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A Bibliometric Analysis of the Great Commission Research Journal 2009-2019

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Abstract

The Great Commission Research Journal, the subject of this investigation, is a relatively new journal with roots in the past. It is a successor to two previous publications from the American Society for Church Growth. A bibliometric analysis of the journal's first ten volumes is presented on two levels. The first is a content analysis of the surface features of the publication such as the authors' education, academic credentials, and employment, the number of full-length articles published, the subjects covered in each article, and other features such as the average length of articles, number of footnote references, and number of graphic representations. The second level of investigation, using citation analysis, focused on referenced authors, books, book chapters, and journal articles. Comparisons with past studies of religious journals were also made. Books are most frequently cited, and journal articles are relatively seldomly cited.

In today's academic research-oriented environment, an investigative methodology identified as bibliometrics is frequently employed. In

simplistic terms, bibliometrics tabulates and analyzes the structural elements of publications. Few papers using this broad methodology have ever covered religious studies (Examples are Hurd, 1963 and Adkins, 2015, 2018). Even fewer have studied a specific religious sub-discipline (Wittig, 2021). Gundry et al. concluded that “their scarcity is notable” (2015, p. 19). The motivation for conducting this present investigation was the desire to discover the publication characteristics of one of the newer religious journals not specifically focused on biblical studies. The *Great Commission Research Journal* (GCRJ) was selected for the study. It was hoped that the analysis of a journal that focuses on church-related ministries and evangelism would be helpful for understanding this sub-discipline and comparing it with others. How does a journal in this sub-discipline compare with the more traditional religious studies journals?

The GCRJ is not technically new, although it began with a new title and volume numbering in 2009. The sponsoring body, the Great Commission Research Network (previously known as the North American Society for Church Growth and later as the American Society for Church Growth), oversaw the publication of two predecessor titles between 1990 and 2009. *The Church Growth Journal* had a four-year life between 1990 and 1993 (vols. 1-4). It was renamed the *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* from 1995 to 2009 (vols. 5-20). In 2009, the Cook School of Intercultural Studies, at Biola University, started publishing the GCRJ (McMahan 2018, p. 140). At that time several transformations occurred. First, the journal was renamed the *Great Commission Research Journal* and presented with a new cover and layout. Second, the volume numbering was started again at “1” and the issues became longer. Third, book reviews and dissertation abstracts were added as regular sections. This new publication, according to Alan McMahan, editor, “represents a fresh start, a new beginning, the promise of greater things. It has its roots in the past, standing on the firm foundation established by its predecessors, yet looking toward the future with an optimism and purpose that is expansive and wide and full of new challenges and opportunities” (2009, p. 3). The purpose for the journal, clearly stated on the inside cover of every issue, is “to communicate recent thinking and research related to effective church growth and evangelism” (“Purpose”). It again will “represent the next generation of thinking on how to engage in effective evangelism that grows the church and builds the kingdom” (McMahan 2009, p. 3). In 2018, Mike Morris, the new editor of the Journal, in the Introduction of his first issue succinctly announced, without further explanation, that the “Great Commission Research Network (formerly known as the American Society for Church Growth) had regained its

capacity to publish the journal on its own (2018, p. 7).

Other periodicals covering church growth and evangelism proved to be short-term publications; they ceased publication in the 1990s or early 21st century. Here is a sample listing of church growth (or evangelism) publications that ceased publication during this period (without exception they are best categorized as non-journals, i.e., magazines and/or newsletters): *Church Growth America*, *Church Growth Bulletin*, *Evangelism*, *Global Church Growth*, *Grow: A Journal of Church Growth*, *Evangelism and Discipleship*, and the *Win Arn Growth Report*. The GCRJ, still the flagship journal it has always been, broadened its focus away from church growth toward effective evangelism and disciple-making as Donald McGavran had originally intended.

Methodology

One new religious journal focusing on evangelism was selected to be the target of this study. The *Great Commission Research Journal* (GCRJ) was initiated in 2009 and had ten years of publication history by 2019 when this investigation began. The journal is published two times per volume and, while the number of articles has varied from volume to volume, a total of 164 articles (not including book reviews) were published in its first ten years. The first part of this investigation tabulated and analyzed the outward, easily discerned features of the journal related to authorship (who, what gender, and other information such as academic credentials, graduate training institutions, and present organizational affiliation) which was derived from vita data furnished with each article published.

The second part of this investigation examined and reviewed the content of all published articles. This task required some ingenuity. The analysis of the subject content of each article had to be done on an ad hoc basis. There is no known list of subject headings for church growth literature, thus a list of terms (headings) was created from an examination of all article titles. Terms that suggested a subject idea (such as 'church growth') were tentatively used, at first, to see how well they covered a collection of articles. Some revision and adaptation were eventually required. A compilation of twelve terms was the end result.

The initial terms or headings chosen to classify the articles included *Church Growth* (a general theme for most articles, which includes the ideas of planting, changes in, and closings of churches), *Church Growth Movement* (the cultural aspect of the idea), *Evangelism* (a companion element to the idea of church growth), *Ministry* (studies of development and style of ministers and congregations), *Missiology* (the study of mission history and methodology including any sort of cross-cultural

work), and *Leadership* (the work involved in leading and overseeing a growing church). Several more headings were added: *Persons* (named individuals and church planters); *Theological Systems* (a hybrid synonym for denominations or beliefs), *America* (including articles that focused on specific states or regions), other *Countries*, *Biblical Texts* (a careful interpretation of specific biblical passages), and *Great Commission* (the most specific encapsulation of Jesus' mandate to evangelize).

The third division of this opening phase of the investigation tabulated and analyzed basic features of the published articles including the number of pages per article, the number of references included in each article, and the types of graphic material within articles. This information was collected from all 164 articles in the ten volumes.

The final part of this investigation focused on citations within the GCRJ. This analysis was conducted on a sample of 50 full-length articles randomly selected from the 164 published. The following data elements were tabulated from each of the 50 articles: (1) citations of authors who had published in the journal, (2) citations of books (number and other publication features), (3) citations of journals (religious and secular, scholarly and popular); and (4) citations of chapters appearing in edited books (including chapters previously published elsewhere). Comparisons were also made to data drawn from an earlier bibliometric study on the humanities.

Results Concerning Authorship, Subject Matter, and Other Article Characteristics

Primary Authorship

The first major element examined in this investigation was that of authorship of the 164 papers appearing in GCRJ during the period studied. There were 177 authors in its first decade of publication, a number which included 13 second and third authors. Of these first authors, one stood out as being remarkably prolific. Gary L. McIntosh, the previous editor of the journal (under the title *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*) and Professor of Christian Ministry and Leadership at Talbot School of Theology (affiliated with Biola University), published fourteen papers. And on several occasions, two papers were published within a single calendar year (vol. 6, no. 2, and vol. 7, no. 1 [2015] and vol. 9, no. 2 and vol. 10, no. 1 [2018]). McIntosh is well known to readers of GCRJ for his biography of Donald A. McGavran, the best-known twentieth-century missiologist (2015, pp. 216, 236); nine excerpts from the biography were published in volumes 6 and 10. Several of his newer articles covered a survey of the church growth movement, "Church Movements of the Last

Fifty Years in North America” (vol. 2, no. 2, 2010), and a contemporary evaluation of Donald McGavran, “The Twenty-first Century Relevance of Donald McGavran” (vol. 4, no. 2, 2013).

Bob Whitesel, Professor of Missional Leadership at Wesley Seminary (affiliated with Indiana Wesleyan University), was another prolific author with five publications to his credit. He, as well as Gary McIntosh, received his doctoral degree from Fuller Theological Seminary, a graduate school that stands out prominently among the authors of this journal. The newly installed editor for the journal, beginning his editorship with volume 12, is David R. Dunaetz. He published four papers among those examined. And George Hunter III, distinguished professor, founder, and first Dean of the School of World Mission and Evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary, has likewise published four items (2018, p. 200). A high number of authors did graduate work at Fuller Theological Seminary, and a competitive number graduated from Biola University and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

While 95% of all authors were male, eight women made contributions as well. Women wrote five papers in the first five volumes, and two more papers, with women as second authors, appeared in volumes 8 and 10. Most authors were professors, but the distribution among other occupations is worth noting: 36 were ministers (chaplains or pastors), 24 were directors or superintendents of some religious or academic program, 9 were currently missionaries or foreign workers, and 7 were full-time students. Twenty-one served overseas prior to working in America (identifying their field of service as France, Mexico, South Asia, Hungary, Argentina, West Africa, East Asia, Africa, Cyprus, South Africa, Ghana, and the Philippines).

Influential Institutions

A tabulation of academic institutions attended by the authors, or from which degrees were granted, was desired, but it was not possible to obtain fully since the vita data appearing with each article was not presented in a standard format. This data was too often presented in a casual, personal style which did not cover more important details. The most frequently named institutions were Biola University (including Talbot School of Theology) and Fuller Theological Seminary. Two more, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, were also mentioned with some frequency. All are conceptually regarded as evangelical institutions.

Article Subjects

The absence of keywords or other subject content designations made it difficult to categorize articles by subject content. An attempt, however, was made to classify article content by excerpting terminology from article titles. The results are found in Table 1.

Table 1: *Article Subjects*

Article Subject	Number	%
Church Growth	52	26.13
Persons	39	19.60
Missiology	20	10.05
Theological systems	18	9.05
Countries	17	8.54
Church Growth Movement	11	5.53
Ministry	9	4.52
America	9	4.52
Leadership	7	3.52
Biblical text	4	2.01
Great Commission	2	1.00
Total	199	100

Note: A total of 164 articles were analyzed; some articles focused on more than one subject.

Other Characteristics of Articles

Three more tabulated items were the article's page length, the number of references in each article, and the number of images.

Length of Articles. The article length ranged between 3 and 38 pages; the average was 15 pages. Twenty-six short papers (15.85% of the 164 papers), most 10 pages or less, could be classified as non-research papers. These papers would be better classified as "personal experience" reports, or reports of work conducted somewhere in one of the American states or a foreign mission field. Three papers in this grouping were commissioned by the editor and appeared under a common title: "My Pilgrimage in Church Growth." These articles were written by retired leaders of the Church Growth Movement: Ray Ellis (vol. 6 no. 1, 2014), Kent Hunter (vol. 7 no. 1, 2015), and Bill Easum (vol. 8 no. 1, 2016).

At the other end of the spectrum were articles of 20 or more pages. The longest paper was 38 pages, but only four papers were 30 or more pages. Thirty-seven papers appeared in this longer group, accounting for

twenty-three percent of all papers. There were many more long research papers than short papers. Apart from the “My Pilgrimage in Church Growth” articles, there was no apparent difference in topics between the longer and shorter papers.

Number of References. The average number of cited references (in footnotes) per article was 29.46. However, 7 short papers under 8 pages had no references. Moreover, among the 3 papers under 8 pages with references (with an average page length of 5.7 pages), the average number of references was 3.9. It is difficult to consider such short papers accompanied by so few references as research.

Among the 35 papers between 8 and 10 pages, the average number of references was 12.6, a somewhat improved result. However, 5 of these papers appeared without a single reference, and 6 others had between 1 and 6 references. Papers in this group, while not heavily documented, at least manifested signs of having found supportive evidence for what the authors claimed.

At the other extreme, 20 papers (with an average length of 21 pages) had more than twice the average number of footnotes (an average of 80.55, ranging from 60 to 133). These can be considered heavily documented research papers.

Number of Images. Graphics appeared in 31.09% of the articles (51 of the 164 papers). The distribution of the graphics is found in Table 2.

Table 2: *Images in the 51 Papers with Graphics*

Graphics	Number	%
Figures	92	51.39
Tables	68	38.00
Maps	11	6.14
Photos	8	4.47
Total	179	100

Results Concerning Materials Cited

A variety of cited materials have been tabulated in this part of the investigation: (1) cited authors (particularly authors of books, because of their importance for the discipline, $n = 362$), (2) single-authored books ($n = 464$), (3) serial publications (both academic journals and popular magazines, divided into religious and non-religious publications, $n = 96$); and (4) separately authored chapters or essays published within an edited collected work (book chapters, $n = 92$). The total number of items cited

was 1,147. Each of these elements will be addressed separately below.

Cited Authors

In the 50-article sample, there were 362 authors cited. This sample included 31.56% of all references during the 10-year period studied. The average number of authors cited per article was 7.24, not extensive, but reasonable. Nine GCRJ authors had their books cited by another author within this sample. Three of these authors had ten or more of their publications cited: C. Peter Wagner (13 titles), Donald McGavran (11 titles), and Elmer Towns (11 titles). Surprisingly, however, most titles authored by these three individuals were cited only one time in the sample; only a few were cited twice. These three authors were frequently cited because of their prolific output of books, only a few of which were acknowledged as being important or highly popular. Other authors having multiple publications cited are Bob Whitesel (7 titles), Paul Hiebert, George Hunter, Gary McIntosh, and Tom Steffen (6 titles each), and Lyle Schaller (5 titles). But, again, none of their works were cited more than once within the sample.

Cited Books

In the 50-paper sample from the first ten volumes, there were 464 references to books, averaging 9.28 books per paper. Not a single book was cited more than 3 times in this sample. No monograph could readily be classified as frequently cited.

There were seven books cited 3 times: *The Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* by David J. Bosch (1991), *Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* by Donald McGavran (1955), *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* by Donald McGavran (1988), the third edition of *Understanding Church Growth* by Donald McGavran (1990), *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views* by Gary McIntosh (2004), *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* by M. David Sills (2010), and *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* by Christopher J. H. Wright (2006). These books were published between 1955 and 2010. They are significant publications among church growth scholars, but they were not frequently cited by the authors of the GCRJ.

Twenty-three books were cited two times, and 303 were cited only once. Many books were cited in this sample, but it is disappointing that not even one was judged significant enough to stand out.

In an even more disappointing result, 28 Bible commentaries were identified in the sample but only 9 were published since 2000. The most

contemporary work was published in 2014. The biblical commentaries cited were not predominantly current publications; still, the citation of material from the 1980s, 1970s, or even the 1950s demonstrates the value of such commentaries within this community of scholars.

Cited Serial Publications (Journal and Magazine Articles)

Serial publications are “materials in any medium issued under the same title in a succession of discrete parts, usually numbered (or dated) and appearing at regular or irregular intervals with no predetermined conclusion” (Reitz, 2006). The most common serial publications are academic journals, popular magazines, and newspapers. Cited journals and magazines have been analyzed in this investigation, but newspapers were excluded. Because of the specific nature of the GCRJ, journals and magazines were each divided into two categories: religious and non-religious. Journals were identified as being published up to four times per volume and magazines were identified as being published six to twelve times per volume.

Ninety-six serial items were tabulated and divided into four categories. The two primary serial categories (religious and non-religious) were divided again into journal and magazine sub-categories. Ten religious journal titles out of 35 were cited two or more times, thus representing 28.6 percent of all such titles. These ten most frequently cited religious journals are the GCRJ, *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* (the predecessor of the GCRJ), *Journal of Evangelism and Missions, Interpretation, Missiology: An International Review*, *Evangelical Review of Theology*, *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, and *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. The GCRJ and its predecessor, the *Journal of the American Society of Church Growth*, account for a third of these titles (26 of 81 citations). This can be regarded as a high degree of self-citation. *The Journal of Evangelism and Missions*, the third-highest listed journal is the only one with the word Evangelism in the title. This journal was published by Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary but has ceased publication. A new journal was launched in 2012 entitled *The Southern Baptist Journal of Missions and Evangelism* and included a feature on Donald McGavran and church growth in its second and final volume, published in 2016. GCRJ appears therefore to be the only remaining journal with a primary emphasis on church growth and evangelism.

Magazines represent the other half of the religious serials. Six religious

magazines were cited two or more times and accounted for 23% (6 out of 26) of all religious magazines cited. *Christianity Today*, the best-known of this group, represents 11% of the religious magazine citations (6 out of 52). The other five religious magazines cited two or more times each were *World Call*, *Mission Frontiers*, *Mission Round Table: Occasional Bulletin*, *Christian Evangelist*, and *Global Church Growth*.

Not much needs to be said about the non-religious serials. Only 34 titles in total were cited. *Third World Quarterly* was cited the most frequently (7 times). It is focused on economics, politics, and government. The other five non-religious serials focused on sociology and psychology.

The 96 serials identified in this investigation were cited 162 times. Half of all journal citations were dated between 2003 and 2017. Over 28% (46 out of 162) were from 2010 to 2017. Only 5% (9 out of 162) of the citations were dated 2017, and only 9% were from the two most current years, 2018 and 2019 (15 out of 162). Interestingly, another 9% of journal citations (14 out of 162) were from pre-1950 material, ranging from 1920 to 1939. Most of these journal citations were from two historical studies by Donald McGavran.

Cited Chapters and Essays from Edited Books

Essays and stand-alone chapters appearing in books classified as collected works (i.e., an editor collected them into a single book) form the next topic for discussion. Ninety-two such essays or chapters were contributed by 64 authors and appeared in 64 books. One book was cited thirteen times; it was the *Journal and Selected Letters of William Carey*, edited by Terry Carter. Another book, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*, edited by Gary McIntosh, was cited six times by six different authors. Fifty-seven books, on the other hand, were cited only once, accounting for 63 percent of the total (57 out of 92). Many of these citations established a connection with a specific person; these 28 citations accounted for a third of all essay and chapter citations. William Carey was the focus of 15 essays, and John Wesley was the focus of 9 essays. Essays and chapters on biblical themes were seldom cited (5 out of 92 = 5%). Most biblical material was cited from books by a single author.

Knievel and Kellsey (2005), in a comparative study of eight humanities fields, concluded that “monographs remain the dominant format of cited sources” (abstract). They found that typically books were cited at a 70 to 30 ratio to journal articles (e.g., for every 10 citations of books, there were 4.2 journal articles cited) in the humanities (which includes religion). In contrast, the authors of the GCRJ appear to be even more dependent on books compared to academic journals; the ratio of

books to journal article citations was 83 to 17 (e.g., for every 10 citations of books, there were only 2.1 journal articles cited).

GCRJ authors rely far more heavily on book support in their writing than on articles from academic journals. What is the reason for this difference? Is the research in the GCRJ based less on academic research than the typical research in the humanities? This is an issue that needs further examination.

Summary and Conclusion

The results of this investigation were divided into two major parts. The first part covered basic features of the articles' authorship (such as name, gender, education, and employment of the author) and various other features such as subject content, pagination length, and the number of references and graphics.

Part two of the investigation examined the contents of the journal using citation analysis. Four components were addressed in this part of the investigation: cited authors, cited monographs, cited serial publications, and cited essays from collected works.

As stated previously, the *Great Commission Research Journal* appeared in its early years as the flagship journal for the church growth movement. It is still the flagship journal; however, it appears to be the only journal devoted to the subject. Several journals advocating a similar purpose have ceased publication. In many aspects of this investigation, the GCRJ has performed generally well. The purpose of the journal, repeated on the inside cover of every issue, is to focus on church growth and evangelism. While similar bibliometric studies have been profitable and useful for other subject disciplines, this study should be equally useful for understanding the characteristics of this religious arena and guiding it in the future as well.

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