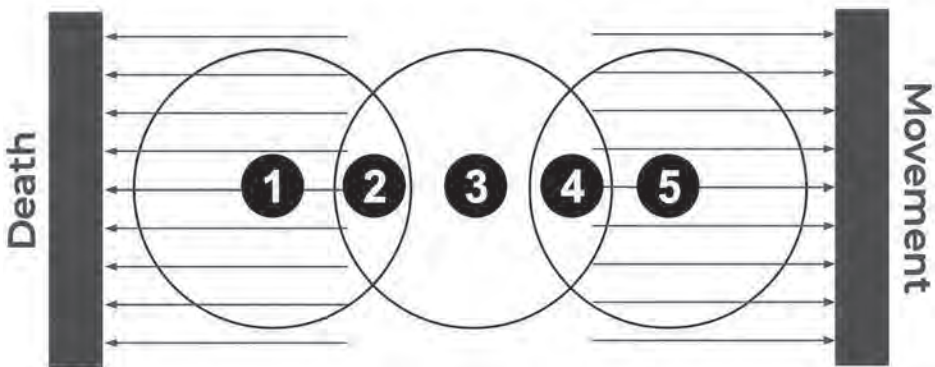
- Level 5: Multiplication (generational reproduction leading to movements)

About one-third of churches exist at each of the first three levels at any given time. While 100% of churches have a core behavior at Levels 1-3, our studies consistently show that only 7% of U.S. churches reproduce at Level 4, and essentially none multiply at Level 5⁹.

Our Future Travelers cohort consisted of Level 3 churches with strong Level 4 behaviors, placing them in the 7% category. However, they were burdened by a longing for Level 5 multiplication. Their angst stemmed from sensing that Level 3 success was constraining their movemental dreams.

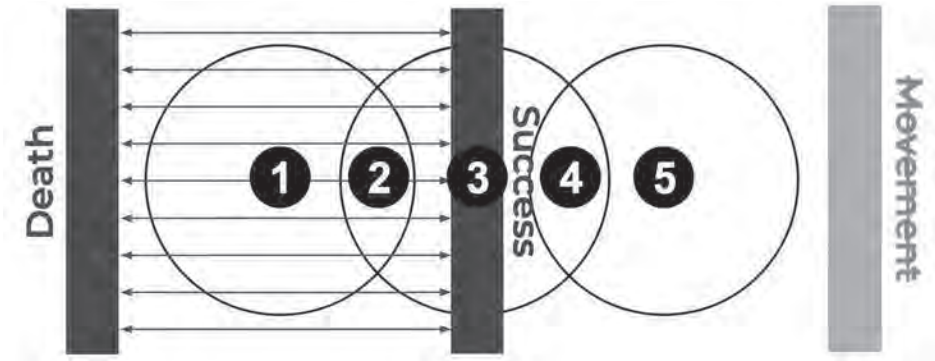
Within this framework, imagine the church's playing field as a field with two competing magnets. On one end sits the "death magnet"—the inevitable pull of decline. On the other end, the "movemental magnet" should draw churches toward healthy reproduction and multiplication.

God's Intended Playing Field for the Church



However, the Church Growth Movement unintentionally replaced the movemental magnet with a "Level 3 magnet" in the form of the programmatic, Consumer-Driven Operating System. Our playing field then resembles the following illustration. Moving from Level 1 and 2 to Level 3, and then optimizing Level 3, becomes our functional definition of success.

Our Hijacked Playing Field



The Pivotal Second Question

When I asked these leaders, “What’s holding you back?” the answers revealed the paradox:

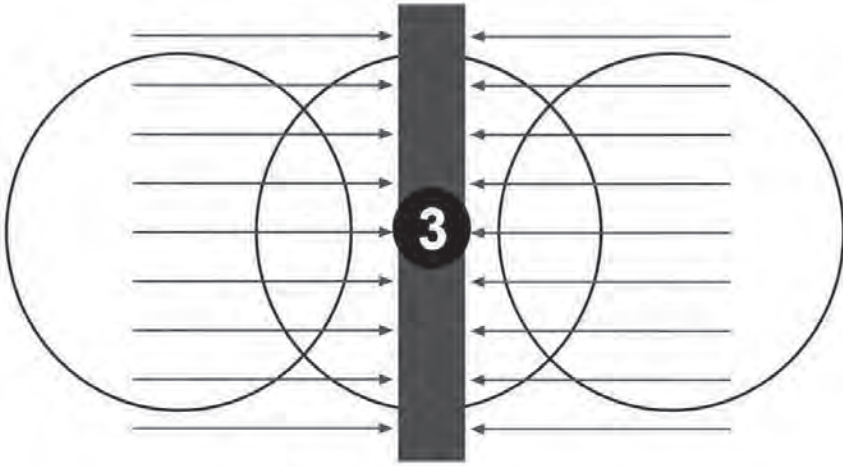
“We have an \$11.2 million building complex. The people we’d release to take our city are the same ones paying off this mortgage.”

“How can our children’s staff encourage mobilization when we struggle to fill hundreds of volunteer spots each Sunday?”

“Every time we release a campus pastor to plant, we lose local momentum.”

Do you see the paradox? What’s gotten us where we are in our success is holding us back from where we want to go! Magnets, like operating systems, hold captive whatever is within their reach, simultaneously pulling from all directions. The same magnet, or operating system, that successfully draws churches to Level 3 and holds them captive there, also holds them back from experiencing Levels 4 and 5.

The Level 3 Magnet



This Level 3 magnet derives its strength from its alignment with what most church leaders consider success: growing large, sustainable churches. The Consumer-Driven Operating System encompasses all the elements that create this magnetic pull, including buildings, staff, programs, excellent Sunday services, demographic research, marketing strategies, and systematic approaches to church growth. It functions like a proven formula that, if followed, will help the church grow.

Remarkably, no authentic disciple-making is needed to fuel it—just great programs, systems, and communicators. Furthermore, the right gifted, visionary communicator—equipped with the right staff and resources—can achieve success by embracing the programmatic formula and algorithm. Tragically, you don't need to be a Christian leader to find success.

For a more detailed exploration of the Level 5 Framework and magnet, see my book, *Multipliers: Leading Beyond Addition*.¹⁰

The Programmatic Growth Dilemma

Each of the dilemmas we've explored—Inheritance, Success, and Legacy—creates momentum toward the ***Dilemma of Programmatic Growth***. When we choose accumulation over multiplication, we naturally gravitate toward programs as our growth engine.

Armed with a conversion-driven priority to fuel our endgame of growing large, sustainable churches, we're on a dangerous path toward producing consumers who must be continually fed. This sets us up for our prevailing operating system's "consumer-driven" descriptor. The adage "what you win them with is what you win them to" plays out powerfully in our prevailing operating system. Some would say it's giving us cultural Christians as our most predominant product.

In embracing a programmatic growth engine, we need the best Sunday services, kids and student programming, cutting-edge marketing, innovative outreach, and more. Programming becomes our catalyst for sustaining growth. How we add makes all the difference, and when programmatic growth replaces generational disciple-making (The Mission Dilemma), we create a system conformed to the Level 3 magnet and optimized for Level 3.

I like to describe the dilemma this way. Programs, especially those with a consumer focus, do produce numerical growth. However, inanimate things like buildings, programs, church services, campuses, and even priorities never reproduce and multiply. They can only consume volunteer hours and financial resources (***The Volunteer Dilemma*** and ***The Economic Dilemma***). That's how programmatic addition works. In replacing disciple-making and missionary mobilization with programs as the church's growth engine, we've limited the church's ability to reproduce and multiply.

The Level 3 magnet represents the evolution of over fifty years of gradually co-opting Donald McGavran's original ideals and principles—the very system we've been tracing throughout this book. What started as McGavran's focus on mission, multiplication, and reaching unreached people groups, with the goal of reaching Levels 4 and 5, slowly evolved into a sophisticated system optimized for institutional and programmatic growth.¹¹

This programmatic momentum creates our final and perhaps most sobering dilemma. Once leaders recognize these systemic constraints, they face a new challenge entirely.

The Dilemma of Entrenchment

The aftermath of this Future Travelers conversation was both significant and sobering. These leaders embraced the red pill path, committing to change. They continued together in a cohort, facilitated by Alan Hirsch, and most took meaningful steps toward becoming more missional in their approach. Several attempted to shift resources toward mobilization and multiplication, moving from “Where’s the next campus?” to “How do we release our members to take our city?”

However, within a few years, most found the changes more limited than they had hoped. Programmatic inertia is real and difficult to overcome. Staff expectations, board pressures, congregational metrics, denominational scorecards, and the entire ecosystem surrounding their churches created a gravitational pull back toward familiar patterns. Furthermore, Sunday is always coming, consuming more than 80% of the time, talent, and treasure of most programmatically driven churches. Our limited results weren’t a failure of leadership or commitment—it was a testament to the systemic power of the Consumer-Driven Operating System.

This brings us to the *Dilemma of Entrenchment*. Unlike the Success Dilemma, in which success blinds us to the problem, these leaders clearly saw the limitations of the Consumer-Driven Operating System. They were willing to face the brutal facts about what was holding them back from movements. But even when leaders understand the problem and genuinely want to change, the inherited system proves too entrenched to overcome without revolutionary transformation.

What we learned serving hundreds of church leaders in future learning cohorts was the difference between revolutionary and evolutionary change. Revolutionary change is like switching from Android to Apple’s operating system. It requires dismantling and rebuilding everything. Evolutionary change is like updating from version 1.0 to 1.1. It works within existing frameworks. Participating

leaders discovered that overcoming the Consumer-Driven Operating System required a revolutionary change, but existing churches could typically handle only an evolutionary change.

This experience confirmed our growing understanding that the challenges weren't just about individual leadership decisions—they were systemic.

The Flywheel in Motion: How All Twelve Dilemmas Work Together

The dilemmas are part of a larger, more comprehensive system. Picture a circular flywheel in the shape of a clock. This flywheel has 12 equally spaced labels around its outer edge, each representing one of the 12 dilemmas. Our Consumer-Driven Operating System spins round and round and round, over and over and over, seeking to grow our church numbers as it helps us accomplish our purposes.

To sustain its growth, the system must be continually fed. Its fuel is inherently built into the dilemmas that make up the system: more growth, more fuel, more momentum, more growth, as the cycle continually repeats itself. Occasionally, the engine hits a growth barrier and gets stuck. The church plateaus and eventually declines to death, or it finds catalytic relief that moves it again.

Each of the twelve dilemmas feeds into the next, creating a flywheel that becomes increasingly difficult to slow down, much less reverse. The foundational listening error leads to inheriting flawed systems, which shape our success metrics, which determine our legacy vision, which defines our mission, which attracts consumers, which requires programming, which compromises doctrine, which demands volunteers, which needs all-star leaders, which requires increasing funding, which creates such entrenchment that even aware leaders can't escape. The system perpetuates itself through all twelve interconnected dilemmas.

The *Dilemma of Entrenchment* reveals why change is so difficult. Even when leaders clearly see these constraints and genuinely want to change, the systemic momentum proves nearly impossible to overcome without revolutionary transformation—something most existing churches simply cannot handle.

Looking Forward: The Perfect Storm Ahead

The five dilemmas we've looked at in this chapter (for a comprehensive treatment of all twelve dilemmas in their natural narrative order, check out my forthcoming book, *Multipliers Dilemma*) didn't remain dormant, theoretical problems. By 2015, these unresolved tensions would converge with cultural, technological, and generational forces to create what can only be described as a perfect storm. The Consumer-Driven Operating System that had powered fifty years of church growth was about to face its greatest test.

The fault lines created by these dilemmas—between consumer and disciple; between attraction and multiplication; and between institutional success and Kingdom impact—would soon be subjected to unprecedented pressures. COVID-19, political polarization, social media disruption, moral failures among high-profile leaders, and generational shifts would expose the fragility of systems built on shallow foundations.

What emerged was not just disappointment or decline, but something more profound: the compound fracturing of evangelicalism itself. The movement that had once defined American Christianity would splinter into competing tribes, each claiming authentic faith while questioning the others' legitimacy.

The red pill is still in your hand. The question is whether we'll learn from this history to write a different future—one that honors McGavran's original vision while avoiding the systemic captivity that has constrained so many well-intentioned leaders. The Disruption Era that follows will test every assumption we've inherited about what it means to be the church in America.

But disruption also creates opportunity. Sometimes you have to hit the wall to realize you've been running in the wrong direction. Sometimes the system has to break before it can be rebuilt on better foundations. Sometimes the end of one era becomes the beginning of another.

The next stop on our journey of discovery moves beyond diagnosis to disruption, beyond hitting the wall to watching it crumble. What we'll discover is that the same

historical forces that produced both the beauty and the limitations of the Church Growth Movement are still at work today, preparing the way for what comes next.

Reflection Questions

Blue pill or red pill—Which path are you currently choosing?

Be brutally honest with yourself. Are you continuing to optimize the attractational model (better preaching, contemporary worship, excellent programs, strategic marketing, more campuses) while measuring success by attendance, giving, and facilities? That's choosing the blue pill—comfortable captivity to a proven system.

Or are you willing to acknowledge that, despite numerical success, something fundamental about your operating system may be constraining your ability to see movements? That's the red pill—uncomfortable truth, risking everything you've built, but a pathway to genuine transformation. Which path are you on? Be specific about evidence in your ministry decisions, budget allocations, staff roles, and what you celebrate as wins.

What's your "What got you here is holding you back" story?

The leaders in the Future Travelers cohort discovered that their success created constraints: buildings requiring mortgage payments, volunteer needs that prevented mobilization, and campus expansion that stalled momentum. What's your version?

List the top three factors that have contributed to your church's success (building, staff positions, programs, systems, reputation, volunteer culture, weekend excellence). Now ask: How might these same factors be preventing reproduction and multiplication? If your children's ministry requires forty volunteers every weekend, how does that constrain missionary mobilization? If your building seats 800 and you're running 600, how does the building shape what you can/can't do? The paradox is real: what made you successful at Level 3 (addition) often prevents you from succeeding at Level 4-5 (reproduction, multiplication). Naming your specific constraints is the first step toward addressing them.



CHAPTER 27

The Disruption Era

Vulnerable Foundations

2015 to 2025

I've spent nearly three decades working with thousands of church leaders. Somewhere around 2016, the conversations changed. For years, the questions I heard at conferences and in coaching calls were about growth: "How do we reach more people? How do we break the next attendance barrier? How do we launch another campus?" Then, almost overnight, the questions shifted: "How do we hold our church together? How do I preach the Bible without losing half my congregation? How do I keep my staff from quitting?"

One pastor captured it for me: "I preached verse by verse through Romans for twelve months. Never mentioned politics once. When I finished, I lost families from both sides, some who said I wasn't speaking out against the left, and others who said my silence was complicity with the right. I just preached the Bible. Both sides heard a political statement." The dilemmas we identified in the last chapter, embedded in the Consumer-Driven Operating System for decades, were about to be tested by forces few of us saw coming.

Yuval Levin, director of social, cultural, and constitutional studies at the American Enterprise Institute, made the following observation about the fracturing of America in his 2017 book, *The Fractured Republic*.¹ "We are now a nation of individuals. And all around us we observe the bifurcation and division—whether moral, economic, social, or political—that defines our public life."

The decade spanning 2015 to 2025 was the most turbulent period in modern American evangelicalism. Cultural disruptions came together with speed and intensity during this era, exposing vulnerabilities that had been building within the Consumer-Driven Operating System for decades. Like a medical compound fracture in which a bone breaks in several places, evangelicalism experienced fractures across its theological and programmatic foundations, authority structures, and movement identity.

These breakdowns resulted from what we can best understand as disruptions or convergent pressures that challenged the established foundations of evangelicalism. At least four foundational disruptions created the primary fault lines: the breakdown of the Consumer-Driven Operating System itself, the rise of platformed individualism, accelerating theological erosion, and a crisis in spiritual authority. These core factors produced appealing progressive theology and ideology that shifted the center of evangelicalism toward a more secular worldview.

Additional amplifying disruptions, including COVID-19, cultural division, faith deconstruction, and digital activism, intensified and accelerated the foundational cracks. Individually, each disruption was significant. Collectively, they converged like seismic forces, further expanding the fault lines identified in chapter 26 into a full, potentially unfixable fracture.

What made this era unique was not just the intensity of individual disruptions, but their simultaneous occurrence and mutual reinforcement. When the fault lines we identified in chapter 26 were tested by forces most of us didn't see coming, the resulting fractures revealed just how fragile the foundation had become.

The Vulnerable Foundation

By 2015, the Consumer-Driven Operating System appeared to be reaching new heights of success. Megachurches continued expanding, attendance metrics soared, and the infrastructure of conferences, publishing, and church-planting networks had never been more sophisticated. Yet beneath the surface, a troubling

paradox had emerged: the system had become optimized for producing the wrong outcome.

The twelve dilemmas I identified in chapter 26 had created what appeared to be a successful system that attracted crowds while producing believers who could remain affiliated without becoming surrendered and educated without being transformed. Donald McGavran's original insights about removing barriers and understanding target populations had evolved into programming designed primarily to satisfy consumer preferences rather than to form surrendered disciples.

The system excelled at what it measured, but produced unintended consequences. The conversion processes and discipleship approaches that supported rapid growth often made it easier for people to "accept Jesus" without fully surrendering their cultural ways. Rather than requiring costly discipleship from the outset, the system allowed converts to incorporate Jesus into their existing worldview and lifestyle.

George Barna's research documented this concerning trend. While millions had genuinely become Christians through these churches, with many developing strong biblical faith, the percentage of Christians with solid biblical worldviews had steadily declined since the early 1990s. The majority trend shifted toward cultural Christianity rather than surrendered discipleship, with a steady, decades-long decline. As Barna observed, "It certainly seems as if the culture is influencing the church more than the church is influencing the culture."²

This optimization created what author and cultural futurist Reggie McNeal identified as evangelical "clubs where religious people can hang out with other people who share their politics, worldview, and lifestyle."³ Instead of producing the counter-cultural disciples that evangelicalism had historically been known for, the system increasingly generated believers who, as Paul described in Ephesians, remained "infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (Eph. 4:14).

While the consumer-driven system succeeded remarkably in attracting people, it laid a vulnerable foundation for evangelicalism. When the convergent disruptions

of 2015 to 2025 hit the church, they exposed how fragile a foundation built on cultural Christianity instead of surrendered discipleship had become.

The compound fracturing of evangelicalism that resulted was not the cause of these disruptions, but rather their inevitable outcome. This vulnerable foundation would prove to be the first of four interconnected fractures, each of which would make the others more damaging and ultimately create the perfect conditions for complete systemic breakdown.

Theological Erosion: The Loss of Evangelical Unity

The consumer-driven system's production of cultural Christians created the perfect conditions for the second foundational fracture: the erosion of theological unity that had historically held together evangelicalism across denominational lines. Building on this vulnerable foundation of cultural Christianity, theological erosion accelerated the process of fracturing. While spiritual leadership and biblical authority splintered, the doctrinal foundations that had once unified evangelicalism across denominational lines simultaneously eroded, removing the theological center that might have provided stability during turbulent times.

By 2018, pastors across the country began noticing something troubling in their congregations. Longtime members who could quote Scripture and had attended church for decades were increasingly adopting cultural positions that seemed disconnected from biblical teaching. It wasn't rebellion—it was confusion about how to think biblically about complex issues. Cultural Christianity and progressive theology infiltrated the movement's core, replacing biblical conviction with secular accommodation. The data is clear, the consequences are visible, and the fracture is real.

Evangelicalism was not only navigating cultural pressure but also struggling within the church.

What pastors witnessed was the lived reality that researchers would later document as widespread theological syncretism. The confusion was understandable. The consumer-driven system had trained believers to view faith as a personal

preference rather than an objective truth, making it natural to blend biblical principles with appealing cultural values. At the heart of theological erosion lay what Barna called “syncretism,” or the mixing of ideas from different belief systems to create personal beliefs. His research revealed that 88% of Americans now subscribe to this approach, which blends biblical principles with competing worldviews, including secularism, postmodernism, and moral relativism.⁴ This represented a fundamental shift from interpreting culture through Scripture to interpreting Scripture through cultural values.

The decline in biblical thinking was dramatic. The statistics confirmed what many church leaders were experiencing firsthand: Barna’s Cultural Research Center found that “born-again Christians holding a biblical worldview” declined from 27% in 2017 to just 19% in 2020—a 30% drop in just 3 years.⁵ Even more concerning, among Christian pastors (those charged with theological leadership), only 37% demonstrated a biblical worldview in 2022.⁶

Barna defines “biblical worldview” using specific criteria to assess whether individuals think biblically about core life issues. This measurement is significant. The biblical worldview traditionally served as the thinking framework that unified evangelicalism across network and denominational lines.

The Fracturing of Evangelical Distinctives

A consequential outcome of the erosion of sound biblical doctrine was the fracturing of what had historically been evangelical distinctives. Four fundamental “sanctities” had served as unifying foundations for evangelicalism for decades:

- the inerrancy of Scripture
- the sanctity of life (pro-life positions)
- the sanctity of marriage (one husband and one wife)
- the sanctity of gender (male and female as distinct biblical categories)

By the start of the Disruption Era, these distinctives had become divisive issues rather than unifying priorities.

The erosion of biblical inerrancy proved foundational to all other theological drift, creating a domino effect that would make evangelicals vulnerable to the next major disruption. When evangelicals adopted a lowered view of Scripture's authority and accuracy, they could rationalize away the other three sanctities as merely cultural rather than biblical mandates. This created a domino effect: compromise biblical authority, and biblical positions on life, marriage, and gender became negotiable cultural preferences rather than non-negotiable spiritual convictions. These sanctity issues became particularly volatile because they generated significant visibility and engagement on social media platforms, making them attractive topics for those seeking to build digital influence—a dynamic that would prove central to the third foundational fracture.

Consider what happened in churches across the country during this period. You've probably heard a story like this: a pastor in Colorado watched as his congregation split when a prominent Christian podcaster took a progressive stance on gender issues, attracting members who had grown uncomfortable with traditional biblical positions. Or perhaps you know a youth pastor, like one in Texas, who discovered that her teenagers were more influenced by Instagram influencers questioning evangelical positions on social justice than by her carefully prepared Bible studies. In both cases, digital personalities had bypassed traditional church authority to offer alternative theological perspectives that felt more culturally acceptable.

Issues that had once defined evangelical identity and provided clear boundaries now created internal division. Progressive voices within evangelicalism questioned these traditional positions, while conservative voices insisted they remained non-negotiable. The result was competing claims about what constituted authentic evangelical faith. What had once unified became divisive, creating a vacuum where theological unity had once provided coherence.

This theological confusion created the perfect environment for the third foundational disruption: digital platforms that promised clarity and certainty in an increasingly fragmented religious landscape. Without theological unity, political, social, and cultural ideologies often filled the vacuum. When evangelicals could no longer agree on core doctrinal distinctives, they increasingly found their primary identity in political affiliation, social justice positions, or cultural

tribal markers rather than shared biblical convictions. This created what Barna termed “cultural Christianity”—a faith expression that borrowed Christian language and symbols while operating from fundamentally secular worldview assumptions.

The consumer-driven system had contributed to this erosion by prioritizing broad appeal over doctrinal clarity. In efforts to attract diverse audiences, many churches had minimized beliefs that might offend cultural sensibilities. The system’s emphasis on felt needs over biblical truth had gradually acclimated evangelicals to prioritize personal preference over scriptural authority. As Nancy Pearcey, author of *Total Truth*, observed, “The Christian message does not begin with ‘accept Christ as your Savior’; it begins with ‘in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.’”⁷ The loss of this integrated worldview foundation made theological erosion inevitable.

This theological erosion created fertile ground for the digital disruptions that would follow. Without shared biblical convictions to provide stability, evangelicals became susceptible to finding identity and authority through alternative sources.

The Rise of Platformed Individualism

Into this landscape of theological confusion and weakened church authority came technological advances that would exploit the fractures and transform them into something far more damaging. Into this landscape of theological erosion and culturally shaped Christians came technological advances that would exploit the fractures and vulnerabilities. The digital revolution altered how influence operated in American society, creating what could be termed “platformed individualism,” or the idea that people build their identity, purpose, and influence through digital platforms.

When believers could no longer rely on shared theological foundations or trusted pastoral authority, digital platforms offered an appealing alternative: spiritual influencers who provided clear, emotionally satisfying answers to complex cultural questions. This cultural transformation disrupted authority

structures across almost every sector of society, but its impact on evangelicalism was particularly pronounced. The democratization of voice, with millions of ordinary people gaining platforms to share their views, caused even deeper problems. New forms of celebrity could now bypass established church authority structures, often eliminating any form of accountability. The consumer-driven system had already trained people to be choosers of religious content, making the shift to digital authority feel natural when church-based authority became contested.

Consider what happened to someone like Sarah, a thirty-something mother from the suburbs. After her church split over political issues and her pastor resigned over controversy, she found herself turning to Instagram for spiritual encouragement. Within months, she was following a dozen Christian influencers who offered conflicting perspectives on biblical womanhood, social justice, and political engagement. Without realizing it, Sarah had replaced pastoral authority with personality-driven content that changed based on whoever posted most recently.

Thought leader Michael Hyatt observed, “We’re in an era where anyone with a smartphone can become a thought leader. But not everyone with a platform has the wisdom to lead.”⁸ This democratization of voice proved particularly damaging to evangelicals already unmoored from theological distinctives, making them vulnerable to digital personalities who offered certainty in an increasingly fragmented religious landscape.

From Radio Stations to Spiritual DJs

The shift happened gradually, then suddenly. Traditional authority had operated like radio stations. Church leaders chose content, and audiences received what was broadcast. But as theological erosion weakened confidence in pastoral leadership, a new model emerged. The Disruption Era created what I call “playlist authority.” Individuals could curate their own mix of spiritual influences, choosing a pastor from California, an influencer from Texas, a podcast from New York, plus their own opinions.

The consumer-driven system had already trained people to be “choosers” of religious content, making the playlist approach feel natural when church trust declined. The ultimate step involved becoming their own spiritual DJs, positioning themselves as primary authorities in their curated content mix.

This represented a fundamental shift from spiritual authority to personal preference, in which people were increasingly inclined to choose influences based more on emotion and cultural alignment than on biblical truth.

Within evangelicalism, this manifested as a dramatic shift from pastors to personalities. The statistics confirmed what many church leaders were experiencing. The Digital Religion Research Center documented the impact: independent religious influencers grew by 287% between 2019 and 2022, while traditional denominational channels grew by only 42%.⁹ Digital platforms rewarded emotional engagement over theological depth, soundbite culture over contemplation, and group agreement over biblical truth. Consider how quickly a pastor’s sermon could be reduced to a fifteen-second TikTok clip, stripped of context and nuance, then shared by thousands who had never heard the full message. Being heard became more important than growing in faith. Followers replaced friends, emotional soundbites replaced truth, and ideological pandering replaced wisdom.

As Sarah Bessey, an influential Christian blogger, noted, “Blogging gave us a way past the gatekeepers of evangelicalism.”¹⁰ But as gatekeeping disappeared, so did accountability. Churches had unintentionally conditioned people to be consumers of religious content rather than spiritually mature disciples, making them easily drawn to digital personalities with 24/7 broadcast platforms. Unfortunately, the smartphone connected to social platforms became an influential altar of worship.

Nearly 46% of social media users reported participating in online activism¹¹, creating an environment in which advocacy often replaced spiritual formation. This shift particularly impacted evangelical youth culture, as digital personalities increasingly commanded attention that traditionally belonged to local pastors, youth pastors, and denominational leaders. This effect amplified as the youth ministries in consumer-driven evangelical churches increasingly struggled to

produce surrendered, anchored youth whose faith could withstand cultural pressures. Young people were more easily drawn to building a personal brand and influence through social media than to a biblical worldview and identity in Christ.

Echo chambers formed around personalities rather than spiritual authority and doctrinal clarity.

Platformed individualism created the mechanism by which other disruptions spread simultaneously. When the erosion of historic Christian teaching and orthodoxy accelerated, digital platforms amplified it. When cultural division emerged, digital tribes accelerated it. The resulting snowball effect often pits biblical truth and wisdom against attractive cultural ideologies, diluting the role of spiritual maturity amid the influence of social media.

As the theological center weakened and digital authority grew stronger, the stage was set for the fourth foundational fracture: a generation of young believers whose shallow spiritual formation couldn't withstand the sophisticated deconstruction narratives spreading through these same digital platforms.

Faith Deconstruction: The Generational Exodus

The convergence of these three disruptions—1) shallow consumer-driven discipleship, 2) theological erosion, and 3) platformed individualism—created the perfect storm for the fourth foundational fracture: widespread faith deconstruction among younger evangelicals. The convergence of syncretism, systemically weak spiritual formation, theological erosion, and the rise of platformed individualism created fertile ground for the modern phenomenon of faith deconstruction within the evangelical community. When young believers, having been formed in a system that prioritized cultural accommodation over biblical distinctiveness, found themselves confused by competing theological voices. They discovered digital communities that validated their doubts, and the programmatic discipleship fueling the consumer-driven system could not withstand the cultural pressures that intensified between 2015 and 2025.

Consider what happened to someone like Marcus, representing countless pastors' kids from prominent evangelical families. Raised in a megachurch environment where he excelled in youth programs and attended Christian college, Marcus began questioning his inherited faith when he encountered social justice issues that his church seemed to ignore. As he shared his doubts online, algorithm-driven platforms connected him with progressive Christian influencers who offered compelling critiques of evangelical positions on race, sexuality, and politics. Within two years, Marcus had publicly “deconstructed” his evangelical faith, gaining thousands of followers who celebrated his journey away from “toxic Christianity.”

At its core, faith deconstruction involves critically examining, questioning, and redefining religious beliefs, practices, and identities. As A. J. Swoboda, in his book *After Doubt*, puts it, “Theological deconstruction is the process of dismantling one’s accepted beliefs. It is one’s painful journey of questioning, critiquing, and reevaluating previous faith commitments upon which we relied.”¹²

While deconstruction often begins with personal doubt or theological discomfort, it has increasingly become a deliberate journey toward spiritual authenticity. What distinguished this era was how digital platforms provided both the vocabulary and the community to normalize the abandonment of faith. As Ian Harber observed from his own experience, “By and large, when someone begins deconstructing, they aren’t looking for a way to leave the faith; they are looking for a way to stay.”¹³ This insight reveals the complexity of the phenomenon, as many who deconstruct are seeking to preserve their faith rather than abandon it.

The motivations were often sincere, but those behind deconstruction were more nuanced than critics suggested. As Mike McHargue, an author who shared his journey through atheism and back, said, “Doubters don’t doubt because they’re in rebellion. They doubt because they are committed to seeking the truth.”¹⁴ However, Josh Porter, author of *Death to Deconstruction*, identified a crucial dynamic: “The spirit of deconstruction is often born from healthy and reasonable questions and doubt, but piloted by frustration and hurt.”¹⁵ This distinction between legitimate questioning and emotionally-driven dismantling would prove critical, especially when shallow discipleship had left many young

believers without the theological foundation necessary to navigate complex questions.

Faith deconstruction accelerated during the 2015–2025 decade, gaining momentum largely among Millennials and Generation Z. Statistics confirmed what many families and churches were experiencing: According to Pew Research, 34% of Americans aged 18 to 29 identified as religious “nones” by 2019, representing a dramatic shift from prior decades.¹⁶

Several converging factors accelerated this phenomenon, each building on the previous foundational disruptions. Church leadership troubles, including high-profile pastoral scandals, further eroded trust in religious institutions at precisely the moment when theological confusion and digital alternative authorities were offering seemingly more authentic spiritual options. As Mark Hackett, a Millennial writer and faith commentator, reflected on his own experience, “Breaking down my faith was triggered by the gaping disparities between the life of Jesus and personal experiences in a church that was rotting from the inside out.”¹⁷ When digital influencers offered compelling alternative narratives about authentic spirituality through the same platforms that had replaced traditional church authority, many found themselves drawn away from evangelicalism. This shift was not necessarily toward clear alternatives, but rather away from what felt increasingly confusing and contradictory.

The deconstruction phenomenon gained momentum through personal testimonies and shared experiences, more broadly empowered by the distribution capacity of digital platforms. What had started as individual doubt became a movement when platformed individualism provided the mechanism for shared experience and mutual validation. The rise of the “exvangelical” movement (former evangelicals publicly sharing their experiences of disaffiliation from the evangelical movement) provided both community and validation for those reconsidering their inherited faith. The same digital dynamics that had shifted spiritual authority from pastors to personalities now created celebrity deconstructionists whose stories of leaving evangelicalism attracted massive followings.

Dave Stovall, former guitarist for Audio Adrenaline and author of *Losing My Faith in Progressive Christianity*, experienced deconstruction through progressive Christianity before returning to orthodoxy. He warns of a crucial danger that few anticipated: “I believe in deconstruction and reconstruction, but I have strong opinions on a right and wrong way to do that. Typically, what we’re seeing now is people deconstruct, and then they eventually do away with the Bible. They get rid of the Bible’s authority in their life.” His experience illustrated how the process, while beginning with legitimate concerns, could lead to “custom-tailored faith” that “had never existed in that form or fashion before me. That’s actually dangerous.”¹⁸

Russell Moore captured this crisis in his book, *Losing Our Religion*: “We see now young evangelicals walking away from evangelicalism not because they do not believe what the church teaches, but because they believe the church itself does not believe what the church teaches.”¹⁹ This observation revealed that many weren’t rejecting Christianity itself, but rather the version of evangelicalism they had inherited—one that had been shaped by the consumer-driven system’s cultural accommodation, weakened by theological erosion, and challenged by digital voices offering seemingly more authentic alternatives.

Faith deconstruction created noticeable generational differences within some evangelical families and churches. This wasn’t just individual people leaving their faith—it was a growing pattern of young people questioning what they had been taught.²⁰ As some publicly shared their reasons for stepping away from evangelicalism, it affected how evangelical leaders were viewed and created different ideas about what authentic faith should look like. This generational split weakened evangelicalism from within, making it harder for the movement to respond to other challenges.

Fractured and Vulnerable Foundations

These four foundational disruptions operated like a compound fracture—each break made the others worse, creating a cascade of damage that proved far more destructive than any single fracture could have. These four foundational disruptions—1) the breakdown of the Consumer-Driven Operating System,

2) theological erosion, 3) the rise of platformed individualism, and 4) faith deconstruction—created the structural weaknesses that made compound fracturing inevitable. They didn't operate in isolation but reinforced each other in a devastating sequence that left evangelicalism extraordinarily vulnerable to external pressure.

The compound nature—and how we got to where we are today—becomes clear when you connect the dots: The consumer-driven system had produced cultural Christians rather than surrendered disciples—believers whose shallow spiritual formation made them susceptible to the theological confusion that followed. Theological erosion had compromised the doctrinal foundation that historically unified the movement, creating a vacuum that digital personalities rushed to fill with competing narratives about authentic faith. Platformed individualism had shifted spiritual authority from pastors to personalities, accelerating theological drift by spreading appealing but unorthodox ideas faster than traditional church structures could respond. Faith deconstruction had normalized the abandonment of inherited faith while providing community and vocabulary for those experiencing doubt, creating celebrity testimonies that made leaving evangelicalism seem not just acceptable, but also authentic and courageous.

Each fracture weakened evangelicalism's ability to withstand the next pressure. Shallow discipleship made believers vulnerable to theological confusion, which in turn made them susceptible to digital authority. Digital authority accelerated faith abandonment. Abandoning faith created more opportunities for doubt. The breaks compounded, each one making the structure more unstable.

By 2020, these foundational fractures had created a form of evangelicalism that appeared successful by traditional metrics but lacked the spiritual resilience necessary to maintain biblical distinctiveness under pressure. The fault lines were interconnected, the foundation was compromised, and the stage was set for external pressures that would turn these hidden vulnerabilities into visible, devastating compound fracturing.

What remained was for the amplifying disruptions to expose just how deep these fractures ran—and that exposure would come with a force and convergence that none of us anticipated.

Reflection Questions

Are you producing cultural Christians or surrendered disciples?

Barna's research showed that only 19% of born-again Christians hold a biblical worldview—meaning 81% blend biblical principles with secular values. Look at your discipleship process honestly: Are people becoming more surrendered to Christ's lordship over time, or are they becoming better religious consumers? Survey ten longtime members: Can they articulate how a biblical worldview shapes their views on work, money, sexuality, justice, and politics? If they sound more like CNN or Fox News than Jesus, you're producing cultural Christians. What's one change you could make this month to emphasize surrender over consumption?

Where do your members find spiritual authority—pastors or platforms?

When your church members face questions about faith, parenting, politics, or cultural issues, do they first ask their pastor or small-group leader, or do they Google it and follow whatever influencer's content resonates with them emotionally? Ask your staff: How many sermon series topics in the last year were reactive responses to viral cultural conversations happening on social media rather than proactive biblical teaching? If platforms are driving your teaching calendar more than Holy Spirit discernment, you've lost spiritual authority to digital personalities. How do you reclaim it?



CHAPTER 28

Compound Fracturing of Evangelicalism

Too Much for the Consumer-Driven System

For nearly three decades, Leadership Network had convened small gatherings of church leaders for peer-to-peer learning. These were the rooms where the innovations we traced in the previous section were accelerated: multisite strategy, externally focused ministry, church-planting, multiethnic engagement, and more. The whiteboards in those rooms were filled with words like growth, impact, innovation, and momentum. Pastors left energized, carrying new ideas back to their churches.

By the mid-2010s, the whiteboards in church conference rooms across the country were being filled with words once thought impossible within the evangelical community. The words were now division, distrust, cynicism, and deconstruction. The same leaders who had once leaned forward, dreaming about what was possible, were now increasingly leaning back, exhausted, trying to figure out how to hold things together. The rooms hadn't changed. The leaders hadn't changed. But the world around them had, and it had changed fast.

No single crisis fractured evangelicalism. It was the convergence, the sheer volume of pressures arriving simultaneously and reinforcing one another, that overwhelmed a system never built to handle them.

By 2020, the fault lines were already in place: a vulnerable foundation of cultural Christianity, accelerating theological erosion, the rise of platformed

individualism, and a generation of young believers deconstructing the faith they'd inherited. Each of these foundational disruptions, which we traced in the last chapter, had weakened evangelicalism from within. But none of them, by themselves, produced the visible fracturing that would come to define this era.

Collectively, the convergence of these disruptions is what produced the visible fracturing. Between 2015 and 2025, multiple external pressures arrived almost simultaneously, each one exploiting a different vulnerability. A global pandemic shut down the Sunday experience that fueled the consumer-driven growth engine. Cultural and political division forced churches to navigate a territory their Seeker-Sensitive strategies never prepared them for. Digital activism gave everyone a platform and nobody accountability. An increasing number of high-profile leadership failures shattered trust in the very leaders the system had elevated. Individually, any one of these would have been difficult. Together, they were more than the Consumer-Driven Operating System could bear.

The Perfect Storm: Amplifying the Compound Fracturing

While the foundational disruptions discussed in Chapter 27 created fractures within evangelicalism, something else happened at the same time. Multiple accelerating disruptions came together. This intensified the compound fracture beyond what any single fracture could have produced. These weren't isolated challenges that evangelicalism could address one at a time. Instead, they were overlapping crises that magnified each other's impacts and exploited foundational vulnerabilities.

Digital Activism and the Breakdown of Truth

Digital activism emerged as the most pervasive amplifying force of the Disruption Era. When platformed individualism merged with social activism, it created an environment in which emotional engagement took precedence over truth, and tribal influence replaced thoughtful discourse.

Many Christians found themselves drawn into this system, often damaging their witness through divisive social media behavior. Consider how quickly a pastor's sermon clip could go viral, not for its biblical insight, but for its political implications. Or how Christian influencers gained followers by taking strong positions on cultural issues rather than heeding Paul's call to live at peace with everyone. The platforms rewarded controversy over contemplation, outrage over wisdom, and engagement over truth.

Digital activism offered something the consumer-driven system had trained people to want: immediate impact and visible results. Championing causes online felt more rewarding than the slower work of spiritual formation. The 24/7 nature of digital engagement began competing with traditional church involvement, while Christians became performers rather than disciples.

The breakdown of shared truth became a defining feature of this era as institutional credibility declined across American society.¹ Digital platforms made this worse through misinformation ecosystems that made it difficult to distinguish truth from emotional manipulation. When false information spread faster than the truth and competing narratives claimed equal validity, a unified evangelical response became virtually impossible.

Digital activism served as an accelerant, transforming foundational cracks into compound fractures. It rewarded viral personalities over pastoral wisdom, creating a celebrity culture that made traditional church authority harder to maintain. Church leaders often avoided divisive cultural issues, allowing digital voices to fill the void and further amplify polarization while diluting the foundational evangelical voice.

This breakdown of shared truth and the rise of tribal digital engagement created the perfect conditions for the second accelerating force: a global pandemic that would simultaneously test every weakened foundation.

COVID-19: The Great Revealer and Accelerator

The COVID-19 pandemic landed right in the middle of the Disruption Era, serving as a visible crisis that everyone could relate to. COVID didn't create

the vulnerabilities within evangelicalism, but it exposed and accelerated many weaknesses, functioning as a perfect storm that brought other disruptions into sharp focus.

When church buildings closed overnight, the pandemic revealed how dependent the consumer-driven system had become on weekend programming. Churches scrambled online, often discovering that their members were more engaged with popular podcasts than with their pastors' teaching. Digital platforms became primary sources of spiritual influence, accelerating the shift from local pastoral authority to viral personalities. The pandemic also intensified theological confusion as churches lacked biblical foundations for understanding government authority and collective responsibility.

Cultural division exploded as evangelicals split over mask mandates, vaccine requirements, and government authority. Churches that had prioritized attracting diverse political constituencies found themselves unable to maintain unity amid intensified cultural pressures. Well-intentioned social media declarations like, "If you love your neighbor, you will wear a mask," created unnecessary division within evangelical communities, often serving more to make the initiators feel good than to promote genuine neighbor love.

Young people, isolated from faith communities precisely when anxiety and mental health issues were mounting, lost crucial support when they needed it most, at a time when global rates of anxiety and depression had already surged by an estimated 25% in the first year of the pandemic.²

COVID-19 highlighted evangelicalism's fragility, demonstrating how a single major disruption could simultaneously intensify all existing fractures in a wider culture that mental health experts were already describing as facing a "national mental health crisis."

I'll share a common story among church leaders without revealing the pastor's real name. Pastor Bryan had successfully navigated his multiethnic urban church through fifteen years of growth and cultural engagement. But COVID exposed what he later called "the illusion of unity." When he announced the church would follow city guidelines and move online, one-third of Pastor Bryan's congregation

accused him of bowing to government tyranny. When he later required masks for indoor gatherings, another group left, claiming he was promoting fear over faith. The church that had once celebrated its diversity of backgrounds suddenly fractured along ideological lines. Bryan always thought the congregation had deep relational community, but he was blindsided by what felt like shallow consumerism with a spiritual veneer. When the crisis hit, people chose their ideological tribe over their church family.

The pandemic's revelation of shallow foundations prepared the ground for the third amplifying force: cultural division that would turn political identity into religious identity.

Cultural Division and Supporting Disruptions

The theological erosion and shallow discipleship documented in the foundational disruptions made political fracturing within evangelicalism inevitable. When believers lack a solid biblical worldview foundation, political identities often fill the vacuum, competing with rather than flowing from theological commitments.

The emergence of Donald Trump as a political figure created a moment when evangelicals were forced to navigate complex tensions between political pragmatism and Christian ethics. The significant evangelical support for Trump—81% in 2016 and 76% in 2020—revealed deep fractures beneath the surface of unity.³ The crisis wasn't the political choice itself, but rather that evangelicalism had fractured into distinct sides, each claiming biblical authority for opposing positions.

This represented a fundamental breakdown of the shared theological foundation that had historically provided unity. The three once-braided streams of doctrine, justice, and politics began pulling apart, with political loyalty and cultural tribalism often straining theological unity. Many pastors found themselves unsure how to lead congregations split down ideological lines. The consumer-driven system's emphasis on cultural relevance over biblical distinctives had previously prepared the way for this political fracturing.

The generational divide was stark: young women increasingly leaned progressive while young men gravitated toward reactionary voices online.⁴ Young evangelicals, particularly women, often viewed the church as complicit in political extremism or moral compromise.⁵ The word “evangelical” grew increasingly contested—some distanced themselves from the label while others embraced it more strongly as cultural resistance.^{6,7,8}

Cultural division amplified the foundational fractures by exploiting the consumer-driven system’s shallow discipleship, making political identity more compelling than spiritual formation. It accelerated platformed individualism by creating demand for tribal echo chambers, intensified theological erosion by making biblical doctrine appear like partisan political positions, and validated faith deconstruction by forcing young people to choose between evangelical faith and social justice concerns.

As cultural division reached fever pitch and biblical unity crumbled under political pressure, the stage was set for a cascade of leadership failures that would shatter the final pillars of evangelical authority.

The Erosion of Leadership Trust and Spiritual Authority

The compound fracturing of evangelicalism was accelerated by the erosion of two interrelated pillars of evangelical stability. The gradual weakening of biblical truth, as we discussed earlier, and the decline in trust in pastoral leadership left the movement without a strong, unified voice of authority. During this same period, Billy Graham and Tim Keller died, Rick Warren retired, and Bill Hybels faced a scandal. Under the weight of numerous simultaneous disruptions on a weakened foundation, evangelicalism found itself drifting in dangerous seas, without a captain.

The weakening of spiritual authority created a different kind of problem. The core issue was not the absence of a scriptural foundation, but rather the fracturing of what had once been a more unified one. Evangelical leaders who had historically shared similar biblical interpretations now found themselves divided on key issues. This theological erosion meant that outsiders and insiders alike no longer saw a single face on evangelicalism, but rather competing voices claiming biblical

authority for different positions. Biblical authority became relative to which leaders and tribes a person embraced, creating a shifting foundation rather than the solid, unified scriptural ground that had once characterized the movement.

At the same time, trust in pastoral leadership was declining under the weight of high-profile moral failures and financial scandals involving prominent evangelical leaders.^{9, 10, 11} The consumer-driven system's emphasis on celebrity pastors (rather than character-based shepherds) made the structure more vulnerable when those celebrities fell morally.

Beyond the scandal-driven trust issues, the Disruption Era created unprecedented stress on pastoral leaders across evangelicalism. Surveys showed that 38% of Protestant pastors had considered quitting full-time ministry, while 63% experienced burnout symptoms.^{12, 13} The constant cultural battles, digital criticism, congregational division over politics and COVID responses, and pressure to navigate issues they'd never faced before left many pastors questioning their calling. This exodus of pastoral leadership came precisely when evangelicalism needed steady, trusted voices to help navigate the cultural storms.

These twin erosions often reinforced each other in problematic ways. As spiritual authority weakened, people didn't turn more to pastoral leaders; instead, like the DJ/playlist mentality we discussed in the last chapter, they began seeking other authorities outside traditional evangelical biblical frameworks. As pastoral trust declined, people also sought alternative authorities, encountering a more fragmented landscape where Scripture was increasingly contested. The result was evangelicalism with a less unified voice and the trusted, biblically grounded authority that had historically helped the movement speak with greater coherence during cultural challenges.

The collapse of pastoral authority left evangelicals vulnerable to the final amplifying force: a societywide breakdown of institutional trust that would make all traditional authority structures suspect.

The Decline of Institutional Trust

The disruptions facing evangelicalism were amplified by a broader cultural decline in institutional trust, which affected every major American institution. Between 2015 and 2025, the United States experienced an unprecedented erosion of public confidence in the foundational structures of democratic society. This wasn't just about political scandals or media bias—it was a comprehensive breakdown of trust across government, science, education, and civic institutions.

The statistics were striking. Gallup's confidence polls revealed record-low trust in Congress at just 7%, the presidency at 23%, and the Supreme Court at 25%.¹⁴ Pew Research found that only 22% of Americans trusted the federal government to “do what is right” most of the time, down from highs of 77% in the 1960s.¹⁵ The RAND Corporation discovered that 72% of Americans considered the economic system “rigged,”¹⁶ while the Democracy Fund reported that 54% believed democracy itself was in crisis.¹⁷

This institutional distrust was particularly acute among younger generations. Harvard University's Youth Poll revealed that only 20% of 18- to 29-year-olds trusted the presidency, with Gen Z exhibiting what researchers called “record-low institutional trust compared to prior cohorts.” This generational divide extended directly to religious institutions, as many young people began distancing themselves from institutional religious labels, including “evangelical,” due to perceptions shaped by political compromise and cultural disillusionment.

For evangelicalism, this broader cultural phenomenon created a double burden. Not only were churches dealing with their own internal authority challenges, but they were also operating in a society where institutional authority itself had become suspect. The decline of trust in government, media, and educational institutions meant that evangelical voices—traditionally seen as part of the broader institutional establishment—faced skepticism by association. This cultural backdrop made it even more difficult for evangelical leaders to maintain credibility and speak with unified authority during the Disruption Era.

At the Threshold of the Next Movement

The 2015 to 2025 decade will be remembered not for any single disruption, but for the unprecedented speed and convergence of multiple pressures that brought the seventy-year trajectory of the Church Growth Movement to a decisive inflection point. Building on the unresolved dilemmas and vulnerable foundation we identified in chapter 26, the fault lines couldn't withstand the breadth and volume of disruptions that converged in this decade.

What we witnessed wasn't simply a rough patch that evangelicalism will navigate and recover from. The divisions run deeper, the authority structures are more fragmented, and the theological center is more contested than at any time since the movement's inception with Donald McGavran in 1955. The word "evangelical" has become a battleground rather than a banner, with some embracing it as a form of cultural resistance while others abandon it entirely. For many, the unity and influence that once characterized American evangelicalism feels irretrievably lost.

The disunity trends documented throughout this chapter have continued to escalate, even as 2025 draws to a close, extending far beyond evangelicalism's disunity into a more pronounced societal fracturing. The political violence that has marked this final year, from assassination attempts on presidential candidates to the widespread celebration of a healthcare CEO's murder, from the targeted killing of conservative voices to attacks on federal immigration facilities, reveals a new level of societal fracturing and dysfunction. When significant portions of Americans celebrate political assassination and federal facilities become targets, I don't think I'm alone in saying that we have moved beyond mere disagreement into something far more dangerous.

Yet, historically, such extremes often signal that when a system reaches unsustainable levels, fundamental change is not only possible but also imminent. This is precisely the kind of moment where God's redemptive power shines brightest. Like a forest after a wildfire, appearing devastated but rich with nutrients for unprecedented new growth, the clearing away of what couldn't withstand the flames may have created the very conditions necessary for authentic revival. History teaches us that the most significant renewals often

emerge not from seasons of strength and success, but from apparent ruin and confusion.

Our current chaos reveals the core issue that has shaped our evangelical journey: the Consumer-Driven Operating System we traced through twenty-five chapters. This OS was unintentionally optimized to produce holding tanks for cultural Christian consumers rather than engaged mission fields for Christians fully surrendered to the lordship of Jesus. The twelve dilemmas from chapter 26 created a “successful” system that attracted crowds while producing believers who could remain affiliated without becoming fully surrendered, and who were educated without being transformed. Platformed individualism, built on a foundation of theological erosion, distrust, and disunity, left evangelicalism fractured and vulnerable.

When the disruptions of this decade exposed evangelicalism’s fragility, many who identified as evangelical became part of America’s disunity problem. In choosing political tribes over biblical community, cultural accommodation over countercultural discipleship, and platformed individualism over gospel witness, Christians became (and still are) part of the problem rather than the solution. The fracturing we’ve witnessed is the inevitable outcome of a system that prioritized numerical growth over depth and consumer satisfaction over spiritual formation.

The next movement must begin with what it has always required: a remnant of fully surrendered followers of Jesus who live as everyday missionaries, demonstrate authentic community, pursue biblical truth over cultural trends, and embody the transformational discipleship that the consumer-driven era bypassed. Like the early church, this remnant will change the world not through institutional power or cultural influence, but through the revolutionary power of lives wholly surrendered to Christ.

What gives profound reason for hope is not any attempt to restore what was fractured, but what’s beginning to stir among a new generation. On college campuses, in microchurch networks, in digital spaces, and in communities we’ve yet to fully recognize, revival is emerging that transcends the categories and conflicts of the Disruption Era. Young leaders are embracing discipleship,

mission, and community in ways that address the very vulnerabilities exposed by the past decade, often bypassing institutional structures entirely.

This is both a sobering and exhilarating moment to be a steward of Christ's church. Sobering because we're witnessing the end of a movement that shaped American Christianity for seven decades. Exhilarating because we may be standing at the threshold of something entirely new—the next movement of God's Spirit in history. Those of us leading today carry the sacred responsibility of cooperating with God to see what He's birthing beneath the surface. We have the privilege of stewarding the transition from one era to the next, helping clear the ground for whatever God is preparing to do.

The story of how we got here is now complete. The story of where we go next—with all its possibilities for renewal, revival, and the kind of authentic spiritual awakening that honors Christ and advances His mission—begins now.

Reflection Questions

Did COVID expose shallow foundations in your church?

Be brutally honest about what the pandemic revealed. When your church went online, did engagement increase or decrease? When you reopened, what percentage returned—and what does that tell you about the depth of community you'd built? Did your church fracture along political/ideological lines over masks, vaccines, or government authority—and if so, what does that reveal about whether people's primary identity was in Christ or their political tribe? Pastor Bryan discovered that his church's "multiethnic unity" was a consumer preference—people stayed as long as the product satisfied them, and left when it didn't. What did you discover about the depth (or shallowness) of your church's foundation when the crisis hit?

Are you part of the problem or part of the solution to cultural division?

The cultural division that fractured evangelicalism didn't come from nowhere—it came from evangelicals choosing political tribes over gospel witness. Check your social media from the last month: Do your posts sound more like Fox

News/CNN or like Jesus' red letters? When you talk about cultural issues (immigration, racism, sexuality, justice, poverty), do you lead with Scripture or with your political tribe's talking points?

The compound fracturing happened when Christians became indistinguishable from their political party, making ideology more central than theology. Which side of that line are you on? What's one tangible step you could take this week to prioritize gospel witness over political tribalism?



CHAPTER 29

The Next Movement

Beyond the Present

Do you know the name of your great-great-great-grandfather? Most of us don't. He's five generations back, close enough that his decisions still ripple through our lives, but far enough that his name has likely been forgotten. Yet his DNA runs throughout our bodies, helping shape who we are. His choices shaped our grandparents' world, which shaped our parents' world, which shaped ours. If we could sit with him, hear his story, and trace the thread from his life to ours, we'd see our own lives differently. We'd carry a deeper sense of stewardship for what we've been given and what we'll pass on.

Donald McGavran was born in 1897—the same generation as the great-great-great-grandfathers of today's Gen Z readers. He's where our story started, five generations ago. Most younger leaders have never heard his name, yet his missionary convictions set in motion the 70-year movement we've traced throughout this book.

Every generation since has built on what the previous one pioneered, for better and for worse. Just as values, habits, and assumptions pass from grandparents to parents to children in a family, an operating system for how we do and experience church in America has been handed down and reshaped across five generations. Understanding that inheritance, including how it evolved and what it produced, shapes how we experience church today.

The question now isn't just how did we get here?—we've spent twenty-eight chapters answering that. The question is: What will the living generations

do with what they've received? Will those who built the current system bless and release the next generation to pursue something different? And will those stepping into influence have the courage and biblical conviction to shape the future of the church, whatever role God calls them to play?

Something fresh is stirring. The Spirit is moving, and the next generation is being entrusted with stewardship of what comes next.

Breaking Free

Our biggest obstacle isn't a lack of resources or vision. It's the depth of the current system's entrenchment. The Consumer-Driven Operating System has survived generational handoffs. It's weathered the dilemma of inheritance, the paradox of success, and the safety of not knowing. It persists because what worked yesterday still produces results today.

But they're not the results we most deeply need. The twelve dilemmas we explored in chapter 26 created a system optimized for the wrong outcomes: believers who can remain affiliated without being surrendered, educated without being transformed, disciplined without making disciples, served without serving, and accumulated without being sent.

The seventy-year progression has moved through the cycle of Man to Movement to Machine to Monument, as first characterized by theologian Dr. Vance Havner. He wrote, "Through the ages, men have risen who sought to recapture the simplicity of New Testament Christianity. But the simple soon becomes complex, and they end with another [institution], the very thing they started out to get away from. There is a man, a movement, a machine, and a monument!"¹

While each generation brings its own ideals and youthful energy, the consumer-driven system remains the only operating system most leaders have ever known. In our case, McGavran birthed the movement. Boomers built the machine. Gen X inherited it, enhanced it, and now maintains it while serving as the primary gatekeepers. Older Millennials are now starting to accept the baton. Gen Z will see the monument become a memory.

We face three possible paths forward.

First, we can stay the course and simply maintain the status quo. This means continuing to optimize the attractional model—better preaching, more contemporary worship, excellent programs, strategic marketing, additional campuses—while measuring success by the attraction metrics of attendance, giving, programs, volunteerism, and groups. This path offers comfort and familiarity but perpetuates the Consumer-Driven Operating System that has proven incapable of producing multiplication movements.

Second, we can pursue revolutionary change in an unhealthy direction. This path abandons what's broken but loses what's worth keeping. Unhealthy revolutionary change takes several forms: embracing progressive theology that redefines core biblical doctrines in pursuit of cultural relevance; swinging to reactionary fundamentalism that withdraws from mission and engagement entirely; or simply trading one broken system for another—replacing the consumer-driven megachurch with equally consumer-driven “deconstruction” communities that prioritize emotions over discipleship and personal authenticity over biblical truth. This path appears to offer change, but it either compromises foundational convictions or abandons the mission entirely.

Or we can chart a new, healthy direction—pursuing revolutionary change rooted in biblical ideals that honor the past while building something genuinely different. This path requires both revolutionary change to overcome the Consumer-Driven Operating System AND revolutionary courage to stand firm on biblical truth even when it costs cultural acceptance. It means building on solid foundations while pioneering new expressions. It means honoring the evangelistic passion of previous generations while redirecting their metrics from attendance to gospel saturation, from programs to relational discipleship, from addition to multiplication. This is the narrow path that requires the most courage—refusing both the comfort of the status quo and the shortcuts of unhealthy revolution.

The question isn't *if* we'll choose. We're already choosing, with every present decision we make. But here's what makes this moment uniquely critical: Boomers and Gen X are the current gatekeepers. They hold the keys. They control the

resources. They set the expectations. For new wine to flow into new wineskins, via revolutionaries in the emerging generations, permission must come from those who stewarded the old wineskins. This requires courage, not just from emerging generations but also from those who must let go of control.

To understand what this requires of each generation, we need to see where each generation stands now.

Generational Context: Bridging the Past to the Future

Think of the Church Growth Movement as a mosaic. Each generation contributes its unique piece, but the pioneers' best insights remain valuable. The movement's strength wasn't in a single leader but in passionate leaders united by love for God, a burden for lostness, and a commitment to reaching people.

Five generations have shaped this movement, each catalyzing what followed. The Lost Generation gave us McGavran, whose missionary insights sparked everything. The Greatest Generation gave us Drucker and Schuller, who provided permission to think about the church and its mission in more comprehensive terms. The Silent Generation gave us leaders like Buford and Wagner, who championed innovation, management principles, and church-planting to scale the church's impact and expand its missional movement. Boomers like Hybels, Warren, Lewis, and many others enthusiastically built the system at scale, achieving remarkable Kingdom fruit. Millions came to Christ, thousands of churches were planted, and evangelistic passion was genuine and infectious.

Then came the Gen X leaders who took the baton from the Boomers and are now the primary gatekeepers of the church. Leaders like J.D. Greear, Matt Chandler, Joby Martin, Craig Groeschel, and many others. They've enhanced what they inherited and continue to lead with vision and competence. The conversions are genuine, and the fruit is real.

One of the movement's greatest strengths has been each generation's ability to build on what came before. McGavran connected fruit and harvest to an urgent

missionary posture. Schuller gave Hybels and Warren permission to dream outside the box. Drucker and Buford championed a new paradigm that gave the movement permission, legs, vision, and innovation to think differently about the church, its mission, and how to scale its impact. Each generation extended what the previous one pioneered. This is the beautiful part of our history.

Here's where we stand today. Picture a bell curve. Gen X sits at the peak. They are the primary gatekeepers holding the keys to the church's models and operating system. Boomers are in the left tail, mostly retired or about to retire, though some remain influential. Millennials are on the right side of the peak with the baton starting to pass, but they won't be primary gatekeepers for at least another ten years. Gen Z is in the far-right tail with virtually no gatekeeping influence yet.

There's considerable enthusiasm about Gen Z's spiritual potential, but the data is mixed. Pew Research shows their engagement is plateauing, not growing.² Barna Group offers more optimistic assessments.³ George Barna's Cultural Research Center warns of high syncretism.⁴ Ryan Burge, a leading data analyst on religion, says there's no definitive data yet.⁵ The reality is clear: without intentional disciple-making rooted in a solid biblical foundation, the next generation might become revolutionaries chasing the wrong convictions.

Here's the pivot that matters most. Whether or not revival comes, the demographic reality is undeniable. Millennials and Gen Z will inherit leadership. They will be gatekeepers. The question isn't *if* they'll lead, but how they'll lead, what decisions they'll make, what ideals will guide them, and how constrained they will be by the consumer-driven system they're in line to inherit.

Together, Boomers and Gen X are the current gatekeepers. The most significant contribution they can make isn't maintaining what exists. It's providing Millennials and Gen Z with blessing and permission to dream new dreams, pursue new wineskins, and pioneer what comes next.

We stand at a pivotal moment in U.S. church history. The seventy-year evolution helps us understand how we got here. The vital question is this: Will we embrace and encourage the next generation of faith-driven revolutionaries to shape the

future of the church? The answer depends significantly on whether current gatekeepers can adopt a posture of release.

The Posture of Release, Blessing, and Permission

So here's the challenge: How do you bless and release what comes next when you built what exists? How do you give permission for new playbooks when the old playbooks brought you success? This is spiritually and psychologically difficult. Yet it's precisely what this moment requires.

I don't know anyone who modeled this better than Bob Buford. He spent decades mentoring me and thousands of other leaders. Bob used to tell me, "I want to spend the rest of my life doing for others what Peter Drucker did for me. He gave me permission, encouragement, and accountability to be who God made me to be." And that's exactly what Bob did. So can we.

Picture Bob sitting across from you, leaning forward with that characteristic twinkle in his eyes. He'd start with a question: "What's your unique contribution? How can I help you?" Not "How can you help me?" but "How can I help you?"

Bob's greatest legacy wasn't what he built, but what he empowered others to pioneer. He created platforms through Leadership Network that mobilized thousands to pursue their unique callings, serving as a catapult for their ideas. When leaders came to him, he offered open-handed blessings, resources, connections, and encouragement. Then he got out of their way. He released permission to pioneer what he would never build himself.

It wasn't until writing this chapter that I realized how important Bob's posture of release truly is. He empowered the Megachurch Movement without becoming a megachurch pastor. He shaped church leadership thinking without writing the definitive books. His fruit genuinely grew on other people's trees.

Here's the connection to our moment. Emerging generations desperately need the same. They can open the door to the next movement. But permission and blessing must come from those who are still shepherding our current, entrenched system.

This posture of release is what the moment requires from Boomers and Gen X. The question shifts from, “What can we preserve, build, and optimize?” to “Who can we bless, release, and empower?” Bob would tell us this is countercultural and costly. It means releasing control, blessing what we might not fully understand, empowering approaches that look different from ours, and trusting the next generation to build differently. It means treating our playbooks as time-bound methods, not sacred cows, while helping preserve timeless biblical principles.

Will we follow Bob’s model and champion others’ platforms with the same conviction we bring to our own? The urgency is now. Gen X holds the keys at the peak of the bell curve. Waiting fifteen years means Millennials will have already inherited an outdated and flawed system. But if God is looking to birth something fresh, the urgency is now.

Ideals and Playbooks

Before we explore specific ideals, let’s be clear about what’s required. Emerging generations face two simultaneous revolutionary roles. First, revolutionary change to overcome the Consumer-Driven Operating System, moving from attendance to discipleship, programs to relationships, and from addition to multiplication. Second, revolutionary courage to embrace biblical truth over progressive theology, even when it costs cultural acceptance. Without both revolutions, we risk trading one compromised system for another.

In reflecting on the ideals of Millennials, Bob Buford told me that each generation starts with fresh ideas and revolutionary energy. Then they get married, buy houses, have kids, and start looking remarkably like the previous generation. There’s a natural gravitational pull toward the familiar. This is why the distinction between ideals and playbooks matters so much.

Here’s what I mean by that distinction. Playbooks are the specific methods and models we use. They’re timebound and context-specific. Ideals are the foundational principles and convictions that guide us. They’re timeless and transferable. The Boomers built their playbooks around the proven belief that “If you build it, they will come,” producing megachurches with large everything.

The emerging generations have defaulted to, “If you post it, they will follow,” which produces platformed individualism and disunity. Both are rooted in a bias toward consumption.

Robert Lewis captured this perfectly when he told me, “What they need isn’t our methods. They need our encouragement and blessing to bring their ideals to life through the lens of biblical truth. The playbook is theirs to write. Our role is to encourage preserving sound ideals while embracing new ones that will overcome the inherent flaws in our consumer-driven system.”

This is why we need to start with ideals, not playbooks. Most genuine revolutions begin where ideals meet convictions. Without this foundation, revolutions tend to follow one of three paths. They fizzle out and accomplish nothing. They succeed, but in the wrong direction, producing outcomes worse than before. Or they succeed, accomplishing meaningful change. The key distinction is often whether healthy ideals guide the passions and convictions in the right directions.

These two revolutionary roles require different kinds of ideals to guide them. Think of ideals like a ship’s rudder. They set direction. Without new ideals captured in a Kingdom-centered mission, emerging leaders remain captive to the old system. The challenge is twofold: embrace new ideals and principles, and ensure they’re the right, healthy ones.

So what ideals should matter? If I were a revolutionary emerging leader today, called to influence the church’s future, seeking to build new playbooks to reach the lost, and wanting to learn from the past seventy years, I would wrestle with several shifts as I discern my guiding ideals and create a manifesto for my revolution. These include:

- Gospel saturation over institutional growth as my endgame
- Relational disciple-making over programmatic consumption as my growth engine
- Mobilizing everyday missionaries over volunteer recruitment for extending impact
- Sending over accumulating for scaling impact
- Surrender to the lordship of Jesus over syncretism

- Biblical truth over progressive relativism
- Decentralized multiplication over centralized control
- Evangelistic urgency because hell is real, and people matter to God
- Community and unity over platform and celebrity
- Simplicity and accessibility over complexity
- Listening posture over programmatic certainty, relying on the Holy Spirit's power through prayer and fasting

Each of these shifts represents a course correction, turning the rudder from where the movement drifted toward where biblical ideals point. These aren't prescriptions. They're starting points for discernment and ideals to wrestle with, adapt, or replace as the Spirit leads.

These shifts emerge from the “looking back” part of *How Did We Get Here?*. They're offered as starting points in discerning “looking forward” ideals. The ideals that emerge from shifts like these must be both different, setting the rudder in a new direction, and right, biblically sound and wise. They'll shape everything: the playbooks developed, the movements pioneered, and the legacy left.

But healthy ideals don't emerge in a vacuum. They must be anchored in something solid.

Building on a Solid Biblical Foundation

The 1950s offered a different cultural context, with a much tighter alignment between cultural morality and biblical teaching. Abortion was illegal, gay marriage was not a topic of debate, and transgenderism was considered a mental disorder by the American Medical Association. Accepted norms, our view of right and wrong, the existence of Heaven and Hell, and even the definition of sin were not the divisive triggers they represent today.

In chapters 27 and 28, we discussed the widespread acceleration of syncretism, theological erosion, and the fracturing of evangelical distinctives, creating an entirely different context for future movement-makers. We find ourselves at

an important juncture, but with a dangerous context for mobilizing a new generation of spiritual revolutionaries.

Let me name the elephant in the room: progressive Christianity and syncretism. When Scripture's authority is neglected or ignored, everything else becomes negotiable cultural preferences rather than non-negotiable spiritual convictions. Denominations that compromised biblical authority have struggled. As we discovered in the early 2000s, emergent church voices like Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt sought to move evangelicalism toward more progressive theology. The impact was profound.

While optimism is growing for Gen Z's renewed spirituality, there's not yet sufficient evidence that any potential revival will be more than a New Age phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s. Here's what theologian Brad East observed: "They're not firmly planted in gospel soil, however arid. They're floating, tossed to and fro by the slightest of waves, the smallest of breezes. It's an absolute lack of anything solid or firm to hold onto. It's shifting sand beneath their feet."⁶

Even more pointed, East writes: "Gen Z and Millennial Christians aren't leaving church because there's too much. They're leaving because there's too little. Too little doctrine, too little dogma, too little firm and unbending teaching about the essential matters of God and faith, Christ and gospel, Spirit and Scripture. 'We don't know' doesn't cut it. 'We don't know' means they're headed for the exits."⁷ This diagnosis makes the stakes crystal clear.

Remember, we identified two revolutionary roles, not just one. First, a *revolutionary change* to overcome the Consumer-Driven Operating System. Second, *revolutionary courage* to embrace biblical truth over progressive priorities, even when that courage means being different from the surrounding culture. Studies show younger leaders embrace cultural norms around issues like sexuality and gender at rates even higher than older generations. Without solid biblical teaching at the core, one compromised system could be traded for another, perhaps even more compromised.

Here's the fork in the road: Will the next generation build foundations on shifting cultural sands or the timeless truths of the Bible? Will they embrace

the inerrancy and authority of the Bible, or see it as one of many good moral documents? This second characteristic of syncretism is a major obstacle we must overcome to bring about change.

As emerging generations wrestle with what the biblical foundation means, I'd encourage them to consider three guardrails to help avoid cultural accommodation. First, the teaching and modeling of the first- and second-century disciples who were taught directly by Jesus and His disciples. Second, historic creeds and orthodox doctrines rooted in those early leaders that have withstood biblical scrutiny across centuries. Third, the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. These aren't just historical artifacts. They're proven anchors.

But here's the critical truth. Biblical foundation isn't just about right theology or correct doctrine, though those are essential. Revolutionary change requires more than a better strategy rooted in biblical principles. It requires the Holy Spirit's power. The early church didn't change the world through superior methods or organizational excellence. They changed it through the power of the Spirit at work in deeply surrendered lives.

This is why "listening posture over programmatic certainty" is one of the key shifts: Prioritizing prayer, fasting, waiting on God, and discerning His direction rather than defaulting to what worked before. The consumer-driven system taught reliance on research, strategy, and proven methods. Revolutionary change requires dependence on the Holy Spirit through prayer. Without prayerful dependence, even biblically rooted ideals can become just another system we control rather than a movement God leads.

My prayer is that emerging leaders build their ideals and truths on God's unchanging Word, grounded in the wisdom of leaders who came before and in the power of the Holy Spirit at work through surrendered hearts.

Standing on Shoulders

The Church Growth Movement has had a remarkable seventy-year run with eternal impact. Millions came to Christ. Thousands of churches were planted.

The evangelistic passion was genuine and infectious. A new dawn is coming, but as we discern future ideals and priorities, we must avoid throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

We stand on the shoulders of strong leaders with strong convictions driven by evangelistic zeal to reach the world. They weren't perfect, and the system they built has flaws we've clearly named.

But there are strengths we shouldn't discard. Their evangelistic passion and urgency. Their love for Jesus and the church. Their entrepreneurial and innovative bias, their adventuresome spirit, and their willingness to risk. Their mindfulness of sustainability and scalability applied to the right outcomes. These are worth preserving.

Here's why standing on the shoulders of giants matters. You don't start from zero. You inherit seventy years of learning, wisdom, successes, and even failures that teach. You get a better vantage point to see the horizon. So look forward based on what you want to be for and about, not backward, running from what you don't like. Use this perspective to look forward, toward what you want to build, not backward to what didn't work.

For example, inherit these giants' evangelistic urgency but redirect their attendance metrics to gospel saturation and penetration. Adopt their entrepreneurial spirit but apply it to multiplication movements rather than institutional expansion.

Revolutionary change doesn't mean rejecting everything that came before. It means building on solid foundations while pioneering new expressions. It means honoring the past while creating the future. This is exactly what I'm trying to model in my own commitment.

What Path Will You Follow?

We've covered a lot of ground, focusing not on predicting the future but instead considering the futurity of our current context. What decisions must we make today if we are to steward the future well and empower, mobilize, and support

the next generation of revolutionaries? It comes down to this: we stand at the same crossroads, but each generation faces different choices.

To Boomers: Our legacy will be measured by who we release, not by what we've built. This is the hardest truth, but the most important one. Ask, "How can I help you?" and mean it. Give permission freely. Stop telling the next generation how to do ministry and start asking how you can help them do what God is calling them to do. Get out of their way. Trust them. Be a blessing.

To Gen X: You're at peak influence right now, leading many of America's largest churches. The question is how you'll use that influence. Will you preserve what's comfortable and perceived to be working? Or will you create space for something new? Your greatest legacy won't be another campus or program. It will be whether you empowered, released, and cheered on the next generation to do things differently. Be gatekeepers who open doors, not close them.

To Millennials and Gen Z: The foundation is yours to restore. The ideals are yours to embody. The playbook is yours to write. Root everything in biblical truth, relational disciple-making, effective evangelism, church-planting, and mobilizing everyday missionaries. Don't settle for cultural Christianity and syncretism. Raise the bar on surrender and lordship. Lower the bar on mobilizing disciple-making missionaries. This is your moment to build something that looks different. Not because different is inherently better, but because your calling at such a time as this requires new wineskins.

Embrace those two revolutionary roles. First, a revolutionary change to overcome the consumer-driven system. Second, revolutionary courage to stand firm on biblical truth. Both are needed. Both are challenging. This is your calling.

Be clear about the cost. Revolutionary change isn't comfortable or safe. Some of you will lose positions. Others will face criticism. Some will experience failure and need to start again. The cost is real. But the cost of faithfulness is worth it. The next generation of believers, the advancement of the gospel, and the glory of God are worth the sacrifice. Step into this destiny, as God's anointed ones at a time such as this in history.

Maybe you're thinking, *But I'm embedded in the current system. I can't just walk away.* You don't have to. Reformation from within is faithful work too. You can't change the entire system, but you can change how you personally disciple others. You can mobilize your small group as everyday missionaries. You can emphasize biblical teaching even if the larger church stays attractional. Start where you have influence.

Here's something concrete you can do now. *Boomers*, identify one emerging leader and ask them, "How can I help you?" Really listen. *Gen X*, identify one door you can open, one permission you can give to someone in the next generation. Then do it. *Millennials*, identify one ideal from this chapter that resonates most deeply with you. Have a conversation about it with someone older and someone younger. *Gen Z*, write down your calling as you understand it today. Share it with someone who can speak wisdom into your life.

The question isn't whether you're inside or outside the current system. Instead, ask: What path will you follow? The choice is yours. Will you participate in a fresh wind and work of God? Will you protect what we've built, or will you inherit the old system?

We stand at a pivotal moment. The chaos of the Disruption Era has cleared the way for new ground. Seedlings are emerging. The next generation is ready. The question is whether we, all of us across all generations, will have the courage to cooperate with what God is doing.

The future is now. What path will you follow?

What I'm Going to Do

Here's my confession as a Boomer. My instinct is to build, scale, and prescribe playbooks. But this impulse isn't what the next generation needs. That approach perpetuates the very system we need to move beyond.

My friend Derek Bell served on Bob's personal team for years. Derek was also a former interim director of the Drucker Institute. As a constant reminder of this posture, Derek signed all his correspondence simply, "Alongside." It's the perfect

word—walking with someone in a supportive, present, and empowering way, sharing the journey without taking over the direction.

Dave Ferguson captured this posture in his book *Hero Maker*⁸, calling leaders to shift from being heroes to making heroes. In a supplementary book called *The Legacy of a Hero Maker*,⁹ Dave and I explored how Bob Buford lived out this posture of blessing. This is the call for Boomers and Gen X: move from being heroes to becoming hero-makers. Can we co-create without being controllers? Can we uphold biblical standards while giving people the freedom to build models we might not imagine? Can we resource the calling of others without requiring them to fulfill ours?

Jesus confronted religious gatekeepers with a stark warning: “No one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins.” He was speaking to leaders who wanted to constrain God’s movement within structures they controlled. We must be careful not to become the Pharisees of this generation. We can’t insist the next movement fit into old wineskins we’ve perfected.

So here’s what I’m committing to do. I’m NOT going to tell the next generation what direction to go, what to build, or how to build it. Instead, I’m asking: “How can I help you understand your unique calling and who God made you to be? How can I help you mobilize as a revolutionary, biblically grounded, and Jesus-surrendered?”

I will be a hero maker for the next generation of revolutionaries, asking, “How can I help you?”

Build what God is calling you to build. Experiment with models we never imagined. Take risks we were too cautious to take. Fail forward when necessary. Learn from your attempts. Let me know how I can help.

Alongside!

Reflection Questions

Are you a gatekeeper who opens or closes doors?

If you're a Boomer or Gen X leader, answer these questions honestly: In the last month, how many times did you say "That won't work because..." versus "How can I help you try that?" When younger leaders propose ideas that don't fit your playbook, is your instinct to explain why it won't work or to ask how you can resource their experiment? List three specific ways you could shift from being the hero (who solves problems) to being the hero maker (who empowers others). Bob Buford repeatedly asked, "How can I help you?" When was the last time you asked that question and meant it?

Which revolutionary role are you embracing—system change or biblical courage?

If you're a Millennial or Gen Z leader, be honest about which revolution feels more urgent to you. Are you passionate about overcoming the consumer-driven system (moving from programs to relationships, Sunday-centric to everyday missionary, accumulation to multiplication) but willing to compromise on biblical distinctives to gain cultural acceptance? Or are you committed to biblical truth (inerrancy of Scripture, sanctity of life, sanctity of marriage, sanctity of gender) but defaulting to the same programmatic playbooks as previous generations? Both revolutions are required. Which one comes easier to you, and what specific step could you take this month to grow in the harder one?



Epilogue: Contending for the Future

By J.D. Greear

Dan Cathy, CEO and chairman of the board at Chick-fil-A, Inc., once gave me a tour of their rather impressive support center in Atlanta. The tour ended, or at least I thought it did, with a walk through the museum chronicling their journey to becoming a more than \$20 billion a year fast food enterprise. But just as I thought we were ending, Dan said, “Now, one thing my daddy (the founder, Truett Cathy) always told me was, ‘Son, if the museum of the past ever gets bigger than the museum of your future, you’re in trouble.’” He then ushered me into CFA’s innovation lab, which spans thousands of square feet and is devoted to reimagining the future of quick-service restaurants worldwide.

What Todd Wilson has done in this book has given you a tour of the museum of our past, ushering you into the museum of our future. The lessons here are not simply interesting; they are inspiring and instructive for those charged with bringing that future into existence.

Todd has been a trusted friend for years, first through our shared passion for church multiplication, then through his national leadership with Exponential, and, more recently, as a strategic advisor in my own life. He has helped me articulate my calling—the compass God uses to steer me—as an evangelistic teacher who contends for the faith. Through Todd’s mentorship, that calling has taken on a sharper edge: not just contending for the faith but contending for the future by giving the next generations permission, encouragement, and blessing to step into their own callings as everyday disciple-making revolutionaries.

You are likely feeling the weight of creating this future. Relax, God never put it on any of us to build His church for Him. He does it through us as we yield ourselves to Him, and His instructions for us are clear.

First, *contend for the faith*. Do not settle for cultural Christianity, and do not demand anything less than full surrender to the lordship of Jesus. Church history constantly demonstrates: *Persecution won't kill the church; compromise will*. So preach the whole counsel of God, including the parts that make every political tribe uncomfortable. Develop disciples who know what they believe and why.

Second, *embrace new wineskins*. Paul's most passionate counsel in the New Testament concerns separating gospel essentials from cultural and generational non-essentials. We can't compromise on truth, but we must adapt some of our methodologies. Todd has given us an abundance of great counsel to that end.

Third, *cling to the ancient paths*. As Todd would tell us, the essence of the Great Commission methodology doesn't change: make multiplying disciples through preaching, teaching, and life-on-life discipleship, and pray early and often, knowing that salvation from start to finish is the work of God. Revival won't come through new techniques, but through following ancient paths of humility, desperation, and devotion to disciple-making.

Finally, *give yourself to multiplication*. The church historian Rodney Stark famously said that the primary predictor of the future of any Christian movement in history is how many young men and women they are raising up for ministry.

If you're a Boomer or Gen Xer, your greatest legacy now is not what you build, but who you release. The most important question you can ask a younger leader is the one Bob Buford asked Todd, and Todd has asked so many of us: "How can I help you?" Not, "How can you keep my thing going?" but "How can I bless what God is birthing in you, even if it doesn't look like what I built?" That posture might be the most revolutionary act you perform in this season.

If you are a Millennial or Gen Z'er, hear this from a pastor who stakes his ministry on your future: the playbook is yours to write, but the foundation is not yours to edit. Stand on the shoulders of those who went before you, but do

not be afraid to call out their idols. Embody their evangelistic zeal but reject their consumer metrics. Keep their innovation, but refuse their celebrity culture. Above all, anchor everything in the authority of Scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Otherwise, this “revolution” will be a new form of captivity.

God is stirring something exciting in the next generation, especially among students and young adults. My question is, “*What are we calling them into?*” Are we going to let political operatives commandeer this awakened interest in Jesus as a voting bloc? Or are we calling them to a Jesus revolution? As I explain in *Everyday Revolutionary*, our task is to turn attendees into everyday missionaries who see their dorm, their job, their neighborhood as their mission field and themselves as “sent.” We need our sending capacity to exceed our seating capacity. That is a revolutionary posture, and it will require revolutionary leadership.

I’m grateful for Todd, his futurist mind, his courage to tell the story honestly, and his heart to champion a generation that will surpass him. This book is a gift to you because it hands you both a mirror and a map: “Here’s how we got here. Here’s where the road now divides. Here’s the kind of leader the future demands.”

Don’t put this book on a shelf and go back to business as usual. Take a step. Then another. Open your Bible with a few hungry people and start making disciples. Identify one younger leader and say, “How can I help you?” Walk onto a campus or into a high school with the assumption that God is already at work, and you need to join Him. Let’s contend for the faith, and let’s contend for the future, together. The future belongs to those who send. Let’s let the museum of our future dwarf the museums of our past.

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Author of numerous books, including *Everyday Revolutionary*



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A National Conversation

Distribution Strategy and Partners

This book was never intended to be just a book. My prayer is that God will use these words to spark a much-needed national conversation about overcoming our flawed, Consumer-Driven Operating System.

You've just finished reading seventy years of history. But the hardest questions don't have answers that fit between two covers. What is the alternative to a consumer-driven system? Why is change so difficult? And how do we empower the next generation to catalyze the next movement? Those questions deserve engaged, honest conversations among leaders at every level and from every generation.

This book is written to be a catalyst for such conversations. I'm taking some unconventional steps, including distributing the digital version for free. The success of this book is not being measured in monetary terms, but instead by the broad distribution of its content and the engaged conversations in which leaders wrestle seriously with tough questions.

These conversations, multiplied across thousands of churches, networks, denominations, and training organizations, are what I believe God can use to begin shifting the scorecard of the American church. It starts with an honest conversation about how we got here and what it will take to overcome the deeply entrenched programmatic, Consumer-Driven Operating System that has fueled the church in the U.S. for decades.

A book can start that conversation. But it cannot sustain it alone.

Supplementary Resources

The book's editor, Lindy Lowry, said it well: "I can tell you the page where my story intersects the modern Church Growth Movement. I feel like a character in this amazing story. So will anyone who reads this book." That reaction is not unique to Lindy. But finding yourself in the story is only the beginning. The resources below are designed to help you go deeper, contribute your own voice, and stay connected to the conversations this book is catalyzing. These resources are being made available at www.church-growth.org as they are developed.

- **Digital and Audio Versions.** The full book is available as a free digital download in multiple formats, including audiobook. Get it into the hands of every leader you know.
- **Interactive Wiki.** This book is a starting point for a more complete history, and the Wiki is where that history gets filled in. Lindy's reaction—feeling like a character in the story—is exactly what we hope every reader experiences. If you have a personal story, a firsthand account, or additional details from anywhere in the seventy-year narrative, you are invited to contribute. Your story deserves to be part of the meta-narrative. Visit www.church-growth.org to add your voice to the historical record.
- **Podcasts.** The main podcast brings the seventy-year history of the modern Church Growth Movement to life through conversations with leaders who shaped it. Distribution partners will develop additional podcasts organized around the book's four integrated themes, focusing on topics like missional church, microchurch, disciple-making, and church-planting. Together, these will form a network of podcasts that extend the book's conversations into specific ministry contexts.
- **Articles.** An ongoing series of articles goes deeper into the eras, figures, and dilemmas introduced in the narrative, available through the book hub and distribution partner websites.
- **Facilitation Guides.** Facilitation guides help church staff, elder boards, and ministry teams move from reading to action, engaging in meaningful conversations that will help shape their approaches to the critical questions this book raises.

- **Webinars.** Live and recorded webinars are designed for church staff, denominational teams, network gatherings, and seminary cohorts who want to wrestle with the content together.

For those wanting a physical book, the print version is available on Amazon.

Extending the Conversations

To maximize both distribution and engagement, this project is organized around a simple model: one Base Camp and many Outposts.

The Base Camp is the central book website (church-growth.org), where the digital book, audio version, interactive Wiki, podcast, articles, and supplementary resources are all available in one place. It is the hub that drives traffic in both directions, toward the content and toward the distribution partners who are extending it and creating opportunities for engaged conversations.

The Outposts are the distribution partner websites. Each partner has been commissioned and authorized to go beyond simply linking to the book. They are empowered to create their own supplemental content, host their own conversations, distribute co-branded versions of the digital book, and embed the interactive Wiki directly on their sites. The goal is decentralized, multiplied engagement. The more outposts actively distributing and discussing this content in their own communities, the wider and deeper the conversation becomes.

An Invitation to Join

If you lead or represent an organization with a meaningful sphere of influence in the American church, and you believe this conversation needs to happen in your community, I want to hear from you. Distribution partners are not vendors or affiliates. They are ambassadors of the message, collaborators in the conversation, and co-owners of the outcome.

A growing number of trusted ministry organizations are committed to championing the message of this book and extending these conversations within

their networks, as distribution partners. You are invited to join other ministries like RightNow Media, Outreach Magazine, CareyNieuwhof.com, Discipleship.org, Renew.org, Renew Movement, Passion for Planting, and NewBreed Training as distribution partners.

The full list of distribution partners, along with information on how to become one, is available at www.church-growth.org or by contacting me at todd@multipliers.org.

Visit the Website

Everything connected to *How Did We Get Here?* can be accessed through **church-growth.org**—the book's central hub for the national conversation it is designed to catalyze. There you'll have direct access to the digital and audio versions, an interactive Wiki, a podcast, articles, facilitation guides, and other supplemental resources. You will also find links to the print version and to the distribution partners' supplemental resources, including places to engage the conversation with peers. This book can start the conversation, but it cannot sustain it. Church-growth.org is where the conversation continues.



Explore all book resources at church-growth.org

About Todd Wilson

Todd Wilson is a former naval nuclear engineer turned Kingdom-minded, entrepreneurial engineer. For nearly three decades, he has served as a multiplication advocate and strategic advisor, founding or co-founding several national ministry organizations, including Exponential, Passion for Planting, Discipleship.org, Renew Movement, and Multipliers. He served for over a decade as senior strategic advisor to Bob Buford, founder of Leadership Network. Todd and his wife Anna live in the Nashville area.



Learn more about Todd at toddwilson.org

About Multipliers

Multipliers exists to come alongside leaders and organizations pursuing biblical multiplication and accelerate their impact. With only 7% of U.S. churches reproducing, Multipliers helps leaders activate the latent multiplication capacity within their churches and lives—through cohort-based experiences, multiplication frameworks, and personal coaching that lead to disciples who make disciples, who plant churches that plant churches. Multipliers also serves as the publisher of this book and the series it anchors.



Discover more at Multipliers.org

Forthcoming Books in the Series

How Did We Get Here? is the first book in a three-part series. If this book is the museum tour—walking you through seventy years of history to help you understand how the American church arrived at its current moment—the next two books are designed to help you do something about it.

Multipliers Dilemma: Understanding the Consumer-Driven Operating System is the second book in the series. It dissects the consumer-driven operating system from the inside—think of it as the frog dissection from elementary school, opening up the system to examine its inner anatomy. The Twelve Dilemmas introduced in Chapter 26 of this book are the entry point. The second book works through all twelve systematically, explaining how they function together as an interconnected flywheel, why they make change so difficult even for leaders who clearly see the problem, and what it looks like to begin navigating out of a system that has been decades in the making.

Multipliers Pathway: Implementing a Disciple-Making Operating System is the third book in the series, co-authored with David Putman and Ralph Moore. It offers the solution—a practical pathway back to Donald McGavran's original disciple-making ideals and away from the consumer-driven operating system diagnosed in the first two books. Grounded in the Multipliers Pathway cohort process (multipliers.org/mp), the third book gives church leaders the frameworks, tools, and community they need to implement a disciple-making operating system that leads to disciples who make disciples and churches that plant churches.

How Did We Get *Here*?

It's a question on the minds of church leaders everywhere. Some ask it in exhaustion, others with quiet concern, sensing something has gone wrong but unable to name it. If your church feels more like a business than a movement, if success feels spiritually hollow, or if programs multiply but disciples do not, this book is for you.

Todd Wilson traces the 70-year evolution of the American Church Growth Movement, from Donald McGavran's 1955 missionary insights to today's fractured evangelical landscape, revealing how a well-intentioned vision slowly became the consumer-driven system shaping most American churches today.

Understanding this history isn't optional. It's essential for:

- Breaking free from a consumer-driven system
- Recovering our disciple-making mission
- Mobilizing everyday missionaries
- Raising the standard for biblical integrity and unity
- Empowering the next generation for lasting change

“This book hands you both a mirror and a map: ‘Here’s how we got here. Here’s where the road now divides. Here’s the kind of leader the future demands.’”

J.D. Greear | Pastor and Author of *Everyday Revolutionary*

“We must look back to look forward. The insights in this book will make a difference, not only in you but in your church.”

Robert Lewis | Pastor, Author, and Founder of Men's Fraternity

“I can tell you the page in this book where my story intersected the modern church growth movement. I feel like a living character in this amazing story. So will you!”

Lindy Lowry | Editor and 20-year collaborator with Todd Wilson

“This should be required reading for every Bible college and seminary student—and every practicing church leader. You can't effectively navigate the future without first understanding how we got here.”

Carey Nieuwhof | Author and Host of *The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast*

