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TOWARDS A CHURCH GROWTH AGENDA FOR THE 1990'S

EDDIE GIBBS

Presidential Address to the
North American Society for Church Growth Annual Meeting
Thursday, November 16th, 1989

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A number of charter members of the North American Society for Church Growth can be described as Church Growth pioneers. Indeed, we are honored once again to have our founding Patriarch and International Pioneer in attendance. Some of you were in at the beginning, pioneering the application of Church Growth insights here in North America. Others of you took the North American adaptations and applied them to your own theological tradition, denomination or parachurch agency, and thereby have become innovators in your particular spheres of influence.

For a number of us this gathering is rather more than a mere professional association in that the insights gained and the friendships forged form part of our spiritual pilgrimage. We would not be where we are today if it were not for the Church Growth people we have interacted with or the Church Growth literature we have devoured.

The Church Growth Movement in North America is now fifteen years old and these two days represent the occasion of the fourth annual meeting of the North American Society for Church Growth. As we review the past we can celebrate a great deal of significant achievement in applying Church Growth insights to mobilizing the membership in a gift-based ministry, leadership management, and a new church planting. More recently, we have focused attention on the development of nationwide Church Growth strategies, power evangelism, leadership and management insights, intercession and spiritual warfare, and the emergence of the metachurch. Our annual meetings are an enriching experience, providing opportunity for us to benefit from the research and reflections of our

colleagues in many different areas. Most pioneers in a new science serve as generalists, while those who come after tend to focus on particular aspects. I think that during the past three years or so, we have just begun to enter the era of the specialists, who are focusing on particular aspects to provide research based data and in-depth analysis and reflection.

It occurs to me that, having covered a range of basic issues, and since we are now beginning to see the proliferation of individual concerns according to our various areas of interest, that there is a danger of fragmentation. I believe that we should now take time to think strategically for the 1990's. This gathering provides a unique opportunity to identify what we consider to be the crucial issues to be faced and perhaps to cluster ourselves around these priority topics, forming teams of people who will undertake research and correspond with each other in order to produce substantive work on specialized topics of strategic importance.

This evening I would like to set the ball rolling by endeavoring to identify a number of key issues which I think warrant our close attention during the closing decade of this millennium.

1. We need to keep abreast of social demographics in North America. In postwar years there has been a vast internal migration from the North-East to the South and West, so that today for the first time in U.S. history the bulk of the population is located West of the Mississippi. Such population movement has highlighted the priority of church planting in the newer cities and their expanding suburbs and satellite communities. Now we must ask, "What will be the significant demographic changes taking place in the 1990's?" Clearly church planting must continue to occupy a priority place in any Church Growth strategy. As we move with high tech further into the information age, we see a significant relocation of smaller businesses which are either the result of the break-up of a giant corporation or are new start-up companies developing a new range of products. A significant number of these are likely to be located in smaller towns, producing population growth which must not pass unnoticed in our preoccupation with the expansion of existing centers of population.

2. Population growth to the West and South has resulted in the decline of a number of the large cities of the North and East. While Phoenix grew by 55%, Houston by 45% and San Diego by 37% during the 1970's, Cleveland declined by 8%, Detroit by 2%, and New York by 9%

during the same period. In addition, we are faced with rural decline and the stagnation of smaller towns which have been built around a single industry which is now on hard times. As I speak, I am reminded of a drive through Duck Town, Tennessee, which depended for its livelihood on the strip mining of copper. As the deposit was mined to the point of economic non-viability, the community experienced recession and numerical decline. We cannot avoid the challenges of the older stagnant communities. Church Growth is not just for the burgeoning suburbs. In addition to developing church planting insights, we now need to focus attention on strategies for the renewal of existing churches.

3. The rapid development of information technology will result in a significant percentage of the work-force operating out of their own homes for most days of the week rather than being office based. According to conservative estimates reported in *John Naisbitt's Trendletter*, between 26 and 31 million will become telecommuters, that is about one of every five adult workers. They will be linked by computer modem to their regional headquarters.

U.S. companies in the vanguard for the movement include The Travelers Corp., which hires home-based data processors, and J.C. Penney Co., whose at-home telemarketers are provided with computers to handle catalogue orders. Hundreds of Pacific Bell engineers, public relations people and others spend at least part of their week at home.

These companies and others say that telecommuting not only saves office-space expenses, but also boosts worker productivity by 20 to 100 percent and makes it easier to recruit and retain good employees.

Los Angeles County is studying a program to relocate 2,000 of the county's 17,000 employees into at-home workers. . . . More recently, the states of California and Washington launched similar test programs.

In decades ahead, telecommuting will have a sweeping impact--on transportation systems, office-development proposals, rural home prices, education-

facility requirements and a host of community land-use issues.²

The church in Europe was taken completely by surprise with the demographic changes brought about by the industrial revolution. We have been slow to respond to the technological revolution. And the information revolution is likely to be equally widespread and traumatic. This shift in work habits may lead to a greater emphasis on the local community. Whereas commuters are too weary to venture from their homes to midweek activities, those who are home-based will welcome the opportunity to venture out of an evening. The smaller, community-based church may experience a new lease on life as a consequence. Some megachurches may become vulnerable to such changes if they continue to rely upon a centralized, programmatic ministry model. Carl George and John Vaughan's research into the metachurch is of particular importance, as it projects a model of church-life centralized acts of celebration linked to and resourcing a multiplicity of community and mission-based groups. These have come into being as a result of grass-roots initiatives. George Gallup, writing in *Grapevine* observes that "the laity want a greater role in shaping the church."³

4. Those sections of society most relied upon to provide lay leadership and the voluntary work-force to operate church programs will no longer be available in sufficient numbers, and the decline in the numbers of those training for full-time ministry means that there will not be such a large pool of clergy persons to develop programs. The four-fifths who continue to travel back and forth to their work place are more likely to be working flexi-hours and shift work, which will mean fewer people available to run church programs during the evening and week-ends. Many churches still have not recovered from the fact that the women they relied upon to provide volunteer labor are no longer available as the majority are now in the work place or struggling to support a family as a

²John Naisbitt, *John Naisbitt's Trendletter* (Washington, D.C.: JNTL, 3 August 1989) n. pag.

³George Gallup Jr., "America's Faith in the Nineties," *Grapevine*, n.d., n. pag.

single parent. Leadership emergence is likely to undergo significant changes with important implications for seminaries. Current enrollments should be seen as a warning sign.

5. The church of the nineties is likely both for internal and external reasons to be less programmatic and church-facilities based in its approach to ministry than in the sixties and seventies. One of the strengths of the North American churches has been the strength and sophistication of their church-based programs: the all-age Sunday school, youth programs, and a multiplicity of special interest groups. The success of such programs in terms of effectiveness for evangelism and church growth depended upon a large "external constituency" of nominal adherents or notional Christians, who by being drawn into those programs experienced the new birth, or were revived, or restored. As society becomes increasingly secularized the ranks of the "external constituency," which heretofore has been more numerous here in the U.S. than in any other Western nation, has become seriously depleted. Programs which were once the heartbeat of the church's life become a milestone around its neck, taking up more and more time from a depleted committed core of workers, and isolating the church from the communities it is called to serve. To be effective in the 1990's, churches will have to evaluate and prune their programs in order to release the people of God to exercise more of their ministry in the world. We will need to get out of our barns and into the fields--which is where the bulk of the sowing and harvesting is meant to be done.

6. We have to come to terms with the fact of an aging population. According to Tim Stafford in an article he wrote for *Christianity Today*,

Today about 11 percent of Americans are over 65. That proportion will gradually rise over the next 15 years, and take a big jump when the baby boomers start turning 65 in 2010. . . . Ultimately, the proportion of seniors should peak between 18 percent and 22 percent--about double what it is today.⁴

⁴Tim Stafford, "The Graying of the Church," *Christianity Today*, 6 November 1987, 17.

Many churches are already there. According to a recent study by James Ellor of Chicago's National College of Education, church attenders will include about 10 percent more elderly than the community at large. About one-quarter of Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Methodists are over 65, and about half are over 50.⁵ We will need church growth and church planting specialists in ministry to senior citizens and early retirees. In the short term, the retirement age has been raised to keep people from drawing on social security, but in the longer term we are likely to see significant numbers being given compulsory early retirement, especially among those in top-level management to ensure that younger executives do not leave the company through frustration. Whereas the church of a previous generation depended on women who were not in the commercial work-force to render volunteer service, the church of tomorrow is likely to utilize the services of early retirees.

Senior citizens are more prosperous than the population at large, and it is this segment of society which is contributing generously to the support of the churches and to the education of their grandchildren. Churches and denominations which fail to recruit significant numbers in excess of their attrition through death and transfer are likely to face increasing financial shortfalls. *Time* magazine devoted a whole issue to the Graying of America. It speculates that

Every year, as the baby boomers age and the nation's center of gravity shifts upwards, the allocation of resources becomes ever more difficult and the potential for conflict between generations even greater. . . .

Without a change in the present system, pensions and health-care costs will account for more than 60% of the federal budget by 2040.⁶

Home care for the elderly and chronically sick will become much more common providing opportunities for caring ministries by the local church in the new era of volunteerism.

⁵Ibid., 17.

⁶"Greys on the Go," *Time*, 22 February 1988, 66, 70.

7. **We need an in-depth analysis of the contribution made by the independent-charismatic churches and the recent movements whose impressive growth is a result of a mixture of new church planting and making available franchises to existing groups in search of a more significant identity**, such as Calvary Chapel, Abundant Life, and the Vineyard. Charismatic renewal and the Third Wave may have contributed significantly to the halting of church decline. In many parts of the Western world, we have seen an exodus of frustrated believers from older mainline denominations to the independent churches. Lyle Schaller claims that the mainline is rapidly becoming sideline. Although renewal has arrested the decline, in no country has it been significant enough to turn the tide to produce overall growth. I have examined the churchgoing data of North America, the UK, Australia and New Zealand in this regard. (I had hoped that the last mentioned, a small country which has experienced widespread charismatic renewal among the Anglicans and Baptists, would have provided the first such evidence, but was disappointed). This being so, we must not simply assume that church renewal, at least in the forms in which it has manifested itself thus far, is the answer to church growth of national significance.

8. **In the definition of Church Growth formulated by this Society, we have declared that the bottom line is growth which results in "responsible church membership." This being so, we must address the challenge presented by "skin-deep Christianity" which according to the data supplied by the Gallup organization is endemic in the United States.** While only 4% of the population is totally "non-religious" and a large majority of Americans believe in a personal God, believe that Jesus Christ is God or the Son of God, believe their prayers are answered, and say that religion is "very" or "fairly" important in their lives,⁷ we are confronted with a society in which homelessness and impoverishment is prevalent, broken families are common, where materialistic values are vaunted, and where morals and ethics are continuing to decline. Church involvement alone does not seem to make a great deal of difference in the way we live our lives. It is only when we isolate the one-tenth of the population that is highly committed, that a distinctive life-style becomes

⁷George Gallup Jr., "America's Faith in the Nineties," *Grapevine*, n.d., n. pag.

evident. As a Church Growth movement, we need to give far more attention to furthering biblical literacy and living a discipleship life-style.

9. Here in the United States we find it particularly difficult to strategize at the national level due in part to the size of the country, but even more due to the bewilderingly fragmented state of the Christian Church. It was interesting to contrast the approaches of the various country strategy groups at the Manila Lausanne II Conference. Some countries, because of the homogeneity of the Christian constituency were able to begin to draw up well-conceived strategies for the evangelization or re-evangelization of their country. They could identify the principal denominations and para-parochial agencies, knew who were the shakers and movers, and were addressing its key issues. The challenge is much greater in the case of North America made up of such diverse people served by a conglomeration of church groups, some with imported histories, and many more indigenous to North America. The domestic issues of the need for church revival and the development of more effective evangelistic strategies cannot be avoided by concentrating on the other agenda of America's role in World Evangelization.

My time has gone, so we must conclude at this point. You may disagree with my selection of issues and my analysis. But I have offered no more than my personal musings. My earnest hope is that we might make time to think strategically to arrive at an agreed range of topics and that we will be able to structure ourselves to begin to address these issues at some depth in order to equip the church to face the unprecedented changes and opportunities which I believe God is already bringing over the horizon. The day of the Lord is at hand.