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Back to the Future: A Proactive Approach To Confirming Our Roots and Charting ASCG's NeXt Generation

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**Back to the Future:
A Proactive Approach To Confirming
Our Roots, And Charting ASCG's NeXt Generation**

R. Daniel Reeves

Presidential Address to the American Society
for Church Growth Annual Meeting
Kansas City, November 21-23, 1996

Introduction

Early this month, voters went to the polls to decide between political options. The voters' choices reflect their views about our country's history and our hopes for its future. During months of campaigning, President Clinton and Senator Dole had given us their differing perspectives of how we, as a nation, have been molded by our past. Both candidates proposed specific solutions for the issues we face today.

Today, we, as members of the American Society of Church Growth, stand at a similar crossroads. Listening to different perspectives, we can see the future as bright, uncertain, or discouraging. I, as your president-elect, speak to you from the perspective of an insider indebted to the leaders who have gone before. I speak as one who is professionally trained and experienced in assessing the present. And because of my God-given passion for building His church, I care a great deal about what happens to this movement in the future.

Look around you. Consider the persons of influence in this room, and the large groups each one represents. The diverse ASCG constituency—professors, denominational executives,

pastors, and other significant agents of change—are united in purpose. Our resolve is firm. Our commitment is unwavering.

Collectively we have awesome potential! Combined with God's grace, power, and guidance, the possibilities are almost limitless. Your elected leaders sense a sobering responsibility; we want to build on the past and reach out to the future.

But, the cultural challenges we face are reminiscent of the contrasting minority/majority reports in Numbers 13:27-33. You will remember that one of Israel's scouts, Caleb, is optimistic. But he is soon outnumbered by those who challenge his perceptions.

Listen to Caleb: *"We arrived in the land you sent us to see, and it is indeed a magnificent country...a land flowing with milk and honey. Here is some fruit we have brought as proof....let us go up at once and possess it...for we are well able to conquer it!"*

But the majority report of the spies was negative: *"The land is full of warriors, the people are powerfully built, and we saw some of the Anakim there, descendants of the ancient race of giants. We felt like grasshoppers before them, they were so tall!"* (LB)

What would scouts say about postmodern America? The pessimist would say we are becoming more secular. Mainline membership has slipped; commitment and participation in traditional church programs has waned. Some denominations remain entrenched in sectarianism. Yet the optimist would point out that as Christians rally in contemporary movements—such as Promise Keepers and as the so-called "Postdenominational churches"—there's an unprecedented spiritual responsiveness.

Our role as members of the American Society of Church Growth is to be true to our roots, yet innovative and proactive. We want a vision that is compelling. As a framework, let's review our history as a contemporary movement. Then, let's honestly evaluate where we stand. And, finally, let's define how, by God's grace, we can go forward.

Where have we been?

Donald McGavran, beginning with the publication of *Bridges of God* in 1955, proclaimed a unique set of burning convictions about the church of Jesus Christ. Until his death in 1990, McGavran's life and words caused many of us to light our candles as a rite of passage. Into the Church Growth movement we have carried the torch during these decades, attempting to ignite churches with his same fervor. Most of us would not gather annually in

this society if we had not been influenced by his teachings. Our heritage owes much to our founder, Donald McGavran.¹

McGavran was convinced churches grew because it is God's unswerving purpose to save humanity through belief in Jesus Christ. He taught that the chief purpose of the Christian mission is by word and deed to proclaim Jesus Christ as God and only Savior, and to persuade individuals to become disciples of Jesus and responsible members of His Church. These convictions motivated the early Church Growth movement.

McGavran's theoretical framework was built on sound biblical principles² and welded to six other missiological streams:

What were some early church growth distinctives? McGavran sought to restore words like mission and evangelism to their theological meanings. To remove the "verbal fog" he created fresh symbols. He spoke of church growth rather than evangelism, maintaining that the growth of churches is the heart of missiology. Another McGavran axiom was that evangelistic methods should be measured against the graph of church growth to determine their effectiveness.

McGavran was precise when he defined the Great Commission, the biblical mandate for evangelism. He did not define the Great Commission as being fulfilled when every person was a believing Christian. In fact, he said, "It is...hard for me to think of any whole country being completely evangelized."³ Instead, he designed a Great Commission yardstick: nations are evangelized when every ethnic population of at least one thousand people has a witnessing church. For example, McGavran inferred that the Great Commission in the United States had been fulfilled because more than 30 percent of the population is "consciously Christian."

Later on, McGavran further clarified the fulfilling of the Great Commission by defining the focus and results of three kinds of discipling. He labeled these stages: Discipling 1, 2, and 3. Or, for short, *D1*, *D2*, and *D3*.

- *D-1* is the initial turning toward Christianity by large numbers of non-Christian groups.
- *D-2* is the initial conversion of individuals in a nominally Christian society.
- *D-3* is the later stages of individual Christian maturity.⁴

McGavran clarified the ambiguity associated with the terms

“unreached” and “unevangelized.” He designated four different categories with labels *U1*, *U2*, *U3*, and *U0*. Let’s look at each:

- *U1* or the Unreached one group are people who have never heard or seen anything resembling the Gospel. They have no symbol or idea in their culture to cause them to think about or seek Christ.
- *U2* or the Unreached two group are persons who have been exposed to some Christian reference, however veiled. For example, bumper stickers such as “Honk if You Love Jesus,” or seeing Jay Leno on TV rebuke Howard Stern for his unflattering reference to the Bible. So, people in *U2* have had some opportunity to consider spiritual questions.
- *U3* or the Unreached three group are pockets of non-Christians (sometimes within Christian countries) who have no true understanding of Jesus Christ as Savior—or even what it means to be spiritually lost. A significant percentage of Americans are in this category.

U0 or Unevangelized zero are persons who are not members of congregations but who are in the midst of a nominal Christian population. This group also includes nominal Christians—members of churches who are not regenerated disciples.⁵

McGavran proposed some radical (and unpopular) solutions for reaching these unevangelized people. For example, he believed that all churches should invest at least 5 percent of their budget for “purposeful research” to learn how to more effectively communicate the Gospel. The research was to be aimed at discovering why people within a given community were unevangelized and to pinpoint their unique needs.

Equally advanced was McGavran’s methodology for determining whether people were ready for the Gospel. His “resistance-receptivity axis” is a horizontal line or continuum that places high resistance on the left and high receptiveness on the right. Those perceived as mid-range—based upon cultural distance—are considered *indifferent*. Distinctive units of people, such as aerospace workers, young single adults, or recent Cuban arrivals, are spaced at various points along the axis.

One of McGavran’s most significant axioms is that methodology is insignificant for persons at the left and right ends of his proposed scale. Those who are resistant will not respond, re-

ardless of the approach. On the other hand, those who are receptive will respond to nearly any evangelistic method. Most groups of people fall somewhere between these two extremes, so the mid-range is where methodology becomes a crucial factor.⁶

In shaping his methodology, no McGavran axiom caused more controversy than this one: “People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”⁷ He firmly believed that until the Gospel is heard from within a person’s own culture—from family members or intimate associates—it cannot truly be heard. With few exceptions, McGavran held that individuals join churches and become responsible Christians in cultural units, known as *peoples*.

Where are we now?

As we meet in Kansas City, the ecclesiastical terrain is experiencing dramatic change. As times change, it is important that the church monitor its mission to bring the message of Jesus Christ to new generations and new cultures. As we initiate alliances and accelerate networking, we need to examine our roles as change agents. The resistance/receptivity axis reminds us to begin with the doors that are already open.

The harvest has never been riper for church growth! Today church planting is a serious priority among most denominations. An equal priority is for existing congregations to be fruitful. These two objectives are neither fads nor secondary issues; they are biblically mandated.

In reviewing McGavran’s legacy we find much that can enlighten our present thinking. First, we need to remove what he termed “verbal fog.” McGavran was extremely concerned about using words with obscure meaning. (This verbal fog was not limited to the United States but was exported to international churches and mission fields as well.) As “forth tellers” of the Gospel, we must be as careful as McGavran was to clarify what we mean.

Second, we must identify the critical growth issues of our day. McGavran was proactive in challenging the comfort levels of his contemporaries. We, likewise, need to honestly address issues that will make a difference in our present policy and strategy development.

One of McGavran’s concerns—an issue in my own consultation experience—is answering the question, “What is *the best*

means to bring about change?" As we in the Church Growth movement continue to test various methods, we are in good company. McGavran's 60-year career was devoted to this elusive issue.

As a trailblazer, McGavran can now guide us. He concluded that the best way to bring about change is not by organizational pressure but by the dissemination of ideas. "One must speak reasonably and gradually when and where it matters," he said.⁸ Today, we continue to work together to find ways to communicate life-changing hope to the right persons, in the right places, at the right times, with the right approaches.

At age 93 McGavran was still exhorting us, Caleb-style, not to back down to the counter forces of growth. Even before McGavran died in 1990, ASCG presidents took up his mantle. For example, at our 1988 meeting, Elmer Towns exhorted us with the question, "Where is Church Growth going?" Towns predicted a bright future for both the discipline and the ASCG as a professional organization because we have a shared mission, enlarged borders, and new tools and techniques to plow new grounds.⁹

A year later, Eddie Gibbs recognized the danger of fragmentation. In his 1989 address Gibbs said "...we should take time to think strategically for the 1990s. This gathering provides a unique opportunity to identify what we consider to be the crucial issues. . .to cluster ourselves around priority topics, forming teams of people who will undertake research, correspond with each other [and] produce substantive work on specialized topics of strategic importance."¹⁰ In his concluding remarks, Gibbs called for unity in facing unprecedented opportunities.

Our two most recent presidents focused on rethinking who we are and where we are going. In his 1993 presidential address in Pasadena, John Vaughan challenged us not to ignore the mounting attacks by several well-known Christian writers against the Church Growth movement.

In Houston in 1994, Gary McIntosh's presidential address described how movements may become like machines. But his conclusions about church growth were optimistic: "It is a theologically sound movement and worthy of study," he said.¹¹

McIntosh also pointed out that our movement—although it is developing new heroes—lacks a dramatic event. Powerful movements, according to McIntosh, celebrate their purpose and

core values through grand festivals with drama, entertainment, awards, and pageantry. Without ceremony, he added, no movement can long survive.

McIntosh recommended that we make the ASCG annual meetings the show place of the movement. He pointed out that such a shift will involve “. . .raising the quality of the meetings so that something significant takes place in terms of lectures and presentations. It also means making our Presidential banquet an exciting and attractive event.”¹²

Since McIntosh gave us this challenge, attendance has been up at our meetings. Leaders have affirmed the call to mobilize and build toward a more proactive future. After all, what more noble cause is there in all the world than equipping churches to better reach the lost?

Reflecting on Gary McIntosh’s exhortations caused me to seriously assess our potential. The last thing I wanted to do as your next president was to resurrect a movement if it had already served its purpose. So I called together a cross section of members—a few professors and pastors, a few national and district leaders, and several cross-denominational resource persons. Last year we met in Chicago as a Church Growth “think tank.”

More than twenty-five persons crowded into a room around a single easel stand just prior to our annual banquet. I asked what we could build on in the years ahead. For two hours I listened and took copious notes. We discussed straightforward questions about our movement:

- I. What is right?
- II. What is wrong?
- III. What is confusing or uncertain?
- IV. What are the voids?
- V. What are the greatest issues we will face during the next few years?
- VI. Right now, where do we stand as a movement?

I want to share some of the feedback with you. First, our strong points: One person pointed to our gracious inclusiveness—being willing to share what we know with persons from diverse traditions. Others emphasized the movement’s focus on the lost; the development of effective evangelistic tools; the practical results so far in our movement’s history; and the solid, biblical grounding of our cause.

In order to have an honest and balanced assessment, we also explored our shortcomings, listing specific areas that needed overhauling. Several suggested that our name does not clearly communicate our purpose. Others felt that we are not adequately communicating our assumptions to a new generation of church leaders.

Our lack of ethnic representation was cited, as was our weak epistemology and our frequent lack of theological clarity. These areas were targeted for future development.

Some expressed concern about the impression that “tools” are the keys to evangelization. Others emphasized their frustration that the movement is a collection of technologies lacking statistical validation. (Tools and technologies can lead to triumphalism that, in turn, leads to pain when expectations fall short). And there was concern about the disproportionate emphasis on megachurches to the exclusion of small and mid-sized churches. Finally, we were chastened for the almost nonexistent interaction between church growth and the ministry of justice.

For the third question we focused—McGavran-style—on the subject of fog. “What is confusing or uncertain about this movement?” I asked. The overwhelming response was the very words—*church growth*.

After forty years there’s still a persistent misunderstanding of that term. One member insisted that meanings are so diverse that church growth no longer has a focus. Another participant replaced the term “church growth” with “church health” or “church effectiveness.”

The problem in perception seems to stem from too much emphasis on the technical aspects of church growth to the exclusion of the spiritual dimension. (The confusion is compounded by an innate aversion to evangelism—often referred to pejoratively as the “E” word. In some circles evangelism has been a “whipping boy” to excuse a lack of commitment to reaching the lost).

Others defended the word “growth.” They felt that aversion to the word is often linked to an underlying denial. In other words, the person is saying, “I will not be judged.” Much of the backlash about statistics is a “cop out,” tied to an irresponsible understanding of the church’s mission, according to this view.

In a final attempt to clear the fog, another member of the “think tank” traced the misperceptions to a cultural shift which

maintains that it's unacceptable to evaluate the worth of a congregation on the basis of tangible results. Thus, a leader can use the oxymoron, "positive plateau," to refer euphemistically to a stalled condition that might, more accurately, be described as an abnormality. One must decide whether plateaued churches are normal and good, or whether they are abnormal and pathological.

Seminaries are also guilty of diluting the term "church growth" in order to sell their product—church ministry. Seminary professors, without a viable connection to congregational trenches, may be terribly threatened by the notion that church growth is an expected outcome of their professional training. Because the "people around the seminary tables" cannot grow a church—either by skill or by orientation—they react strongly against the suggestion that growth should be seen as normal and good.

Responses to my fourth question, "What are the voids in this movement?" identified gaps requiring remedies. The most compelling response was another question, "Who is our present-day McGavran?" We lack a current spokesman for church growth. Many of the highly visible personalities (such as George Barna, Bill Hybels, and John Maxwell) do not identify with the American Society of Church Growth.

Think-tank participants noted that we have not clearly communicated our core values to strategic theological circles. After McGavran—who had focused on a limited range of critical issues—the movement became more diffused. Pioneers C. Peter Wagner and John Wimber were described as having been on various journeys during the eighties and nineties, but were lumped together by most outsiders as like-minded examples of church growth.

It was also pointed out that the boundaries of "church growth" have become increasingly fuzzy. Those of us at the perimeter must take some responsibility for that diffusion. We are so engrossed with training leaders and congregations at the grass roots that we have failed to articulate our goals in vital public forums.

Three other voids were mentioned which offer clues for future strategy. First, in contrast to popular pastors' books and seminars, the views of average pastors and church members appear to be less influential on our movement.

Second, the bulk of the most visible articulation of church growth has not been missiological. The audience was prevented, therefore, as one member put it “. . .from seeing the whole cloth.”

Third, nothing new has been said lately to galvanize consciousness. Most of the action has been occurring under different banners. Within a more segmented society “...the niches of church growth have become the novelty.” As another member put it, “Many of us have lost the perspective that the fragments have anything to do with the core. All we see are equals shooting off rockets in different directions within an uneven display of fireworks. We desperately need theological linkage.”

My final question to the “think tank” session was “Where do we stand as a movement at this present time?” A composite of the answers suggests that we are entering a significant phase. We have been seasoned by multiplying ourselves around the world for the past two generations. No larger or more influential society exists for our purpose. Attendance at society meetings has grown over the last three years. We have increased the caliber of our speakers. Our administrative and editorial capabilities are also improving.

Most importantly, as a society we remain under the Cross of Christ and faithful to His calling. We watch for opportunities to mentor emerging leaders. As guardians of basic church theory we dialogue with and assist other related movements. I believe many denominations not represented in this gathering want what we offer. The need for balanced, obedient, and thoughtful instruction for churches has never been greater. The ASCG can continue to be spiritually alive—guiding and shaping church expansion and extension.

A gathering sponsored by the National Ministries Division of the Presbyterian Church well illustrates this last point. Entitled “Taking A Thirsty Land by Storm,” a celebration of evangelism was held last month (October 1996) at the Historic First Presbyterian in downtown Phoenix, Arizona.

Ten years ago, as a consultant to this church, I remember the frustration. “Survival against all odds,” I nicknamed the congregation. Within a single fortress structure, complete with iron gates, I unearthed every problem I had seen during my first ten years of consulting ministry! I heard tales of demons in the basement, of extended and cantankerous battles between the

pastoral staff and session. The average age of the members was 65. Most other mainline downtown churches had abandoned the city for more pleasant sites in the suburbs.

The Historic First Church's whimsical senior pastor, Peter Echert, who had twenty years of inner-city battle scars, declared: "We will not concede! Our mission here is not finished. We must prepare for the future." Within five years the ministry had freshened up from top to bottom. Young business persons used the refurbished gymnasium during lunch for workouts. Some of them came back to attend the contemporary worship service led by the Rev. Gail Parker and a young specialist church planter, Dr. Gary Reinicke.

Historic First had sprung back to life via a focused ministry. The congregation continues to grow. As Gail Parker told the church's story of intentional ministry in Phoenix, leaders from across the country—seeking to understand the process of renewal—took notes.

As many of you know, the climate for evangelism has often been cloudy for the Presbyterian Church USA. In some cases, the word *evangelism* has almost ceased to exist. For several decades, the denomination has steadily lost members. (Princeton Theological Seminary President Tom Gillespie recently projected that at the current rate of decline the denomination will be officially extinct by the year 2032.) Historic First's story gives hope. The denomination is taking note of the elements for renewal and growth. Listen to the objectives listed on a brochure of the National Ministries Division, PC/USA:

- To discover effective ways to plant and water seeds of faith that will grow into new life in the Presbyterian Church.
- To empower and inspire participating congregations to carry out the Great Commission of evangelism.
- To learn specific strategies for reaching the unchurched.
- To create lasting networks of support for evangelism.

Next year two of PC/USA's very best pastors will be speaking to us. You won't want to miss hearing them.

Now, let's focus on the most important issues for the future of American church growth: *Where are we going? How will we get there? What course appears to be best?*

I will describe four core issues arranged in the order of

greatest strategic impact.

A *core issue* cannot be ignored. It is a matter of extreme strategic importance. A core issue may be an obstacle preventing forward momentum. Or it may be an opportunity which, because of our schedules, responsibilities and other agendas, could easily be overlooked. The degree to which we accurately identify and address core issues will to a large extent determine our impact in assisting churches. (As McGavran put it, "Church growth is not the only end of mission, but it is generally held to be a chief and irreplaceable end").¹³

In concept, each of the following issues was suggested during the think-tank exchanges last year. But the exact order and description represent my own testing and distilling. They are provisional core issues, open to challenge and refinement from those inside and outside this society.

1. *Charting a relevant course – without biblical compromise – amidst turbulent change.*

To do this, the ASCG would help church leaders identify and address critical issues for growth.

2. *Articulating our core values and creating a more defined and durable ecclesiology.*

To do this, the ASCG would initiate discussions on the nature and role of the church in the 21st century.

3. *Establishing a transformational climate for developing a new generation of leaders.*

To do this, the ASCG would assist churches to develop biblical congregations in the 21st century. We would raise the level of energy, enthusiasm and expectations for emerging church leaders.

4. *Developing additional strategic alliances with pastors, professors, communicators and denominational leaders.*

To do this, the ASCG would assist church leaders to enlist and equip new disciples. We would involve a broader spectrum of individuals and denominations in the discussion of the future mission of the church in America.

The ASCG will continue to experience turbulent change between now and the year 2001. If we are to expand the number of churches within each denomination represented here, we will be challenged to overcome internal and external obstacles at an ac-

celerated pace. All the while, the driving force for our passion to reach the world today must be the same Gospel that turned the First Century upside down.

How can the ASCG – which has carried the burden for planting churches throughout the United States during the past twenty-five years – continue to carry the torch for discipling unchurched masses? How can we assist churches to respond to the spiritual hunger of our nation during the next decade?

These are vitally important questions. God will hold us responsible for the incredible opportunities and gifts He gives us at this pivotal moment in history.

In this culminating section I want to suggest that the only viable direction is forward. We have seen others throughout Christian history meet changing times with innovation, imagination, and intentional action to establish Christ's church. We are poised to do the same.

As we have said, movements are ever changing. We cannot remain stationary, circle aimlessly, or move backwards in time. We will not reach our generation if we are bound by the contextual forms or the particular issues of our mid-to-late twentieth century mentors. McGavran would not want us to be tied to the past. He would expect us to use every means to disciple the emerging tribes of our day.

Where do we go from here?

1. *Start with what we have.* We have an enormous untapped potential. In the ASCG we have an "army of veterans" ready to lead the charge, enlisting and equipping disciples into the next millennium. After several years of assessing patterns and trends within contemporary Christianity, the Church Growth movement is well positioned for its current generation of ministry. Earlier we highlighted some significant, emerging indicators of progress. Through prayerful diligence and conscientious advocacy there's no doubt we can advance the Kingdom.

2. *Continue to listen to one another and to value one another.* The center of the ASCG is church growth foundational theory – with new theories constantly being developed. Let's learn from one another. Let's ask: What is happening in other denominations? What can we learn from emerging movements to help us plant more churches? Let's foster a climate where effective listening and learning allow us to grow in depth.

3. *Identify, share, and learn from effective role models and processes.* To whom should we be listening? Who are tomorrow's leaders? How can we interact constructively with them? To mentor where it is welcome? To hold always to biblical standards of accountability? To distill the primary from the periphery; and to implement wisely?

4. *Develop and deploy "internal change agent teams" strategically throughout our diverse constituencies.* Those of us who are seeing revitalization are developing cadres of change agents. Our new first vice president, Dr. Ray Ellis, does this extremely well. Watch him carefully. Observe how he regionalizes his leadership and integrates the Free Methodist distinctives. Notice his role modeling—McGavran-like—within biblical parameters, increasing fruitfulness.

Entropy and death are not inevitable in our various denominational bodies. Organizations can be re-tooled from within with effective interventionists.¹⁴ The potential represented in this room for such highly focused and carefully coached tribal teams to be unleashed is significant indeed. It will involve identifying judicatory leaders in our respective constituencies and partnering with them to design effective communication and mobilization strategies.

5. *Move forward in networking.* As an initial step, I want the ASCG to establish an Internet home page, so prospective members can participate more easily. It's essential to keep dialogue open. Officially, and unofficially, we should initiate contacts with Promise Keepers, Postdenominational churches, and the authors of the Cambridge Declaration—to name just a few.

One ASCG agenda I want to raise is how we can most effectively dialogue with separatist groups, such as the signers of the Cambridge Declaration. These writers claim the evangelical church resembles the pre-Reformation church and that as the most visible and influential Protestant churches today, we have lost our salt as well as our way.¹⁵

Ralph Winter projected more than two decades ago that the uniformitarian hypothesis was breaking down. He predicted that before long our innate tendency to believe that "our way is best" will be overcome by dialogue, and that an emerging collective wisdom among most Christian leaders will prevail.¹⁶

Winter's hypothesis has been validated in the recent movements cited earlier, such as Leadership Network, the Postdenom-

inational Church, and Promise Keepers. Yet, a counter, sectarian trend appears to be emerging, with an altogether different view of the church.

It is my firm belief that the denominations represented in this society are not losing their salt. As we adjust to reaching new audiences, we are merely deploying sound missionary strategy. We are not compromising the Gospel in such strategic shifts, as many are suggesting. Rather, we are intentionally and responsibly reclothing the Gospel, following the First Century example of Paul. Evangelical leaders today, in my view, are neither more nor less intense and devoted in their passion to Christ, to the church, to evangelism, and to sound doctrine than were the Reformers.

How can we get this perspective across to groups that are entrenching rather than positioning the church for a mighty 21st century harvest? What forums would best promote an honest and effective exchange of ideas? What persons could help make such breakthroughs occur for the sake of the Kingdom?

6. *Build our society strategies proactively, not reactively.* Here is a preview of our focus for the next few years...

- This year the emphasis is on church growth and worship as the number one issue in the American church. No subject has more confusion and controversy. Byron Spradlin and the other authorities on our program are well equipped to turn on the lights, to help keep us in balance and to be more fruitful.
- Next year in Orlando the emphasis will be on church growth and urban ministries. With some of the most qualified pastors and professors in the country, such as Tom Wolf, George Hunter, Elmer Towns, Frank Harrington, and Howard Edington, we will receive insights on how to approach urban audiences. Urban ministries target the largest and most receptive unchurched populations in our nation, as well as throughout our turbulent world.
- In San Francisco in 1998 there will be a serious revisiting of ecclesiology. Eddie Gibbs, Charles VanEngen, Elmer Towns, George Hunter, Russ Chandler, and Jon Wilson will be joined by other scholars and pastors to enhance our understanding of the foundation and the boundaries

for ministry in the 21st century. In the meantime, our executive team will be working with a variety of our members to sharpen and enhance our ASCG core values for distribution and response.

7. *Establish a new level of theological discussions on the nature of the church in the 21st century.* As your new president, I am prepared to initiate – with your permission – a strategy for forming a potentially significant ecclesiology statement. The project will involve:

- A feasibility study to determine viability, scope, leadership- selecting, and funding options.
- Two years of interaction between ourselves and other evangelical groups in order to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the church. Seminary presidents, high visibility professors, pastors and writers will be asked to participate in clarifying issues that are currently confusing, and which lead to ineffectiveness.
- The project will culminate in San Francisco in 1998 with the signing of An Ecclesiology Statement for the 21st Century. I hope that the vast majority of leading evangelical scholars will be willing to sign. No statements since Lausanne 1974 will equal San Francisco's potential impact.

In summary, the future for church growth and for our society is bright indeed. We provide:

- *Stimulating exchanges between scholars and practitioners on strategic issues.*

Our annual gatherings provide a setting where our bedrock convictions can sharpen one another.

- *Proactive networking with our counterparts in diverse Christian constituencies.*

Peer mentoring is one of the most powerful tools available for transformation. Many of our members meet new peers each year to continue to dialogue, increasingly by e-mail throughout the year.

- *Learning opportunities. We are committed as leaders to never stop learning.*

Let's focus on the most strategic issues! We want each gath-

ering to bring the most qualified resourcers to speak on matters most likely to impact our churches' efforts to extend the Kingdom.

Just as Donald McGavran dialogued and debated in his day, so must we in ours. He reasoned and pleaded with the Conciliar movement and with The World Council of Churches. Many of those battles are won and behind us, but a whole new set of opportunities and adversaries confronts us.

We have a valid and ever-changing mission. An abundance of fresh challenges await us. The time to carry the church-growth torch to the next level is now! Let's begin in earnest the next exciting phase. Let's unite as seasoned champions of the most worthwhile cause imaginable. Let's vow anew to mobilize every available means to aid our churches in this tremendously accelerating age of history. Let's raise the standard of ministry effectiveness. Let's create new leadership teams in our respective contingencies who will boldly catalyze our less progressive members into action. Let's continue to listen and to network with one another as a powerful witness to other church bodies and to the increasingly cynical unchurched populations that surround us.

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NOTES

1. For a sampling of the early principles, see A. R. Tippett, ed., *God, Man and Church Growth: A Festschrift in honor of Donald Anderson McGavran*, Eerdmans, 1973.

2. See *The Bridges of God*, Friendship Press, 1955, *The Church Growth Bulletin*: Vol. I-V, William Carey, 1969, and *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, William Carey, 1976.

3. "Seven Missiological Streams," an unpublished article distributed to an Advanced Church Growth Course at Fuller Theological Seminary

in 1977.

4. A November 29, 1976 letter to David Barrett, distributed to doctoral candidates at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena.

5. "How About That Verb 'To Disciple?'," *Church Growth Bulletin*, May 1979, pp. 265-70.

6. *Understanding Church Growth*, 1970, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, p. 198.

7. *Understanding Church Growth*, pp. 228-229

8. During class discussions in 1976.

9. Elmer Towns, "Church Growth Coming of Age," *Church Growth Journal*, 1990, pp. 2, 7

10. Eddie Gibbs, "Towards a Church Growth Agenda for the 1990s," *Church Growth Journal*, 1990, pp. 9, 15.

11. John Vaughan Presidential Address, *The Journal of the American Society of Church Growth*, Winter, 1997.

12. Gary McIntosh, "Thoughts on a Movement," *The Journal of the American Society of Church Growth*, Winter, 1997.

13. Donald McGavran, ed., *the Conciliar Evangelical Debate*, William Carey, 1977, p. 178.

14. For two extremely insightful, contemporary texts on change agency see Lyle Schaller, *The Interventionist*, Abingdon, 1996 and Everett Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 4th Edition, Free Press, 1995.

15. For a report by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, see *Modern Reformation*, July/August, 1996.

16. During class discussions in 1975.