



# The theological foundations for church growth



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There are two key reasons why theology is crucial for church growth.

First, many people have deep theological objections to the notion of numerical church growth. This was pithily expressed by one ordinand who told me church growth was 'just an unspiritual bigging yourself up'. When two or three church leaders are gathered together, a multitude of theological objections arise to the notion of numerical church growth: 'It's the kingdom that matters, not numerical growth ... It's an ungodly side-lining of the need to love one's neighbour ... Isn't growth in the Christian life about the quality of our inner, spiritual lives, rather than "bums on seats"?' Serious questions, but there are serious answers to them.

The second reason why theology matters is that all the data shows that when churches *intend* to grow numerically, they *tend* to grow numerically.<sup>1</sup> And it is theology that creates intentionality. Conversely, there is a good case for arguing that many churches and denominations are hamstrung by 'decline theology', in which talk of numerical growth is seen as spurious or unnecessary. 'Decline theology' is itself dubious, but also powerful. Any meaningful church growth requires that the false premises behind it be unmasked.

I want to sketch the outline of a theology for church growth. It is not original, being drawn largely on the work of others.<sup>2</sup> There is much more that could be said. But I believe a nuanced theology of church growth is both possible and essential. The growth which churches in the Global

North so urgently need cannot come unless there is a robust theology beneath it.

## Church growth is philosophically legitimate

It is often stated that promoting faith is 'arrogant', that it is an illegitimate 'proselytism'. Worst of all, we may engage in 'Bible-bashing'. However, the New Testament shows that Christians did and should share their faith, as long as it is done 'with gentleness and respect' (1 Peter 3.15).

Our culture, rightly, recognises the importance of sharing conflicting views about politics, the arts and health and much else. Whatever one's views on Brexit, no one has suggested that sharing either 'pro' or 'remain' viewpoints was, in itself, 'arrogant' or that advocacy of one side or the other was, *per se*, wrong. If it is legitimate, indeed, crucial, to share viewpoints on a wide range of matters, why should issues of faith be excluded from discussion? The term 'proselytism' is so flimsy it is best avoided. Currently, as used, accusations of 'proselytism' often act as a way of censoring those beliefs that the speaker deems unacceptable to discuss, whilst assuming that other beliefs can be freely promoted.

All faiths must receive respect. But claims that all faiths are equally valid or that truth is itself plural cannot be sustained. The story of the blind men and the elephant, beloved of many Religious Education syllabi, in which each man understands one aspect of the truth but misses the whole truth, is itself contradictory. It is the

## NOTES

1. See, e.g., the findings of the Church of England's Church Growth Research Programme, available at: [www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/report](http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/report)
2. See the range of scholars writing in D Goodhew (ed.), *Towards a Theology of Church Growth* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).
3. *Ibid.*.
4. G Tomlin, 'The Prodigal Spirit and Church Growth', in *Church Growth*, p. 136.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
6. Anglicanism in recent decades has sought a greater emphasis on the Holy Spirit. However, it may be questioned whether modern Anglicanism in the Global North has yet arrived at a truly robust pneumatology.
7. M Warner, 'Incarnation and Church Growth', in *Church Growth*, ch. 6.
8. L Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 227.
9. Bede, *Life of Cuthbert*, ch. 9.
10. T Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), p. 331.

outside observer in the story, claiming to 'see all', who knows the truth and puts right those he or she deems blind. Sharing faith is not 'arrogant'. Indeed, it is the closing down of discussion in the name of a spurious pluralism that is problematic. We need to be grown-ups. Faith (and unbelief) has to be tested by respectful discussion and by looking at evidence – and, as we will see, the evidence for Christian faith is robust.

## Church growth is biblical

The Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts form a composite work. At its heart is the resurrection of Jesus. This event is where Luke's Gospel ends and the book of Acts begins. Talk of kingdom is central to Luke's Gospel. In Acts, 'kingdom' is mentioned far less. It matters, but the primary outworking of the kingdom in Acts is the proliferation of local churches.

Many theologians and church leaders explicitly or implicitly privilege 'the kingdom' over the local church. The New Testament knows nothing of this. It could be argued that the strapline of the book of Acts is 'founding churches across the world'. Most striking are those moments where the apostles arrive at towns like Tyre (Acts 21.3–4) and Puteoli (Acts 28.13–15) and find a community of believers *already* there. The obvious inference is that anonymous Christians brought the gospel there and set up churches. These unnamed Christians were probably not official apostles, but they acted apostolically.

Think of the hugely affirming terms used by the New Testament to describe these small, often fragile, sometimes very messy churches; a holy people, a royal priesthood, the body of Christ, holy ones, a people belonging to God. These are the people of whom Paul says that he thanks God when he thinks of them. If Scripture values such local churches and puts such emphasis on their proliferation, who are we to do any less?

## Church growth is doctrinally necessary

A theological basis for seeking numerical church growth is readily to hand in Scripture. When we turn to doctrine, we may need help to see it is there. Here the work of writers such as Professors Alister McGrath and Ivor Davidson and of Bishops Graham Tomlin and Martin Warner is immensely useful.<sup>3</sup> They point us to how the fundamental doctrines call us to an extrovert faith, which seeks the growth and proliferation of local churches.

Graham Tomlin argues that when we look at the Spirit, we see a God whose essence is sending: 'Theologically speaking, mission and the consequent growth of the church begin with the begetting of the Son and the procession of the Spirit from the Father. It starts with the Trinitarian life of God before it ever involves the creation, let

alone the human part of that creation.'<sup>4</sup> Growing churches is part of being truly Trinitarian.

Stress on the Holy Spirit also ensures that stress on numerical growth is balanced by desire to grow in personal holiness and in service to wider society. The Holy Spirit grows congregations *but also* grows people by fostering gifts of service to the wider community and by healing individuals within congregations.

**many churches and denominations are hamstrung by 'decline theology'**

'That is why church growth matters. Healthy, well-functioning churches are places where people can be restored and become agents of change and renewal within the world beyond the church. The reason we need churches to grow is not to pay the bills, or to feel good about ourselves. It is to enable humanity, in tune with the Spirit of God, to fulfil its divine calling to care for and nurture the world which God has created.'<sup>5</sup>

To say this is to challenge British churches: can church decline be linked to the tendency of many Western Christians to downplay the third person of the Trinity?<sup>6</sup>

Martin Warner points to the centrality of the incarnation in church growth. In so doing, he alerts us to the way the term 'incarnational', so much used in contemporary church life, can sometimes be used in a sloppy way.<sup>7</sup> The primary way in which Christians incarnated Christ in their localities was by the founding and growing of communities of those who followed Jesus as Lord. As Lesslie Newbigin put it, 'the only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.'<sup>8</sup> It is striking how the word 'sacramental' is often used as a synonym for 'Eucharistic', when, for almost all denominations, there are at least *two* sacraments. Eliding 'sacramental' with 'Eucharistic' is a dubious downplaying of baptism, as if it were a secondary sacrament. This is downplaying the sacrament which enfleshes church growth. Every baptism means the community of faith has expanded.

## Church growth is central to fidelity to tradition

The Christian tradition shows that enthusiasm for church growth was evidenced by some surprising figures. Living in the North East, I hear much of the Northumbrian, Cuthbert, an influential Anglo-Saxon churchman from the seventh century. Saint Cuthbert is usually depicted as a man of prayer who had a deep communion with nature. He was, but he was more than that. Bede tells us how Cuthbert 'often did the rounds of the



villages, sometimes on horseback, more often on foot, preaching the way of truth to those who had gone astray.<sup>9</sup> Cuthbert sought to grow the Church.

Likewise, Saint Francis of Assisi, a medieval Catholic friar and preacher, is routinely portrayed as a man who profoundly loved the poor and creation. And he did, but he also loved to share the gospel and build up the Church. The aphorism attributed to Saint Francis, that one should always preach the gospel, but only use words 'if necessary' – with its implication that the verbal

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proclamation of faith is marginal – has become an ecclesial cliché. But the *practice* of Saint Francis points in entirely the opposite direction. He and the friars were the centre of intentional church growth in the middle ages.

## Church growth is necessitated by reason and experience

The Stanford anthropologist, Professor Tanya Luhrmann, speaks of how: 'What one might call an avalanche of medical data has demonstrated that, for reasons still poorly understood, those who attend church and believe in God are healthier and happier and live longer than those who do not.'<sup>10</sup>

An excellent research report from the thinktank Theos details the full extent of this 'avalanche' of research.<sup>11</sup> It is academically proven that joining a congregation is strongly linked to marked improvement in physical, mental and relational well-being. In an age when churchgoing is often depicted as a quasi-pathological disorder, this needs saying. Christian congregations are deeply good news. Joining a church does people good – spiritually, but in other ways too. The gospel is good news eternally and it is good news now. So the growth and proliferation of local churches is something Christians have excellent reasons to desire passionately. Likewise, the decline and closure of churches is not something to be treated with a fatalistic shrug.

## Towards a theology of church growth

Seeking the numerical growth of local churches ought to be central to theology. It is not peripheral. It is not optional. There is also considerable evidence to show that it is eminently possible, especially when we look outside the Global North

and when we look beyond what are sometimes called the 'mainline' denominations (and there is significant evidence of significant church growth in Britain, too).<sup>12</sup>

This raises the disturbing question as to whether the decline of many British churches has, in part, theological roots. When we understand Scripture, doctrine and tradition as if growing local churches was a minor matter, or even something disdained in favour of supposedly higher 'kingdom' goals, we are not only distorting Scripture, reason and tradition, we are conforming to the secular mindset which is so influential in our surrounding culture.

More and more, I find myself turning to Charles Taylor's diagnosis, in his book *A Secular Age*.<sup>13</sup> Taylor sees secularity as the dominant culture in places like Britain. Part of living in a secular age is the assumption that growing local churches is unnecessary or impossible or both. It will take a conscious effort, an exodus, to let go of such 'decline theology.' My friends from the Global South find Western fatalism a bizarre way in which to view the Church. I think they are right.

A range of research shows that churches that *intend* to grow *tend* to grow. And intentionality only comes through theology. Having a nuanced theology of church growth will assist churches in growing numerically, but doing so in a godly way. Such a theology will also liberate us from the hopeless horizon of secularity which assumes this world is all there is. A theology of church growth, rooted in the hope of the resurrection, shows us what treasure we have to offer a world of aching loneliness.

## NOTES

11. N Spencer, G Madden, C Purtil & J Ewing, *Religion and Well Being: Assessing the Evidence* (London: Theos, 2016).

12. E.g., see P Brierley, *Capital Growth: What the 2012 London Church Census Reveals* (Tonbridge: ADBC 2013); D Goodhew and R Barward Symmons, *New Churches in the North East* (CCGR: Durham, 2015).

13. C Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).



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