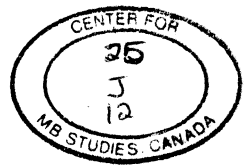# THE CHURCH GROWTH THEORY AND MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCH POLITY

Mennonite Brethren in the context of history are a renewal missionary movement rooted in the 16th century Anabaptist tradition in faith and practice. The centrality of renewal has focused their theology in soteriology and ecclesiology. The central concern for evangelism and church growth as expressed in the Church Growth Theory provides a strong affinity to that of Mennonite Brethren. The statement of D. L. Moody "It doesn't matter how you get man to God, provided you get him there" expresses the Mennonite Brethren commitment to evangelism.

I. The Church Growth Theory Phenomena

The Church Growth Theory has provided a new definition to evangelism in pointing to the important consideration the cultural implications for effectiveness in evangelism. The need to recognize the network of kinship, friendship and association as bridges to reach people with the gospel is very significant. The web-evangelism emphasis is classic.(1) It also has provided a new emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and forms of methodology for evangelism related to the context of the prevailing contemporary culture. The focus on the concern for growth is timely for an era of spiritual lethargy.(2)

The Academy of Church Growth defines the theory as "that science which investigates the planting multiplication, function and health of the churches as they relate specifically to the effective implementation of God's commission to make disciples of

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all nations" (Matt. 28:19-22).

"It strives to combine theological principles of God's word concerning the expansion of the church with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences" based on the foundational work of Donald McGavran with focus on the homogeneous principle as reflected from his missionary ministry in India.(3)

Theologically the Church Growth movement professes to be rooted in the evangelical faith related to the scriptures as the Word of God, the lostness of men, Jesus Christ as the provision for redemption with a focus on the responsibility of all Christians to participate in the task of evangelization through the power of the Holy Spirit.(4)

Peter Wagner describes church growth as a paradigm drawn from the social structure of the people-movement in India. The paradigm in the American setting seeks to identify the significant people groups in a given area. The Engel Scale is followed to identify a given people in terms of their openness towards and need of the Christian faith.(5) The resistance-- receptivity axis--helps to prioritize target audiences and indicates which people should be approached first with the gospel.(6)

"To change the focus from people to be reached to the potential force for evangelism the church growth paradigm holds that one of the qualities of a healthy church is church growth."(7) While the paradigm recognizes other contextual

factors as conditions to growth it concludes that in most cases the congregation itself and its leadership are responsible for growth or lack of it."(8) The growth factor thus is considered as a major criteria to determine the health of a church. Growth inhibiting church diseases are described and cures prescribed.(9)

The effort to integrate the social science paradigm into a consistent relationship with biblical theology has proven difficult. The strong emphasis on the factor of human initiative as a basic condition for growth with less attention to the spiritual relationship in ethical purity and commitment of self-denying discipleship in the church as a condition of the Spirit's moving in evangelism, eclipses the centrality of men's dependence on the God for any ingathering of people who are saved through repentance from sin and forgiveness of their sins through the atoning provision through Christ. "It poses questions of consistent scriptural interpretation, theological pollution, pragmatism and accommodation."(10) The expressed concerns addresses the question of a possible over-emphasis on sociology, anthropology and technique in methodology. Delos Miles in "Church Growth--A Mighty River," recognizes the contributions of the movement but closes with the concern for the lack of theological consistency in describing the phenomena as functionalism fantasy and paganism.(11) A biblical evaluation of the Church Growth Theory--a scientific paradigm expresses concern that in its larger context the sovereignty of God is replaced by the sovereignty of man. Conversion is less a process of waiting

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upon God to extend salvation than of convincing the sinner to ask God for that grace which is immediately available. Man's request predicates God's response. Salvation is available as a commodity for the benefit of man. The theology of salvation is detached from the divine initiative of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7-14).(12)

II. Mennonite Brethren Polity

The term "polity" refers to the structure of government and administration of the church, including the relationship of individuals and groups within a specific community.

The broader spectrum of protestantism reflects three basic modes of polity: the Episcopalian, Presbyterian and Congregational.

The Episcopalian polity entrusts all authority to the clergy and the body of believers have no share in it. the authority of the clergy forms the chief bond of unity and maintains a strong distinction between the clergy and the laity.(13)

The Presbyterian church polity provides a plurality of elders in every church and recognizes a distinction between the elder who teaches (the pastor) and the elders who govern. It makes room for the people in the choice of the office bearers and in helping to decide matters in the congregation. The decision in matters of faith and practice in the larger community rests with the governing body of the Presbytery.(14)

The Congregational polity recognizes the autonomy of the local church and the final authority rests with the members of the local church.(15)

Mennonite Brethren church polity distinguishes itself from the three models given in the principle of mutuality and interdependence. The Confession of Faith based on their understanding of the Scriptures expresses the guidelines for policies.

Each church is autonomous in the government and administration of its own local affairs. However, churches shall accept as binding decisions made by the Conference in accordance with the provision of its constitution. The Conference includes all churches founded on the Confession of Faith set out in the By-laws No. 1 and that have joined the Conference. The Conference shall have the right to make final decisions in all matters that relate to the united activities and the common welfare of the churches.(16)

As noted Mennonite Brethren are historically a covenant community of interdependence. The local congregation follows established consensus consistent with scriptural understanding of the larger brotherhood, the Conference.

The considerations that follow must be qualified by the observation that recent decades of cultural, sociological and economic changes of unprecedented rapidity have affected the covenant commitment of some individuals and congregations. The struggle within the Brotherhood is to be true to the Scriptures in the context of the times in which we find ourselves. The issues addressed in the discussion of the Church Growth Theory in relation to Mennonite Brethren Church polity follows the context

of scriptural understanding in the life of the Mennonite Brethren movement as recorded in official records.

III. Issues Arising from the Theory of Church Growth in Relation to Mennonite Brethren Polity

The voluminous literature on church growth reflects the process of experimentation and testing to prove the assumption of the theory. The focus of the search is to find the how and the what for effective growth with the dimensions of the transcendent becoming a marginal reference to maintain a frame of theological justification. The area in which this observation is possibly most apparent is in the paradigm of leadership.

1. Leadership in the Church

A. The Church Growth Theory Model

The Church Growth Theory places the primary responsibility for growth in the leadership as reflected from the following definition: "The army has only one Commander-in-Chief, Jesus Christ. The local church is like a company with one company commander, the pastor, who gets the orders from the Commander-in-Chief. The company Commander has lieutenants and sargents under him for consultation, but the final responsibility for the decision is that of the commander, and he must answer the to the Commander-in-Chief. "If you believe God has called me to pastor this church, then you follow me." "The pastor has the power in a growing church."(17)

The military paradigm requires no interpretation. It does

not contain any biblical qualification with the exception of the reference to Jesus Christ as the Commander-in-Chief. The broader functional task of this leadership is provided in numerous publications.(18)

The autocratic model of leadership as expounded in this literature places an important emphasis on the need of motivating and training lay leadership with a focus on sociological principles of association as bridges to reach people for Christ and the church. The effectiveness of the centralized leadership advocated by Church Growth is illustrated in the many examples of local churches who have experienced phenominal numerical growth.

Two observations however need to be added. The examples described do not provide needed data to examine the quantitive growth in relation to spiritual qualities resulting from such growth. Secondly, the literature does not contain any reference to known examples of serious crises in churches which resulted from the over emphasis on church growth on the level of leadership and radical reverses in numerical membership.

The Mennonite Brethren experience with the Church Growth model of authocratic leadership has been both positive and negative. In affirming the benefits which have been recorded in results of numerical growth there is also the record of numerous devastating results in terms of leadership casualties with spiritual and numerical reverses in the life of congregations.(19)

B. Mennonite Brethren Model of Leadership.

Mennonite Brethren, a closely knitted fellowship in a homogenious setting, have historically followed an implicit theology which emerged from their corporate Bible studies. Policies to govern the life of the church found expression in Conference Resolutions binding for individual members and churches of the fellowship.

A description of the leadership model in the early history of the Mennonite Brethren reflects that of a multiple leadership emerging from within the congregations. They recognized from their midst those gifted in teaching, administration and evangelism. Room was given within the fellowship for the exericse of these gifts. After a time of testing their gifts and the consistancy of their spiritual life related to the scriptural standards for the ministry of leadership, they were recognized as a gift of God to the church and confirmed by the laying on of hands. The selected group of leaders constituted the board of elders--the leader being an equal in the leadership group.(20)

Christ serves as the model. Leadership, as described by Paul, means the role of suffering servanthood. The style of authoritative leadership is mutual subordination. It is granted to those who minister and is authenticated by the way of servanthood.

The rapidity of cultural transition from an agrarian to an industrial, professional and commercial context generated the need for a paid pastoral leadership in the context of a

theological multiple model. The transition, not without some serious tensions, has given occasion to repeated testing of the perceived biblical teaching on leadership. The official position on the character and model of leadership recorded in numerous conference resolutions, continues to be that of multiple leadership emerging, where possible, from within the congregation, functioning in the spirit of servanthood and mutuality.(21) The stated understanding of leadership of the Mennonite Brethren remains in tension with the authocratic model of leadership advocated by the Church Growth Theory.

2. Authority, Initiative and Decision-Making

Leadership in the paradigm of the "General" with his lieutenants and sargents answers the question posed for our study as to who initiates, owns and implements the church growth vision in the local church. The realization of the vision depends on the ability of the "General" to select the lieutenants and sargents, to formulate the program that will appeal to the target people group and motivate the church membership to provide the support for the vision.(22) The local church is a voluntary participant in the effort to implement the program and share the benefits of a growing church. The policies in faith and practice rest with the leadership. The congregation may receive periodic opportunity to express approval of the program and its responsible leadership.(23) In the words of Robert Schuller "Let there be no dodging of this issue. Pastor? Do you hear me? You should be the sparkplug. You should be the inspiring commander

leading the troops up the hill."(24)

Mennonite Brethren understanding as previously outlined recognizes the leadership responsibility to initiative and guide the congregation to recognize the needs and provision required to fulfill its calling as a people of God in the world but not of the world. In important decisions the leadership outlines the needs and process of action required to the congregation for consideration. The process of dialogue, fasting and prayer for God's will in the matter follows to reach consenses. Spiritual unity and sensitivity are prerequisits for leadership and congrgation to reach consenses and demonstrate the commitment to carry out the decisions recognized as responsibility before God. The democratic process in decision-making on the principle of majority vote, inherent to our culture, remains in tension with Mennonite Brethren understanding as a base for authority and decision-making.

3. <u>Church Council and Board of Elders--Models in Church Leadership.</u>

<u>Mennonite Brethren</u>

The Board of Elders under the name of "Altestenrat or Vorberat," has historically been the model of M.B. church leadership. The membership of this body under normal circumstances were ordained ministers and deacons. In some congregations brethren who were not ordained, but had gained the confidence of the membership as models in faith and life and gifted in areas to meet needs in the church, were added to the team. The leader of

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the Board of Elders, a leader of quals, provided the functional dimension. The authority of the "Altestenrat or Vorberat" rested in their responsibility to serve as the guardians of the Scriptures in nurture, fellowship and watchcare of life and relationship of the flock. The exercise of authority was implicit, guided by the word "Thus says the Scripture."(25)

The church council model emerged during the 1930s to provide leadership for the many small groups of Mennonite Brethren immigrants scattered through the provinces in Canada resulting from the immigration influx in the 1920s and 30s, and dislocations of people in the U.S.A. caused by the economic depression in the 30s and 40s. The rapid cultural changes that followed moved Mennonite Brethren to the paid pastoral system in the 1940s to 50s, in Canada 1960, disrupted the organic spiritual process in leadership development gradually accepting the church council as an alternative. It provides a representative leadership related to the various programs within the church, Christian education, youth, music, dioconate, board of trustees, etc. The model is functional in character. The tenure of its membership is limited to one, two, or three years. A survey of leadership patterns in the Mennonite Brethren churches for the last two decades records an average of three to four years for a complete turnover in the church council membership, including the pastor.(26) By nature of its composition, functional character and brevity of its tenure it carries no authority. It is job oriented and imposes a democratic process. The continuous

responsibility of spiritual nurture, watchcare, and leadership is lost. Church history will describe this model as a pragmatic leadership provision in accommodation to the cultural milieu dominant during the second half of the 20th century.

The Board of Elders model which in recent years emerged in some Mennonite Brethren churches is a call for a return to a responsible authoritative leadership. In the absence of an established organic process to restore an Eldership emerging from the community, various approaches have been used to recapture an adequate leadership. The prevailing circumstances in some of these churches provided room for rapid transitions from the Council model to the Eldership with authority for progress to break existing spiritual plateaus. Giftedness and leadership talent became strong factors in the selection of Elders lacking integral spiritual relationship with the flock. In this process the Church Growth theory described above has had major influence. The need for the change from the Church Council (democratic) leadership to a biblical model is urgent. The crisis which movements towards this change have created in some Mennonite Brethren churches has its cause in the process not in the principle.

4. The Theology of Discipleship.

Mennonite Brethren undestanding of discipleship is anchored in its definition given by Jesus himself recorded in Matthew 10:37-39; Mark 8:34-37; Luke 14:25-27 calling for self-denying with a priority of commitment to Christ superceding all other

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relationships and values. The ethemological definition of discipleship being that of a learner, fails to address the New Testament condition to be a follower and disciple of Jesus. Those who fail to meet these conditions "cannot be Christ's disciples."

Seldom does McGavern and the Church Growth Theory begin with a biblical text in their strategy development for evangelism. The premise of their theory is rooted in social sciences with an attempt of biblical authentication. The discipling according to McGavern, is an intermediate stage to lead the prospective convert to declare his openness to consider the benefits of accepting Jesus. The essentials of the gospel to recognize human sinfulness and lostness, with the demand to repent and recognize Jesus as Savior and Lord, are substituted with the "what," the benefits of saying yes to Jesus. "Discipling" therefore is the necessary intermediate stage, and there will be few "gathered churches" if multitudes are not discipled first.(27) Discipling implies leaving the harder part of the gospel to a later stage.(28) First get people to respond to what they can get, then seek to generate the motive to consider the demands of the gospel. Responsible church membership is not considered a basic requirement for becoming a Christian--repentance, faith and conversion are the requirements. Joining a church is part of perfecting, not discipling.(29)

The discipling and perfecting understanding of the gospel as described, emerges from an inconsistant hermaneutical exposition

of Matthew 28:18-20. The call to "make disciples" cannot be separated from the demand of discipleship as defined by Christ. The Christological center in discipleship is conditioned (Luke 14:25-33). Failure to meet those conditions falls under the word of our Lord "he cannot be my disciple."

To make disciples as given in Matthew 28, is prefaced by the declaration of the Lordship of Christ. "Go therefore" syntactically refers to verse 18, "All power is given unto me in Heaven and in earth."

Evangelism in our contemporary culture, the "have, self-fulfillment" generation, applies the declaration of Lordship as an assurance of all recourses to evangelize the world, not a call to the discipleship as defined by Christ.(30) It provides the offer of benefits claimed by 30 percent of American population of being born again, thus accepting the benefits of salvation without a commitment to a biblical discipleship.(31) "The test of the vitality of a religion is to be seen in its effect upon culture."(32) The rapid moral disintegration of American culture with 30 percent claiming to be born again should prove a sufficient answer to the character of evangelism without a biblical foundation of commitment.

The Church Growth Theory has provided structure to the message of salvation without commitment broadly accepted in American evangelicalism.

In the context of Mennonite Brethren theological understanding true conversion, "The Doorway to Discipleship,(33)

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finds expression in a commitment to the fellowship of the church. The trend in Mennonite Brethren circles to extend the privileges of communion--the Lord's Supper--to children and people who claim to be "born again" without the expression of commitment in baptism and church membership is in tension with the "discipling concept" of the Church Growth Theory broadly accepted in American evangelical circles.

Conclusion

The deep concerns for Mennonite Brethren arising from the theology and social science technique in methodology of the Church Growth Theory is a call for the following response.

1. The overemphasis on growth in Church Growth Theory demands a response from Mennonite Brethren to account for the lack of growth during the past several decades where evangelism has been central in local church and conference programs.

2. The Church Growth Theory provides the necessity to account for a broad leadership crisis in our churches. The military paradigm of autocratic leadership, so foreign to a biblical character of a shepherd and servant leadership demands that Mennonite Brethren provide the models of such leadership in the context of our contemporary culture.

3. The discipling and perfection process in evangelism advocated by Church Growth Theory with an underemphasis on commitment is a call on Mennonite Brethren to reconcile theology and reality in their programs of evangelism of the past several decades.

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4. The strong teaching program in the process of "perfecting" advocated by the Church Growth Theory is a call for Mennonite Brethren to return to the group fellowships with the weekly Bible study hour which was an integral part of the Mennonite Brethren pilgrimage until a few decades ago.

ENDNOTES

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3. Peter Wagner, "Recent Developments in Church Growth Understanding," Review and Expositor, Vol. 77, 1980, p. 509.

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5. James Engel and H. Wilbert Norton, What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest (Zondervon, 1975), p. 45.

6. Peter Wagner, op.cit., p. 507.

7. Ibid., p. 510.

8. Ibid.

9. Peter Wagner, Your Church Can Grow (Regal Books, 1976), and Your Church Can be Healthy (Abingdon Press, 1979).

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11. Ibid., pp. 144-146.

12. Bill T. Leonard, "Evangelism and Contemporary And Contemporary American Life," Review and Expositor, Vol. 77, 1980, p. 197.

13. J. L. Schaver, The Polity of the Churches (Chicago: Church Polity Press, 1947), pp. 22-23.

14. Ibid., pp. 56-57.

15. Ibid., pp. 42-43.

16. Confession of Faith of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 1976 edition, p. 14. Constitution and By-laws of the Mennonite Brethren Conference, 1978 edition, p. 12.

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18. Donald McGavern and George G. Hunter, III, Church Growth Strategies that Work, Lyle E. Schaller, editor (Abingdon Press, 1980; Peter Wagner, Your Church Can Be Healthy, edited by E. Schaller (Abingdon Press, 1982, 4th edition); Peter Wagner, Your Church Can Grow, op.cit.; and others.

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21. General conference Mennonite Brethren Yearbooks: 1948, pp. 106-108; 1951, pp. 130-143; 1972, p. 14. Board of Reference and Council of the Mennonite Brethren General Conference, 1980; Study papers: "Call and Ordination to the Ministry," Victor Adrian; "Leadership Styles for Mennonite Brethren Churches," John E. Toews; "Current Issues in Leadership," Herbert Brandt; Pacific District Conference Year Book, 1983, pp. 18-22.

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23. Peter Wagner, Your Church Can Grow, op.cit., pp. 64-65.

24. Ibid., pp. 66-67.

25. A. H. Unruh, Zionsbote, August 21, pp. 1-4; General Conference Yearbook, 1951, op.cit.

26. J. B. Toews data of the survey is from 1986. Questionaires were sent to all the churches related to pastors and church council leadership. A second survey was carried out on the basis of district and provincial conference records by the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno.

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29. Peter C. Wagner, Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A

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