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A Response to Dr. Rainer

Larry Gilbert

Evangelism is NOT the heart of the Church Growth Movement. But, it should be. It is also clear that as the Church Growth Movement has matured it has drifted from its original evangelistic premise. I agree with Dr. Rainer that we must return to our roots. As I see it, the *Great Commission* (reaching people with the Gospel, incorporating them into the local church and teaching them how to live their faith in everyday life) has always been the heart of the Church Growth Movement. However, in the beginning there was a much greater emphasis put on the reaching part of the Commission, with much less emphasis on assimilation and discipleship. As time has passed (40 years) we now find ourselves at the other end of the spectrum putting nearly all our emphasis on assimilation and discipleship with very little, and in some cases no emphasis, on the evangelism side.

As our emphasis evolves so does our implied definition of the Church Growth Movement. We have permitted an evolution of the term to encompass many other areas of church discipline, as Dr. Rainer suggests; "Church Planting, Marketing, Seeker Sensitive Methodologies, Cell Groups, Prayer, Spiritual Warfare, Generational Studies, Church Renewal, Church Leadership, Conflict Management, Change Agency and Mega Churches." Although most of these disciplines don't fit Dr. Rainer's definition, they are within the realm of the original definition. However, many newcomers are going to extremes and making *everything* church growth. Under the name of church growth we now address topics such as family, healing, parenting, devotions, Bible

study, music, prophecy, dating, marriage, etc. The argument being, as we strengthen our personal lives, family, and community we strengthen the church, which will ultimately create numerical growth. Others would argue that if it creates spiritual growth it doesn't need to create numerical growth to be considered church growth. This all may be true in the broadest sense, but calling everything church growth will ultimately dilute the purpose and pull us even further from the true heart of our movement. Thus, we are losing sight of and de-emphasizing the original objective of the Church Growth Movement.

After working with hundreds of churches for over 20 years I have come to the conclusion that the *real key* to church growth is *balance*—the kind of balance provided by the Great Commission when it is properly fulfilled. However, *evangelism* is and always should be the heart of the Great Commission. Without evangelism how can one identify with Christ? Without evangelism how can one grow and mature into the image of Christ? So the big question is, "*How do we return evangelism to its proper role within the Great Commission?*"

First, where did we go wrong? I would suggest that we stopped emphasizing evangelism because we have turned evangelism into a "program". I am not condemning programs. Programs are simply an organized system for reaching an objective. In essence, programs are nothing more than *methodologies*. Churches are not built with doctrines, philosophies, and principles; in reality they are built with methodologies that are based on doctrine, philosophies, and principles. *The problem with turning evangelism into a program is that our programs do not fit the people we expect to use them.* The problem with evangelism programs is they were all written by people with the gift of evangelism, for people with the gift of evangelism, and, unfortunately, imposed on everyone. We have made evangelism a barrier term and in the minds of many the task of evangelism has become one of the penalties for being a Christian.

In an informal survey done by the Church Growth Institute, we set out to determine what the average Christian (not the average pastor or seminary graduate but the everyday man and woman sitting in the pew; which are the ones we expect to use our evangelism programs) visualizes, in their mind when we use terms like evangelism, soulwinning and witnessing. The first thing we determined was that in the minds of most laity these

three terms are interchangeable. Second, we determined that when we use these terms most laypeople visualized *themselves on their knees pressing a stranger for a decision*, which is what most of them wanted absolutely nothing to do with.

On the other hand what do pastors and church leaders think of evangelism programs. Recently when introducing a new evangelism program produced by Church Growth Institute, we found the response to be at best mediocre. Therefore we called pastors and asked them what was the barrier that prevented them from purchasing this resource. One pastor summed up the sentiments of many when he said, "Ho-Hum, what's new, someone else has done another rewrite of *Evangelism Explosion*." The bottom line is, pastors are tired of using evangelism programs that their people won't participate in. In another survey on evangelism, conducted by Church Growth Institute, "evangelistic preaching" was listed, by pastors, as their number one means of evangelism. In other words, their churches don't have any organized means of involving their laypeople in reaching the lost for Christ.

Second, I am pleased—No! beyond pleased, I'm excited—to see a call to return evangelism to the heart of the Church Growth Movement. With that pleasure, however, I still must urge us to be careful not to make the mistake of so many before us. I have noticed that when great churches, as well as movements, plateau, the cry always comes to go, "back to basics." It is a call to go back to their first love, their basic doctrine, their basic philosophies and basic principles, that which gave them their vision. But in reality *it is always a return to their original methodology*. Therefore, we must be cautious *not* to return to the original methodology, a methodology that no longer fits the church's organizational structure, the people or the culture. We must go forward by developing a methodology that fits the work force who will use it.

While continuing with the thought, "back to basics," I would like to address a broader concern within the Church Growth Movement. Many are saying the Church Growth Movement has plateaued and is poised for decline. I would say we have not plateaued but we have reached the end of a major era within the Movement. And if we don't recognize the next era, we really will go into decline. Let me explain. Although McGavran's renewed emphasis on evangelism gave the Church Growth

Movement its foundation, the research, the study of growing churches and analysis leading to the discovery of laws and principles are what made the Church Growth Movement great and gave it recognition as a legitimate discipline. Church Growth was now a science. I call it the "Discovery Era" of our movement. The answer is not going back to basics. Only in the movies can we go "Back to the Future." We must go *forward* to the future.

The Church Growth Movement must move from the Discovery Era to the Mass Application Era. If the discovery of laws and principles has made the Church Growth Movement great, how can we return to greatness when the discovery Era is all but complete. We have discovered all the laws and principles that make churches grow. (Or at least the dominant ones that will create the most growth.) Now it is time to move into the era of *Mass Application*. It is time to develop methods that can be applied by the next level of church leaders.

In recent years our laws and principles have been great assets to pastors who are highly gifted, creative, and innovative. They have used these laws and principles to build many great churches.

But let's face it, these dominant, highly gifted leaders represent a very small percentage of churches in America. The remainder are not as creative, innovative nor highly gifted. Most have the gift of shepherding and are overwhelmed with the task before them. Many simply do not have the ability to adapt these laws and principles to their situation. *However, these leaders are the future of church growth.* We must develop structures and methods that meet these leaders at their level. We must develop methodologies that are true to Scripture, yet fit the culture, gifts and talents of the churches' leaders and the resources that the leaders have available to them. Only then will we see church growth in the masses.

Many believe that the next great revival for the church will be a Lay Involvement Movement. If this is so, the challenge for the Church Growth Movement of the future is to find new, creative and innovative methods for equipping leaders. Equipping leaders to equip every Christian, not just a gifted few, to be able to effectively present the Gospel, thus evangelizing the lost and incorporating them into the body of Christ. We must develop methods that draw laity into evangelism rather than scaring

them off; methods that develop redemptive relationships with the lost; methods that befit all of God's children, no matter what their gift, not just those with the gift of evangelism. We must develop methods and tools that will equip leaders at all levels, not just those who could be C.E.O.'s of Fortune 500 companies.

Let me conclude by saying that I agree with Dr. Rainer and want to emphasize that with four simple statements of summary:

1. We must recognize the importance of evangelism and return it to its proper role within the Great Commission. Without evangelism there can be no fulfillment of the Great Commission, church growth.
2. We cannot return to old evangelism methods but must develop new methods and programs that will involve more laypeople in effective evangelism.
3. We must begin a new era or phase, the *Mass Application Phase* in the Church Growth Movement, by applying Church Growth principles at a level more understandable and workable by the masses of pastoral and lay leadership.
4. The real bottom line is we must take the application of the laws and principles of the Church Growth Movement to the level of those we expect to use it – the laity.

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