

CHURCH GROWTH IS DESIRABLE

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In recent years the subject of church growth has had a bad press – so much so that the ‘British Church Growth Association’ has had to fold up and in its place we now have ‘Healthy Church UK’. In some ways I welcome the shift of emphasis. For God does not call us to grow churches – he calls us to make disciples. Of course, where disciples are made, the church normally grows, but growth in that case is a by-product of obedience to the Great Commission rather than the goal itself. Still, to be fair to the leaders of the old church growth movement, they always made it clear that what counted was not transfer growth, but conversion growth. Indeed, they used to distinguish ‘conversion’ growth from ‘biological’ growth – ‘biological’ growth in their terms is when children from Christian families came to faith in Christ, whereas conversion growth for them is what happens when people are won from outside the church. A more valid criticism of the old church growth movement was its apparent commitment to the homogenous principle – Peter Wagner, for instance, an influential proponent of church growth ‘guru’, argued that ‘the membership of a healthy growing church is composed of basically one kind of people’. Although it is true that ‘birds of a feather flock together’, homogeneity within the church is in fact not to be welcomed and is not a sign of spiritual health – for the glory of the church’s calling is to be a diverse and inclusive people. On this particular count I believe we can rightly be critical of the old church growth movement. And yet, some of the criticisms that have been made of church growth have been wrong. It is, for instance, not helpful to deduce from the lonely figure of the crucified Christ that ‘Christ was not interested in success’. The Cross was not the end of the story; it was the means of Jesus drawing ‘all people’ to himself (see John 12.32). The Cross may be a warning against false triumphalism and a pointer to the costliness of true growth; it does not speak against the need of churches to grow. The truth is that churches – particularly in Britain – need to grow. In this respect I am challenged by Professor Robin Gill, who likened churches to the pelicans in St James’ Park in central London - peculiar creatures, stranded in an environment not their own; awkward, out of place, angular, with a big mouth but little brain, demanding but inactive. He said: "Churches in Britain need to make urgent choices about structure and direction. If they are to cease being pelicans, they need to be much clearer about how they might be effective in present-day Britain. They need to be more single-minded about growth... about how they might reach the nine out of ten people in Britain who seldom or never go to church". Church growth is indeed desirable!

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