Dissertation submitted for Masters in Practical Theology

Does church size matter?

A critical evaluation of the factors that define, drive and measure success in church planting across Europe today.

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Abstract

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This dissertation critically evaluates the significance of church size in defining, driving and measuring success in church planting across Europe. By exploring the historical and theological foundations of the Church Growth Movement (CGM) and its influence on church planting strategies today, this study will propose a crucial redefinition of success that moves beyond numerical growth. While the CGM has significantly shaped evangelism and mission, the study questions whether an overemphasis on size and pragmatism compromises deeper theological and pastoral priorities.

Ultimately, this paper will argue that a more holistic approach to measuring success in church planting is needed – one that balances numerical growth with spiritual depth, contextual effectiveness and fresh innovation for church reproduction and multiplication. Emerging responses in church planting emphasise greater missional engagement, where metrics may inform but do not drive church planting endeavours. This calls for a reframing of success that aligns with the *missio Dei,* urging church planters to prioritise discipleship and community engagement over rigid size metrics, ensuring that the European church remains faithful to its calling.

Contents

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1. Foundations

Bigger is often framed as *better.* In church planting, growth in size and influence is typically viewed as success, with numerical goals providing validation and steer. Conversely, numerical stagnancy is often framed as a 'failure' if certain milestones are not met in expected timeframes. A correlation between quantitative growth and the health of a church is generally attributed to the foundations laid by missiologist Donald McGavran in the late 1950s, further developed by Peter Wagner in their respective literature.[1] 'Church Growth' theory was adopted by vast swathes of the religious Western world, sparking a movement that carried assumptions about pragmatic approaches to evangelism, leadership and measuring local church impact.[2]

Opinions about the resulting 'Church Growth Movement' (CGM) are diverse and varied. Some credit the CGM with sparking a much-needed renewal in the local church, serving a 'powerful theological vision' that is foundational to more effective evangelism and missional strategy.[3] However, others have questioned the pragmatism and motivation of the CGM, challenging the uncritical adoption of insights from secular and socioscientific fields into the genesis of new churches.[4] They claim that such models run contrary to biblical principles of ministry, with church planting strategies failing to confront culture rather than be shaped by it.

In an increasingly secularised and post-Christian Europe, this paper will suggest that any 'successful' approach to church planting must start with a more encompassing definition of success. Measures of effectiveness cannot be limited to numbers but must readily incorporate a broader cluster of equally important qualitative values. Whilst many positive emphases can be applauded and drawn from

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[1] Notably, by Donald A. McGavran in *How Churches Grow* (1959), and with C. Peter Wagner in *Understanding Church Growth* (1970). It is argued in the latter that church growth is God's will and God is pleased with it.

[2] C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1976), 13-14. Wagner notes the term *Church Growth* as a 'McGavranism', to capture insights that challenged traditional notions of 'evangelism' or 'missions' that had lost their cutting edge.

[3] George G. Hunter, "The Theological Roots, Vision, and Contribution of the Church Growth Movement", in *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, Vol 16/2 (2005), 3.

[4] Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning From the European Experience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 123.

McGavran's foundations, the potential pitfalls of the CGM must also be considered, with particular attention on how church planters set foundations in the establishment of new churches. Sensitivity to host cultures and paradigms must better inform our efforts to contextualise church planting, which requires robust examination of our driving motives and missiology today.[5] Whilst many agree that *more* churches are needed across Europe, the pressing question is about what *kind* of churches will better produce disciples of Jesus, which is the crux of our Great Commission.[6]

1.2 Motivations

This study is motivated by my experience as a church planter, but more recently as a denominational leader within the Assemblies of God, responsible for church planting coordination across Europe.[7] During my years in church leadership, a serious and pressing concern was about the size and growth of my local congregations. Church Growth advocates insist that 'all healthy churches grow', where the primary proof of church health is the numbers, usually in attendance or engagement.[8] This pressure to see numerical growth created significant internal stress at times but was often used as an evaluative lens for external success against other ministries. In such environments, the Pastor is positioned as the chief pragmatist, strategic leader and primary resource behind church expansion.[9] However, I contend that such a position is not only unbiblical, it is unsustainable. Under increasing pressure, several of my close colleagues quit vocational ministry out of exhaustion, deep hurt, or chose to abandon their faith altogether. The irony is that equating church health with church growth produced deeply unhealthy leaders.

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[5] Craig Van Gelder, "Gospel And Our Culture View", in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views,* ed. Paul E. Engle and Gary L McIntosh (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 81. He emphasises a strategy for mission that involves prayerfully listening to the gospel as a community, discerning how God is leading us to act in a given context, *alongside* insights from social sciences.

[6] Matthew 28:19. Scripture references within this paper are all from the New International Version (NIV).

[7] The denomination referred to is the World Assemblies of God, with leadership and coordination in Europe provided by Assemblies of God Great Britain.

[8] Donald A. McGavran and George G. Hunter, *Church Growth Strategies That Work* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1980), 13.

[9] Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1992), 311.

The sheer nature of church planting can be all-consuming, but Ronald A. Heifetz offers a helpful metaphor in his book *Leadership on the Line,* describing the difference between being a dancer on the floor and an observer on the balcony.[10] To see things from a 'balcony perspective' as a leader, he proposes taking yourself 'out of the dance, in your mind, even if just for a moment'.[11] This paper attempts to observe church planting from the balcony and consider what impact the CGM has had on church planting perspectives today, evaluating existing paradigms and considering if there is a better way to engage in the 'dance'.

1.3 Observations

Church Growth theory originated from McGavran's observations on people movements on the mission field in India, noting the key factors that caused or hindered church growth.[12] Karl Vaters praises his astute observations yet equally critiques how the American church adopted then abused his principles to drive numerical growth alone.[13] Whilst Vaters' critique is the misplaced 'drive for success' in the church, his implicit complaint is the failure to heed McGavran in addressing the nuances of context and culture.[14]

It is observed elsewhere that the era of Christianity being at the centre of Western civilisation has ended and, therefore, is now much more challenging for new generations to access or accept an overarching Christian worldview.[15] Generations Y and Z are undoing the meta-narrative of authority and institutions in favour of being defined by a 'happy midi-narrative' of a smaller community around them, from where they locate meaning and purpose.[16] Both the post-Christendom and post-pandemic eras are reframing people's questions and where they turn for answers today. These

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[10] Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002), 53.

[11] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line,* 54.

[12] Gary L McIntosh, "Why Church Growth Can't Be Ignored", in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2010). McIntosh notes that McGavran's early research was eventually published under the title *The Bridges of God* (New York: Friendship, 1955*),* labelled the 'Magna Carta' of the Church Growth movement.

[13] Karl Vaters, *Desizing The Church: How bigness became an obsession, why it matters, and what to do about it* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2024), 63-65.

[14] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 23.

[15] Andrew Hardy, *Missional Discipleship After Christendom* (Eugene, ER: Wipf & Stock, 2018), Perlego Edition, Chapter 8: Discipleship of the New Tribes.

[16] Sara B Savage, et al. *Making Sense of Generation Y: The World View of 15-to 25-Year-Olds* (London: Church House, 2011), 37-38.

shifts hugely impact what kind of churches are planted, as Andrew Hardy notes, emphasising the crucial importance of 'contextual relevance' for effective discipleship, particularly among younger people.[17] However, to what extent the pursuit of 'relevance' is at odds with the compromise of biblical ideas and gospel truth will require further critical evaluation.

CGM adherents claim that church planting is the best method of expansion across the world, observing that new churches grow faster than established ones.[18] The Assemblies of God has a rich heritage of church planting and a renewed vision to become a church planting movement again.[19] Collaboration on national numerical church planting goals can be a focus for much prayer and unity – but if they become the prevailing scorecard for success, it can crucially undermine the ultimate goal of seeing true transformation in Europe. Todd Wilson, CEO of *Exponential,* believes the drive for *more* is a 'false summit' in church leadership, often the result of impure motives and 'lust for addition-growth', but perhaps it has less to do with ego and more to do with mission-drift.[20] Our mandate is not primarily to lead big churches or plant more churches but essentially to make disciples in every culture and context. Stefan Paas' research into church planting across Europe serves to confirm that the age of a church is perhaps less of a factor in reaching people effectively, compared to *where* they are planted, *who* leads them and, significantly, *what* the missional focus is.[21] To move forward, I contend that the European church must uncompromisingly return to its missional roots, before any metrics and measures are used to define success.

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[17] Hardy, *Missional Discipleship,* Chapter 8.

[18] Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, 11. 'The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.'

[19] The World Assemblies of God Fellowship has a vision to see 1 million churches by 2033. Conceived in 2017, that means planting over 650,000 churches, with each geographical region collaborating and accountable in their national goals. See mm33.global

[20] Todd Wilson, *Multipliers: Leading Beyond Addition*, (Emeryville, CA: Exponential, 2017), 42.

[21] Stefan Paas and Alrik Vos, "Church Planting and Church Growth in Western Europe: An Analysis," in *International Bulletin of Mission Research* Vol. 40/3 (2016), 249. Paas highlights location, missionary focus and leadership as more crucial factors than age in any claim church growth.

1.4 Questions

This paper is based on the premise that a key desired outcome for church planters is numerical growth, achieving a primary missional objective of reaching new people with the Gospel. However, it will critically examine the overhang of the CGM in elevating quantitative growth as paramount, emphasising pragmatism and proactive leadership. The motivations and observations above urge several significant questions for critical exploration:

- What does 'church growth' mean in the contemporary church today?
- What are the contributions and limitations of the CGM?
- What are the claims that CGM makes about church planting?
- How could success be better measured and evaluated?
- What kind of churches are emerging in response to these questions?
- What kind of leaders are required to plant effective churches today?

Part Two will reflect on the biblical relationship with numbers, the contemporary fixation with size, and how the CGM has adopted certain theological and ecclesiological lenses to drive growth. Consideration will be given to the tension between faithfulness and fruitfulness in Christian leadership, extending to a thorough evaluation of the CGM in Part Three. Classic definitions and dimensions of 'church growth' will be assessed for their usefulness, with summary of the key principles presented by McGavran, Wagner and others. Critical evaluation of the positive impact and potential pitfalls of the CGM will be offered, with Part Four engaging direct claims about church planting. Such analysis will raise challenges with measuring growth and defining success as suggested by Church Growth paradigms, leading to considerations of alternative measures in Part Five. Finally, Part Six will address some evolving responses to new questions about church planting across Europe today, with recommendations for moving forward.

Chapter 2 - The Drive for Size

2.1   The Big/Small Divide

Tension is often found between big and small churches, typically caused by differences in philosophies, strategies and drives. Implicit in this tension is the claim that one is 'better' than the other. Vaters notes the classic 'linear view' where larger churches are presumed to be healthier, and smaller churches are unhealthy or stuck in some way.[22] When numerical growth is lacking, blame is often attributed to mission drift, poor leadership or congregational stubbornness.[23] Larger churches are seen to have better influence and resources to meet the needs of diverse populations in expanding areas.[24] Often, they cater to a more detached and mobile culture, inviting people to 'come as you are' without major commitments, yet still fostering a sense of belonging.[25] While those claims are valid, others frame such size as a liability rather than an asset. David Hesselgrave argues that smaller churches better meet people's spiritual and psychological needs and are more effective in unlocking their potential.[26] Church health is therefore emphasised and prioritised qualitatively, against assumptions about size, which Tim Suttle critiques through the lenses of Western colonialism and consumer capitalism.[27] Stanley Hauerwas similarly claims that the contemporary church has been infiltrated by worldly values like 'the air we breathe', which demand progress towards bigger, better, and faster.[28] It is this resulting obsession with size and numerical growth that Vaters claims is 'killing' the church, both literally and metaphorically.[29]

A comparison of these views does not solve the tension between big and small churches, as both have value. However, when numerical growth is accented as the central indicator of health, there is a polarising divide. In *Canoeing the Mountains,*

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[22] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 119.

[23] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 33.

[24] Robert H. Schuller, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1974), 7–18.

[25] Ryan Wilson, "The New Ecclesiology: Mega-Church, Denominational Church, and No Church," in *Review & Expositor*, 107/1 (2010), 63

[26] David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally,* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2000), Perlego Edition, Chapter 7.

[27] Tim Suttle, *Shrink: Faithful Ministry in a Church-Growth Culture,* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2014), Perlego Edition, Chapter 1

[28] Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 151.

[29] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 11.

Todd Bolsinger astutely notes a prevailing 'survivorship bias' in churches that use increasing numbers to justify their success, with a driving need to perpetuate numbers to sustain it.[30] Churches are consequently framed in terms of 'winning' or 'losing' in a one-dimensional framework that sees size and health as correlated, rather than a two-dimensional model marking them as different.[31] However, one critic challenges such crude measures of success as 'quantitative fallacy'.[32] Despite their apparent external differences, both small and big churches have the same internal problems if they chase size, which Vaters argues is a hiding place for leaders' character flaws and an often ignored cause of church dysfunction today.[33] Rather than narrow-frame the question of 'success' to how churches can scale up numerically, perhaps there are broader questions that will assist critical reflection:

- What is our biblical mandate?
- What is the role of the local church?
- From where do we get our definitions of success?

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[30] Todd Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Unchartered Territory,* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books 2015), 118.

[31] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 120.

[32] Jim Memory, "How Can We Measure the Effectiveness of Church Planting?", in *Church Planting in Europe: Connecting to Society, Learning from Experience,* eds. Evert Van de Poll and Joanne Appleton, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock: 2015), Perlego edition: Chapter 14, Part 2.

[33] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 118.

2.2   A Biblical Relationship with Numbers

Scripture reveals frequent records of lists and numbers, which implicitly or explicitly depict the growth and mission of the people of God. The Old Testament book of Numbers provides lists of names and numbers together, rather than mere statistical records, but collected on command from God.[34] Censuses were usually connected with war preparation or organising Israel for resettlement.[35] The census in Exodus 30 was also the basis for necessary taxation in the community.[36] As a primary organisational tool, genealogical lists of names and numbers in 1 Chronicles 9 likewise confirmed their legitimacy and place among the people of God.[37] Evidently, numbers played an important practical and strategic role in the Old Testament. Still, there is a marked contrast in the census conducted by King David in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21, which ultimately brought about God's wrath and punishment. In counting 'the fighting men of Israel' (2 Samuel 24:4), commentators interpret that David placed strength and confidence in numbers rather than faith in God.[38] Perhaps this serves as a stark warning to future generations to examine our motives for measuring numerical success and consider where our ultimate confidence is located.

In the New Testament, numbers continue to punctuate and proclaim the story of God's people. The gospels record how Jesus' followers grew, from the twelve he sent out (Luke 9:1) to another group six times larger (Luke 10:1) to around 120 believers who waited together in Jerusalem after his ascension (Acts 1:15). After Pentecost, another 3000 believers were added to the church (Acts 2:41), growing to 5000 shortly after (Acts 4:4), and continuing to grow rapidly across the region (Acts 6:7). Subsequent references are more vague, yet leave readers with an impression that early Christians felt part of a 'burgeoning movement' – one that may have faced opposition, but also enjoyed 'extraordinary divine favour'.[39]

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[34] Numbers 1:1-3

[35] Philip J. Budd, *Numbers,* Word Biblical Commentary 5 (Dallas, TX: Word Books 1983) Perlego Edition*,* in commentary on Number 1.2

[36] Budd, *Numbers,* Perlego Edition 1.2

[37] Roddy Braun, *1 Chronicles*, Word Biblical Commentary 14 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1984). Perlego Edition, Genealogical Prologue: The Purpose of Genealogies - 1 Chronicles 9:1

[38] A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, Word Bible Commentary 11, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, (Grand Rapids, MI: Thomas Nelson, 2000), Perlego Edition, Comment on Ch 24.

[39] Mark Bonnington, "The Kingdom of God and Church Growth in the New Testament"*,* in *Towards a Theology of Church Growth,* ed. David Goodhew, (Oxon: Ashgate Publishing, 2015) 68.

However, whilst there is an undeniable correlation between faith and numerical increase in Acts, Craig Van Gelder asserts that the numbers recorded were the result of faithful witness into the surrounding communities, rather than being goals achieved or driven by effective strategies.[40] Scripture reminds us that outcomes are in God's hands, not ours.[41] In that sense, Vaters is right to admonish those who idolise and chase outcomes at the expense of being faithful to the Great Commission.[42] The true ministry of disciple-making takes time and requires pace, which is often at odds with the immediacy of Western culture. The Parable of the Sower in Luke 8 reminds us that quantitative short-term growth is no guarantee of long-term health, and conversely, neither is the lack of immediate numerical results a reflection of inadequacy.[43] Therefore, numbers may inform us but should never define us. The churches in Revelation 2 and 3 demonstrate that the trappings of size and comfort sometimes actually challenge and hinder faith rather than strengthen or prove it.[44] However, if numbering is done to gain a better understanding for effective ministry, it could be considered not just helpful but necessary. Furthermore, Gailyn Van Rheenan rightly suggests any quantitative measures should be motivated by love and not ego, including compassion for those that may have been lost or wandered away (Luke 15:3-6).[45]

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[40] Van Gelder, "Gospel And Our Culture View", 106.
[41] Prov 16:9, Prov 19:21, 1 Cor 3:6.
[42] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 26.
[43] Memory, "How Can We Measure?", Chapter 14, Part 3
[44] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 27. Jesus criticised the prominent church in Ephesus for leaving their first love (Rev 2:1-7), the church in Thyatira for following false prophets (Rev 2:18-29) and the church in Laodicea for being lukewarm (Rev 3:14-22). He conversely encouraged the smaller churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia to remain faithful, despite their trials and limitations (Rev 2:8-11, 3:7-13).
[45] Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Reformist View" in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views,* ed. Paul E. Engle and Gary L McIntosh, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 184

2.3   A Theological Framework for Growth

Advocates of Church Growth theories emphasise a theological foundation is deeply rooted in the biblical text and Christian doctrines. Rather than being reduced to a pragmatic or strategic matter, growth is part and parcel of the Church as a living organism, the 'body of Christ'.[46] A core conviction is the divine mandate on God's community to reproduce and multiply, rooted in both Old and New Testament commands.[47] Acknowledging the Church as a 'reproducing community' is the task of every generation, an imperative yet incomplete assignment until God's purposes are fully realised.[48] David Goodhew argues that numerical growth should be a central concern for the Church, as 'a good thing, deeply desired by God'.[49] Likewise, Alistair McGrath draws from the biblical images of yeast spreading and seed growing (Matt 13:31-33) to determine that corporate growth is integral to the collective vision for God's people.[50] Such claims have contributed to renewing ecclesiology and a 'higher' doctrine of the church, with CGM scholars defining incorporation into the Body of Christ as integral to someone's conversion.[51] In that sense, there should be little separation between kingdom expansion and numerical growth of the church.[52] However, Suttle questions an assumed integration of those two things, accusing Church Growth enthusiasts of proof-texting Scripture through cultural lenses, accentuating parts that portray expansion and growth.[53] He contends that fruitfulness should not be pursued over *faithfulness*, as the primary role of church leaders.[54] In their 2013 report on church planting across Great Britain, Dadswell and Ross similarly critique assumed measures of church effectiveness under the obsessions of modern capitalism, pointing out Jesus' parables that reveal different rates of growth,

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[46] David Goodhew, "Towards a Theology of Church Growth: An Introduction", in *Towards a Theology of Church Growth,* (Oxon: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 4. Also notably Rick Warren, The Purpose Driven Church. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 16.

[47] Genesis 1:28, Matthew 28:19-20

[48] Graham Cray, *Mission-Shaped Church, Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of church in a changing context,* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), 95

[49] Goodhew, "Towards a Theology of Church Growth", 24

[50] Alistair McGrath, "Theology, Eschatology and Church Growth", in *Towards a Theology of Church Growth",* ed. David Goodheew (Oxon: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 97.

[51] Hunter, "Contribution of the Church Growth Movement", 10

[52] David Goodhew, *Church Growth in Great Britain: 1980 to the Present* (Oxon: Ashgate, 2012) Perlego Edition: Chapter 1, Section 4

[53] Suttle, *Shrink,* Chapter 1.

[54] Suttle, *Shrink,* Chapter 1.

with perceived 'success' dependent on the contextual soil.[55] Where there is a myopic preoccupation with numerical growth that ignores specific context and place, churches inevitably become socially and culturally isolated.[56]

A better theological framework is suggested by Stuart Murray, acknowledging concepts such as the *missio Dei,* incarnation and Kingdom advancement, where mission is broader than just seeing individuals converted.[57] Measuring effectiveness should be against the 'multi-dimensional goal of the Great Commission, Creation Commission and Great Commandment', which Samuel Lee contends requires broader metrics than quantitative alone.[58] These assertions helpfully express growth in wider terms, but Goodhew argues that diminishing numerical growth as of peripheral importance feeds a devastating 'theology of decline' in churches.[59] Inevitably, growth is assumed impossible or not as important as other kingdom matters. He agrees with Murray that the kingdom of God is broader than the gathered church, so growth cannot be limited to church attendance, but not at the expense of 'ecclesial low self-esteem'.[60] Against an increasingly secular culture that seeks to undermine the church, Goodhew argues that a theology *for* numerical growth is actually counter-cultural and subversive.[61] His assessment rightly challenges a widely pervasive narrative of decline that frames the demise of the European Church. In that sense, Goodhew squarely contends with Suttle by speaking of numerical growth *in accordance with* faithfulness to the gospel, holding them in relationship rather than against each other.[62] Advocating for the vibrancy of the church, Goodhew maintains that a 'theology of decline' fed by a 'secularisation thesis' neither fits New Testament

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[55] David Dadswell and Cathy Ross, "Church Growth Research Project: Church Planting," (Cuddesdon: Oxford Centre for Practical Theology, 2013), 63. They major their discussion here on the Parable of the Sower.

[56] Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations,* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2001), 64. *MIssio Dei* is a Latin term that translates to the "mission of God" or "sending of God".

[57] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 51.

[58] Samuel Lee, "A Holistic Framework for Measurement of Entrepreneurial Church Planting", *Great Commission Research Journal*, Vol 9/2 (2018), 154.

[59] Goodhew, "Towards a Theology of Church Growth", 32. He argues a 'theology of decline' is formulated to almost justify being small or getting smaller, a perspective which only affirms and bolsters the statistical research on church growth trends. Alan McMahan also analyses such research and data about church growth, arguing that decades of teaching and intervention strategies have yet to reverse the trends in American and European churches towards plateau and decline. See Alan McMahan, "Church Growth by Another Name: Challenges and Opportunities for the Future of a Movement," *Great Commission Research Journal,* Vol 1 (2009), 21. Goodhew contends that a 'theology of decline' is partly to blame.

[60] Goodhew, "Towards a Theology of Church Growth", 34

[61] Goodhew, "Towards a Theology of Church Growth", 35

[62] Goodhew, "Towards a Theology of Church Growth", 5-6

narratives, doctrines or Christian tradition.[63] However, a critical footnote must acknowledge that smaller churches, especially under persecution, may have an immeasurably stronger witness than a larger church where hearts have grown cold.

Two doctrinal lenses deserve brief acknowledgement on the theological perspectives they offer to Church growth. Through an *eschatological* lens, McGrath emphasises a final 'long view' that acknowledges growth as essentially God's work, challenging a 'privileging of the present'.[64] Likewise, a *pneumatological* lens brings into focus the power and presence of the Spirit, without which the church is an 'empty shell' and growth is impossible.[65] These perspectives provide crucial safeguards against pragmatic presumptions that endanger the church, but must not shape an equally problematic attitude of passivity, where the future is seen as predetermined. In protest, Brian McClaren advocates for a 'participatory eschatology', a helpful framework that provides humans with both 'freedom and limits' to be creative in God's unfolding story.[66] While God writes the story, humanity must be actively involved. In this essential task, Graham Tomlin stresses the importance of invoking the Holy Spirit upon and through God's people as they follow His missionary movement into the world.[67]

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[63] Goodhew, *Church Growth in Great Britain,* Chapter 1

[64] McGrath, "Theology, Eschatology and Church Growth", 101.

[65] Graham Tomlin, "The Prodigal Spirit and Church Growth"*, in Towards a Theology of Church Growth,* ed. David Goodhew, (Oxon: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 129.

[66] Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008): 173.

[67] Tomlin "The Prodigal Spirit and Church Growth"*,* 133

2.4   Pastoral Reflections on Church Growth

Church Growth ideas have undoubtedly renewed a focus on evangelism and church planting, but some argue they have introduced significant pressures on leaders, often distorting the essence of ministry. When pastors evaluate themselves by numbers or results, it leads to a performance-based approach, which J.R. Briggs claims is 'idolatry…[that] wreaks havoc and wrecks souls'.[68] Dallas Willard also warns that when the drive to achieve dominates, 'it is the personal and spiritual life of the minister that suffers'.[69] Research conclusions from Dadswell and Ross reveal that narrow-framing success to stressful numerical expectations is 'discouraging and disabling', even 'traumatic', not just for pastors but for their congregations.[70] This language is deeply troubling and compels response, yet highlights the tension between growth aspirations and faithfulness to the pastoral vocation. In that sense, Briggs insists that church leaders need a 'compelling compass' to reorient them towards a biblical framework for fruitfulness.[71]

Others observe how the cultural obsession with speed and prompt outcomes is at odds with the often slow, transforming work of God's Spirit in people's lives.[72] Tom Bennardo suggests that an inward drive for urgency is based on certain 'incontrovertible truths' about limited years ahead, the state of the world and God's plan for redemption.[73] However, while I concede that much of the European church needs awakening from complacency to mission, any pressure for 'results' must be tempered with acknowledging God's timing and pace, which is much different from our own. Particularly in the context of post-Christian Europe, any self-assessment of personal effectiveness based purely on numbers invariably leads to immense frustration or disappointment.[74] Consequently, Dadswell calls for more honesty in the face of numerical hype, noting that some church planters have even confessed to smoothing over certain data to constitute a brighter picture of 'success'.[75]

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[68] J. R. Briggs, *Fail - Finding Hope and Grace in the Midst of Ministry Failure,* (Lisle, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2014), 65.

[69] Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's essential teaching on discipleship* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2006), 34.

[70] Dadswell and Ross, "Church Growth Research Project", 64.

[71] Briggs, *Fail*, 60.

[72] Tom Bennardo, *The Honest Guide to Church Planting* (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 2019), 105. Bennardo reaches for Matthew 13:33, depicting yeast slowly working through dough, and also James 5:7 that describes a farmer patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains'.

[73] Bennardo, *The Honest Guide to Church Planting,* 108

[74] Memory, "How Can We Measure?", Chapter 14, Part 1

[75] Dadswell and Ross, "Church Growth Research Project", 67.

Business author Jim Collins popularly states that 'good is the enemy of great', but this is rightly challenged by Suttle when the pursuit of 'greatness' is conditioned more by the world than a balanced theological vision for God's church.[76] When greatness is consumed with size as the goal, it puts crushing pressure on pastors, consequently disconnecting us from the goodness of God.[77] Suttle calls for a reorientation away from pursuing 'great' to being 'good' again, but also overreaches when he pits those values against each other. Great churches can also be good churches. A good church should also engage with its 'great' mandate. The solution is to adopt a broader definition of qualitative success, correcting any theological drift away from a biblical picture of health, maturity and fruitfulness. Numbers do have value and offer insight for strategic appraisal, but Vaters rightly contends for better questions relevant for church planting: *'What is Jesus calling us to do and be?'* and *'How faithfully are we doing it?'*[78] Perhaps these questions can liberate leaders from the burden of 'results', redirecting focus to faithfulness first.

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[76] Suttle, *Shrink,* Chapter 2. He refers to Jim Collins' popular leadership manual *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Lead and Others Don't,* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).
[77] Suttle, *Shrink,* Chapter 2.
[78] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 118.

2.5 Summary

Biblical, theological and pastoral reflection all offer helpful perspectives to an emphasis on numerical growth, yet it must be maintained that a clear imperative of the New Testament is bringing outsiders into a relationship with their Creator.[79] McGavaran's founding claim is widely endorsed, that an 'increase of members and congregations is absolutely essential to the world mission of the church'.[80] However, when success has been narrowly defined by numerical growth, the resulting pressure on pastors and churches to 'perform' has been devastating, resulting in the underemphasis of other aspects of church growth that are equally, if not more important. Furthermore, church planting advocates suggest that normal church growth actually involves 'division rather than unlimited expansion', which views multiplication through an entirely different lens.[81]

There is a growing call to return to biblical foundations of ministry that emphasise faithfulness over results, broadening our understanding of church growth and success. The following section will evaluate the historical foundations of the CGM, considering key definitions and axioms that have emerged and how they positively impact or potentially hinder the church today, with particular emphasis on planting new churches.

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[79] Mark 16:15, Acts 2:38, Rom 1:16, 2 Cor 5:20, 1 Tim 2:4.
[80] McGavran, *How Churches Grow, 15*
[81] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 61-62

Chapter 3 - Evaluating the Church Growth Movement

Both critics and advocates of the CGM agree on the extraordinary contribution that it has made to prioritising and bolstering the mission of the church. Walter Russell notes the theological clarification that it has brought to growth being something active and 'intentional', rather than being a passive byproduct of church life, driving a focus on how Christian communities can be catalysed and mobilised effectively.[82] However, despite such widespread endorsement, there is also shared criticism about the trappings of the CGM, regarding its excessive pragmatism, over-reliance on human effort, and lack of biblical foundations. These differing views will be critically evaluated, but not before digging deeper into CGM foundations and the impact of McGavran's missiological research. Nelson Searcy states that McGavran is the 'single most influential thinker on how we do ministry in today's church' – a bold claim that Gary McIntosh supports in his biography and, if true, requires serious consideration as to where foundations may need revisiting or re-digging today.[83]

3.1 History and Roots

Donald McGavran served as a missionary in India from 1923-1954, providing pastoral supervision to over eighty other missionaries, five local hospitals, several schools and thirty small churches.[84] Concerned by the limited growth of his ministry, he became captivated by breakout reports in scattered areas of India, where entire communities were embracing Christianity *en masse*.[85] McGavran keenly observed and studied these 'people movements', fuelled by the prior groundbreaking research of J. Waskom Pickett, with whom he would proceed to collaborate in future studies about why some churches multiplied rapidly while others in the same region were not.[86]

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[82] Walter Russell III, "Forty Years of Church Growth: A View from the Theological Tower," in *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, Vol 6 (1995): 18.

[83] Nelson Searcy, from the foreword to Gary L. McIntosh, Donald A. McGavran: A Biography of the Twentieth Century's Premiere Missiologist (New York: Church Leader Insights USA, 2016), 7.

[84] McIntosh, *Donald A. McGavran: A Biography*, 11.

[85] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 42.

[86] J. Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India* (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 1933).

One of McGavran's key interests regarded the interrelation of the church and its surrounding environment, with critical observation on how foreign mission agencies established 'mission stations', which effectively extracted people from their indigenous contexts.[87] Converts were required to conform to foreign ethical and cultural standards, therefore diluting their social influence, as missionaries were consumed with teaching and 'perfecting' them through a Western discipleship framework.[88] However, McGavran noted that while social action programmes multiplied in these areas, the church did not. Such 'social dislocation' was in stark contrast to the swathes of people responding to the Gospel in other areas, where the resulting churches enabled them to maintain their community ties.[89] Converts could preserve their social identity while adopting a new faith, minimising the social cost of conversion. Consequently, McGavran challenged mission agencies to move from maintenance to incarnational ministry, observing that Christianity spread more quickly through a people group's own language, leaders and indigenous customs.[90]

Another astute observation made by McGavran was that 'societies ripen to the Gospel at different times' as the 'responsiveness of individuals waxes and wanes'.[91] Such receptivity is ultimately the work of the Spirit to convict the world of sin, but McGavran noted that the Gospel tended to spread more easily in areas where people were already open.[92] His missiological perspective was renewed by two connecting theological lenses. A 'theology of search' emphasised sowing seeds and actively identifying those who were receptive to the Gospel, rather than passively waiting for people to 'find' faith.[93] Where there are signs of response, a 'harvest theology' underpins any enterprise proactively devoted to persuading people to convert and become active members of the Church.[94] Against a more liberal view of mission that included and emphasised good works, McGavran reverted to a classical view about the 'essential task' of evangelism being to see converts and make disciples.[95]

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[87] Charles Van Engen, "Centrist View" in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views*, ed. Paul E. Engle and Gary L McIntosh, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 128.
[88] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 122.
[89] McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 223.
[90] Hunter, "Contribution of the Church Growth Movement", 10.
[91] Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 3rd edition, rev. and ed. Peter C. Wagner, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 245-248.
[92] Hunter, "Contribution of the Church Growth Movement", 4.
[93] McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 27.
[94] McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 26.
[95] Donald A. McGavran, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research,* Vol 10/2 (April 1986): 53–58.

McGavran's early research was published in *Bridges of God* (1955)*,* recognised as 'the Magna Carta of the Church Growth movement'[96] or the 'birth certificate' of Church Growth.[97] Further insights contributed through a subsequent publication, *How Churches Grow* (1959), seemed counterintuitive to the conventional evangelical tradition, but sparked a 'quiet revolution' in the minds of those devoted to effective mission.[98] Through ongoing collaborative research, McGavran was eventually invited to become the founding Dean of the School of World Mission and Institute of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1965, a crucial step that positioned him to expand his understanding and infuence.[99] Most notably, one of his early students, C. Peter Wagner, became one of his most ardent supporters and important successors, contributing to a revised edition of McGavran's second landmark book, *Understanding Church Growth.*[100] In that work, McGavran identified a set of questions which would drive the future of the CGM:

1. What are the *causes* of church growth?
2. What are the *barriers* to church growth?
3. What factors contribute to making the Christian faith a *movement* among some populations?
4. What principles of church growth are *reproducible*?'[101]

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96 Gary L. McIntosh, *Donald A. McGavran: A Biography of the Twentieth-Century's Premiere Missiologist* (New York: Church Leader Insights USA, 2016), 274.
97 Thom Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology and Principles* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 21.
98 Hunter, "Contribution of the Church Growth Movement", 10.
99 David Lowell Cook, "The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement", in *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth,* Vol 11/3, (2000), 18.
100 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 4.
101 McIntosh, "Why Church Growth Can't Be Ignored", 12.

3.2 Principles and Emphases

Various attempts have been made to summarise the principles that ground Church Growth thought, but Alan Padgett offers three useful axioms that frame the key ideas.[102] The primary theological axiom is that God passionately wants lost people to be found, saved through 'putting on Christ', and grounded in God's desire that none would perish (2 Peter 3:9).[103] To that end, McGavran's priority in mission was on 'discipling' the nations, which mainly dealt with conversion, distinct from 'perfecting' believers to maturity through education and nurture.[104] Consequently, Gordon Penfold observes that where McGavran's 'Harvest' and 'Search Theology' are not promoted, churches end up stalling in neutral, and therefore bringing these perspectives back into focus will raise the spiritual climate.[105]

A second axiomatic principle that McGavran stated is that numerical growth should be assumed as the 'chief consideration in estimating church welfare'.[106] Growth is God's good and pleasing will, and serving that goal to the best of our ability is being faithful to the Great Commission.[107] Such convictions drive intentional, sociological research and innovative methodology to reach people more effectively, but the elevation of numbers as the central criterion of success has also received widespread criticism.[108]

Through McGavran's study of people movements, he noted that 'people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers', a third CGM foundation known as the 'homogeneous unit principle'.[109] Where there are common and shared characteristics, the gospel is more likely to thrive amongst groups, resulting in the growth and multiplication of churches. Leaning into this principle, Church Growth enthusiasts will unapologetically and intentionally tailor ministries and

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[102] Alan G. Padgett, "The Church Growth Movement: A Wesleyan Critique," in *Mission of the Church in Methodist Perspective: The World Is My Parish*, ed. by Alan G Padgett, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 140–43. Elsewhere, Gary L. McIntosh suggests there are seven foundational principles: people movements, pragmatic research, scientific research, social networks, receptivity, priority of evangelism, and the central purpose of disciple-making, in "The Church Growth Movement," in Leadership Handbook of Outreach and Care, ed. James D. Berkley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 31-41.

[103] Padgett, "A Wesleyan Critique", 140.

[104] McGavran, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," 53.

[105] Gordon E. Penfold, "Why are we here? Harvest Theology, Search Theology, and Christ's Vision for Redemption", *Great Commission Research Journal,* Vol 6/2 (Winter 2015), 250.

[106] McGavran, *How Churches Grow*, 16.

[107] McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 6.

[108] Padgett, "A Wesleyan Critique", 142.

[109] McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 163.

churches to specific subsections of the culture to overcome any potential barriers to the gospel.[110] Elmer Towns references McGavran's crucial research in India, noting that the 'best way to evangelize a caste is not for a foreigner to preach to them… [but to] plant a church in their culture' and raise indigenous leaders.[111] Hunter also reads Matthew 28:19-20 through this lens, to recover an emphasis that exhorts Christians to reach whole clans, tribes and other homogeneous groups that share a corporate identity, against a Western individualism that would seek to divide them.[112] While interesting, this claim fails to acknowledge that true disciples cannot be mass-produced, and relational collateral is always best-established one-to-one. Further critique of the homogenous unit principle will be explored later, but McGavran highlighted the paramountcy of understanding cultural diversity in mission.

3.3 Adoption and Acceleration

Although McGavran's ideas gained traction in the 1960s, he was also aware of the potential downsides, structuring his movement away from the American church for as long as he could.[113] In his early years at Fuller Theological Seminary, his courses at the School of World Mission only accepted mid-career missionaries as students, based on stringent qualifying factors that excluded most North American-based pastors.[114] McGavran focused on teaching principles for foreign outreach and effective disciple-making, rather than a desire to create megachurches *per se.*[115] However, as demand escalated across the United States, alongside a growing interest in the 'success' of larger churches, he finally relented to the pressure, agreeing to teach a pilot class in 1972 with Peter Wagner for North American pastors and denominational leaders.[116] In taking McGavran's missionary principles and applying them to the American milieu, this class is considered by many to be the springboard for the 'Americanization of the Church Growth movement'.[117]

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[110] Van Engen, "Centrist View", 140; Will McRaney, "Church Planting as a Growth Strategy in the Face of Church Decline", in *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry,* Vol 1/2, (Fall 2003), 75.

[111] Elmer Towns, *Putting an End to Worship Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 42.

[112] Hunter, "Contribution of the Church Growth Movement", 11

[113] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 41.

[114] McIntosh, *Donald A. McGavran: A Biography,* 185. He outlines three qualifications that must be met for students accessing the course: 1) Field experience, 2) Fluency in any other language other than English, and 3) Wide knowledge of one's field, mission and its indigenous churches."

[115] Elmer Towns, "The Rise and Decline of the Church Growth Movement", in *Great Commission Research Journal,* Vol 4/2, (2013), 162. 159-181.

[116] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 47.

[117] Cook, "The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement", 15

Church Growth ideology continued to prominence across North America as academic credibility was established. In 1974, Wagner shaped the Church Growth component in the Doctor of Ministry course at Fuller Seminary, which is attributed as a driving factor in its exponential growth across the 1980s.[118] The subsequent establishment of the 'American Society for Church Growth' in 1986 also formalised an academic network of professors and pastors around the study and promotion of Church Growth.[119] These forums added early authority to key ideas, also providing a renewed compass for the Great Commission, but critics observe how the advancing American movement started to drift significantly away from McGarvan's original intent.[120] McIntosh notes the emerging confusion with a 'popular stream' of Church Growth lore that seemed to share the language and claims of the 'classical stream' but emphasised research that accentuated *growth* of the church, diverging from McGavran's emphasis on making disciples.[121] Vaters also starkly contrasts these varying streams and highlights their problematic differences, essentially framing McGavran's '*how to do it* stream' as offering missiological principles and processes, versus the American '*how I did it* stream' focusing on cloning means and methods.[122] Bigger churches pointed to their tools and techniques that could help turn around struggling churches in any context. Ed Stetzer identifies this as the crucial flaw in the Americanization of the CGM, which 'focused on method instead of missiology, thus leading to an application of mission rather than a philosophy of mission'.[123]

Maintaining a distinction between these two streams is essential, rather than collapsing them into one and dismissing Church Growth as a movement too closely tied to methods in one monolithic culture. When critics like Os Guinness broaden the term 'Church Growth' to include any subsection of ministry 'linked by a series of underlying commitments' to renew the local church, he unfairly misinterprets McGavran through the lens of a modern CGM enamoured with methodology, but without critical missiological application.[124] It is crucial, therefore, not to let go of

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[118] Towns, "The Rise and Decline", 164.
[119] Cook, "The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement", 22
[120] Towns, "The Rise and Decline", 167.
[121] McIntosh, "Why Church Growth Can't Be Ignored", 20.
[122] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 64.
[123] Ed Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth, Church Health, and the Missional Church: An Overview of the Church Growth Movement From, and Back to, its Missional Roots," in *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth,* Vol 17/1 (2006), 94.
[124] Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 13.

McGavran's essential vision. Indeed, Wagner was first to qualify that if McGavran's missiological perspectives on church and growth were abandoned, 'then you should use some other name because you're not part of the Church Growth Movement'.[125]

The distinction between 'classical' and 'popular' Church Growth has faded significantly over recent years. Vaters suggests that whilst much of the Western church has adopted McGavran's language on the surface, it just thinly veils a more 'relentless obsession with bigness'.[126] Perhaps less cynically, Stezer frames it more as blind deception in those who are 'absorbed in applying techniques, convinced that it is missional', while 'in reality, those methods *replace* missional thinking.'[127] A more balanced view is somewhere between those two perspectives, where perhaps there is an unconscious ignorance in the modern church of the hard work demanded of authentic missional engagement. Interestingly, in recent years, there has been a commitment from both advocates and critics of the CGM to either get back to McGavran's missiological foundations or move forward to talking more about church *health* rather than church growth.[128] Such language was significantly laboured by Christian Schwartz in *Natural Church Development,* considered by some as a disproportionate reaction to the excesses of the CGM, although framed by one reviewer as ironically recapturing McGavran's original intent.[129]

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[125] C. Peter Wagner, "We've Only Just Begun: An Interview with C. Peter Wagner," in *Global Church Growth,* Vol. 22/1 (Jan-Mar 1985), 9.

[126] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 70. Vaters also contends that the American obsession with size also rose in tandem with a 'great awakening around conversion, stage evangelism and credibility gained from the size of gathered crowds'.

[127] Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth", 93.

[128] Rick Warren, Purpose Driven Church (Nashville: Nelson Books, 1995), 17

[129] Christian A. Schwartz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*, (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996); D.E. Simpson., "Book Review: Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches by Christian Schwarz", *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth,* Vol 9/3 (1998): 63.

3.4 Definitions and Dimensions

Before offering further critical reflection, it is important to qualify McGavran's emphases around the various dimensions of church growth. The term "Church Growth" is noted by Wagner as a 'McGavranism' itself, an attempt to phrase the insights he had developed on the mission field without using the word "evangelism", which he felt had become a diluted catch-all term for social action.[130] McGavran wanted to emphasise conversion growth, bringing people into the local church through evangelism, where the inevitable output was *church growth.*[131] To that end, Wagner provided a standard and popular definition for Church Growth as 'all that is involved in bringing men and women who do not have a personal relationship to Jesus Christ into fellowship with Him and into responsible church membership'.[132]

As time went on, however, a broader definition was articulated, possibly to answer critics of the movement and ensure various aspects of McGavran's thought were expounded. Written into the constitution of the North American Society for Church Growth, Wagner would later define Church Growth as 'that discipline which investigates the nature, expansion, planting, multiplication, function and health of Christian Churches as they relate to the effective implementation of God's commission to make disciples of all nations.'[133] This definition adds helpful contour and dimension to McGavran's coined phrase, associating it clearly with numerical growth and church planting but underpins it with insights from Scripture, missiological research and contemporary sciences.

McGavran and Wagner delineate three major types of numerical Church Growth: biological, transfer and conversion.[134] 'Biological growth' comes through natural birth, 'transfer growth' through new members moving from other churches, and 'conversion growth' through the addition of brand new Christians – the latter being most effective in fulfilling the Great Commission.[135] Furthermore, they note growth can occur in four dimensions, offering essential breadth to any appropriate measure for Church Growth. These are indicated as *qualitative* 'internal growth',

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[130] Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow,* 13-14.
[131] Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth", 93.
[132] Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow,* 14.
[133] C. Peter Wagner, "Church Growth Movement", in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions,* ed. Scott A. Moreau, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 199.
[134] McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 71-72.
[135] McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 72.

quantitative 'expansion growth', 'extension growth' where churches are planted amongst similar communities, and 'bridging growth' where attempts are made to reach people across cultural divides.[136] This final aspect is captured well by Professor Will McRaney, who notes how McGavran used church growth to describe 'the evangelization of all people with the view toward the development of indigenous congregations with the new converts, in a manner consistent with their cultural norms'.[137] However, with less emphasis on church planting, Loren Mead collapses the dimensions of *extension* and *bridging* growth into 'incarnational growth', when a church is able 'to enflesh in the community what faith is all about'.[138] Unfortunately, this synopsis undermines McGavran and Wagner's centrality on evangelism as conversion, making disciples, and launching new congregations. However, Mead still endorses 'numerical', 'maturational' and 'organic' dimensions of church growth, despite a growing fixation by critics on numbers being the defining metric.[139]

Stefan Paas offers a more helpful and contextual interpretation of church planting in secular Europe. He expands the notion of 'conversion growth' beyond just brand-new Christians, noting that many Europeans already adhere to churches in a formal sense, despite years of secularisation.[140] On that basis, conversion could be implied as moving from passive membership to 'active belonging', and growth as 'the active participation in the life of the church of those who were not previously involved or only nominally involved'.[141] Paas breaks down three categories of conversion growth, encompassing 'awakened' members and 'returnee' members who already have Christian roots, as well as 'initiates' who convert from no Christian background.[142] Any quantitative measures of church growth in Europe are constructively informed by Paas' valuable wider lens, which associates well with 'internal growth' noted by Wagner and 'maturational growth' noted by Mead. True 'conversion' to active participation in local churches requires a revolution of discipleship, obedience and commitment to the Great Commission. If Church Growth is simply defined by numerical attendance alone, we follow the shift of the American CGM stream and inevitably away from McGavran't roots altogether.

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[136] McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 72-73.
[137] McRaney, "Church Planting as a Growth Strategy", 73.
[138] Loren B. Mead, *More Than Numbers: The Way Churches Grow* (New York: the Alban Institute, 1993), 13.
[139] Mead, *More Than Numbers,* 12.
[140] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 146.
[141] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 148.
[142] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 148.

3.5 Critical Evaluation: Positive Impact

Despite significant criticism of the CGM as it evolved, it also contributed some key insights and emphases that have significance for church planting today.

3.5.1. Focus on Outreach and Evangelism

Stetzer notes how the CGM asked and answered challenging questions about how churches could be *more* effective in reaching people, framing new ways of organising churches for growth.[143] McGavran's stand against 'introverted churchism' and self-preoccupation was a challenge to congregations that had lost sight of missionary mandate, calling for a fresh emphasis on evangelism and 'winning people' for Christ.[144] This clear New Testament imperative is brought into sharp focus by the CGM, which Van Rheenen credits as awakening the 'missionary nature of the church'.[145] Nevertheless, the prominence given to conversion evangelism is challenged by Charles Van Engen as being a 'glaring weakness' in McGavran's missiology, which kept him from developing a more holistic approach to mission.[146] In separating evangelism and social action into 'boxes', Padgett challenges the absence of kingdom theology in the CGM, often accused of 'justice blindness' and obsessed with seeking 'decisions' rather than making a difference.[147] However, McGavran consciously rejected such a 'parallelism' philosophy as the antithesis of New Testament mission, by placing evangelism on equal footing with other works of the church.[148] Goodhew also suggests that a lean towards 'kingdom' terms over 'church' growth only excuses a devastating 'eschatology of decline' across Europe.[149] Whilst kingdom impact is crucially part of McGavran's philosophy, the CGM correctly called people back to evangelism as the chief work of the church.

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[143] Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth", 91

[144] David Smith, "The Church Growth Principles of Donald McGavran," in *International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*, Vol. 2/2 (1985), 27.

[145] Mead, *More Than Numbers,* 12. ; Van Rheenen, "Reformist View", 171.

[146] Van Engen, "Centrist View", 124.

[147] Padgett, "A Wesleyan Critique", 145.

[148] McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 64-65.

[149] Goodhew, *Church Growth in Great Britain*, 19.

3.5.2. Focus on the Paramountcy of the Local Church

For soteriological reasons, McGavran saw a person's incorporation into the Body of Christ as integral to their conversion, affirming Augustine's paradigm of 'no salvation outside the church'.[150] For that reason, Hunter notes that the CGM's contribution to ecclesiology has been significant, with a focus on church planting as an essential feature of evangelism.[151] While many are quick to criticise local churches, the CGM placed priority on the 'treasure in jars of clay' (2 Cor 4:7), which Towns suggests may be a reference to convey the value in a community of people, not just individual Christians.[152] This value is being lost amongst a growing trend of 'dechurching' amongst modern evangelicals, many who have left local churches but may still express a personal, individual faith.[153] However, by placing the local church and its expansion at the heart of Christian mission, the CGM rightly elevated its identity and value to God.

3.5.3. Priority on Scientific Research and Investigation

The inclination towards social sciences, such as anthropology and sociology, has contributed positively to helping understand context and guide mission.[154] David Hesslegrave acknowledges a certain tension between social-scientific research and theology but concedes that when rightly employed, such investigation has greatly informed critical reflection around how, where and why churches grow.[155] However, writing from a reformist view, Van Rheenan cautions about the degree to which social sciences can inform strategic perspectives when rooted in secular presuppositions.[156] Whilst not dismissing their value in exegeting culture, he challenges Church Growth theorists about not compromising biblical principles with cultural ones.[157] Jon Dydbahl raises a similar concern by comparing some CGM paradigms to an evolving framework of 'ethnotheology' that attempts to marry theology and anthropology

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[150] Hunter, "Contribution of the Church Growth Movement", 12

[151] Hunter, "Contribution of the Church Growth Movement", 12

[152] Towns, "The Rise and Decline", 177.

[153] Jim David and Michael Graham, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take To Bring Them Back?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), 21. Authors note that not everyone is leaving for the same reasons. Some have been victims of pastoral malpractice, others have been victims of the draw of the world and the flesh – who they call 'dechurched casualties' (27)

[154] Jon Dybdahl, "Anatomy of the Church Growth Movement", in *Spectrum* Vol 12/3 (1982), 10.

[155] Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally*, Part 1, Chapter 2

[156] Van Rheenen, "Reformist View", 182

[157] Van Rheenen, "Reformist View", 183

together, where theological truth is assessed against changing cultures.[158] However, Towns is quick to defend against such caricature of the CGM, arguing for the primacy of investigating Scriptural principles around how churches may grow, which can be subsequently informed by the correct use of scientific engagement.[159] The CGM highlighted the importance of paying attention to social and cultural systems without abandoning the theological priorities in Scripture.

3.5.4. Priority on Strategic Planning and Leadership

Following systematic research, the CGM advocated for churches to engage with careful and strategic planning towards evangelism.[160] Before the CGM, churches were often led by committees, but emphasis shifted to pastoral leadership as one of the primary keys to church growth.[161] Pastors were provoked as missional leaders with strategic questions to better understand context, culture and how to organise for mission.[162] They were bolstered with courage to embrace new opportunities by applying faith to the culture they faced.[163] However, as the emphasis towards active leadership shifted away from more classic pastoral functions, Suttle challenges the uncritical adoption of business and secular principles that are antithetical to true Christian leadership.[164] Other critics widely share this fair accusation, which will be examined further in this paper, but Suttle drives an unfortunate wedge between Christian 'leadership based on faithfulness, not pragmatism'.[165] In pitting them at opposites, he misses the essential pastoral leadership role beyond caring for people, by catalysing and empowering them as leaders themselves to evangelise their own contexts.

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[158] Dybdahl, "Anatomy of the Church Growth Movement", 9. Author refers here to Kraft's ideas in Charles H. Kraft, " Towards a Christian Ethnotheology," in *God, Man, and Church Growth,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973): 109-126.
[159] Towns, "The Rise and Decline", 174.
[160] Padgett, "A Wesleyan Critique", 147.
[161] Towns, "The Rise and Decline", 178.
[162] Hunter, "Contribution of the Church Growth Movement", 7
[163] Towns, "The Rise and Decline", 175.
[164] Suttle, *Shrink,* Chapter 1.
[165] Suttle, *Shrink,* Chapter 2.

3.5.5. Emphasis on Innovation and Adaptability

In advocating for a refocus on evangelism, the CGM also expressed openness to innovation and extra-biblical methods to reach people.[166] Although often criticised for their means, this encouragement to 'think outside the box' pushed back on traditional approaches to ministry as culture changed. McGavran explained that if a particular method 'does not work for the glory of God, throw it away and get something which does'.[167] Linus Morris observes this trend across Europe in the early 1980s, where the hierarchical 'state churches' were failing to engage growing populations, and critically reflects his way to an alternative model in his book *The High Impact Church.*[168] Through 'breakthrough thinking', new church plants were able to accomplish the seemingly impossible through innovative and creative approaches, most significantly through the deployment of laity to plant churches across several European cities.[169] Paas observes this as a trend in newer, younger churches in Europe that experience quicker numerical growth, with entrepreneurial leaders that 'simply do not believe that the current situation is inevitable'.[170] Rather than imitating methods, the gateway to innovation is asking the right questions in each new context, which was McGavran's focus at the inception of the CGM.

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[166] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 93.
[167] Wagner, Frontiers in Mission Strategy, 60.
[168] Linus J. Morris, *The High Impact Church: A Fresh Approach to Reaching the Unchurched* (Houston, TX: Touch Publications, 1993), 62.
[169] Morris, *The High Impact Church,* 41.
[170] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 146.

3.6 Critical Evaluation: Potential Pitfalls

While the CGM contributed significantly to evangelism and mission, key limitations must also be acknowledged. Criticism is levied towards its philosophy and praxis, although points of difference between the McGavran and American streams will be observed.

3.6.1. Pragmatism over Theology

Concerns are widely shared about the 'fierce pragmatism' of the CGM, which places a dangerous overemphasis on the practical and undermines solid missiological thinking.[171] Van Rheenan deems such pragmatism as having an anthropocentric core, fixed on goal-setting and developing methodologies for mission, rather than proper theological reflection that considers what God is already doing.[172] Paul Hiebert describes the church today as 'captive to a modern secular worldview', where human control and engineering have replaced divine leading in mission.[173] Insights from social sciences are almost used as 'spiritual technology' to produce results, but often employed without any theological guardrails.[174] Therefore, Stetzer aptly describes the result in the American CGM as 'methodological mania'.[175] Other critics point to a deficient ecclesiology in Church Growth circles that prioritises the function of the church over its attributes, emphasising what the church *does* rather than *is.*[176] Van Gelder correctly points out that the resulting tendency is to conceive the church in 'malleable terms', something we are mandated to 'build' and grow ourselves.[177] This is pessimistically termed by Samuel Escobar as 'managerial missiology', where missionary action is reduced to 'linear task' and 'logical steps'.[178]

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[171] William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 77. Also J. Herbert Kane, The Christian World Mission: Today and Tomorrow (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981), 212. 'The proponents of church growth, with few exceptions, have emphasized the human factors and all but overlooked the divine factor.'.

[172] Van Rheenen, "Reformist View", 175

[173] Paul Hiebert, "De-theologizing Missiology: A Response," in *Trinity World Forum* 19 (Autumn 1993), 4.

[174] Dybdahl, "Anatomy of the Church Growth Movement", 10.

[175] Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth", 90.

[176] Van Gelder, "Gospel And Our Culture View", 80.

[177] Van Gelder, "Gospel And Our Culture View", 81.

[178] Samuel Escobar, "Evangelical Missiology: Peering into the Future at the Turn of the Century," in *Global Missiology for the Twenty-first Century,* ed. William. D. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 109.

These allegations have merits and misrepresentations. Any strategy assimilation must prioritise biblical and theological reflection; the gospel cannot be reduced to what is manageable and measurable. Yet, Van Rheenan rightly challenges sweeping judgements that negate management from missiology, observing that 'mature churches tend to have mature processes' for teaching, training, and deploying new Christians. An unorganised church rarely grows. We must avoid a dichotomy between strategy and theology, but ensure that the latter underpins the former. Tim Suttle goes too far in describing pragmatism as 'kryptonite' to the church, killing faithfulness in leaders and 'stealing initiative from God'.[179] His short-sightedness lacks the helpful eschatological lens that McGrath offers to Christian leaders, framing Church Growth as a 'collaborative' work that we are invited into, whose end only God determines.[180] Such thinking leaves room for human engagement and creativity while protecting Christians against a pure pragmatism that leans solely toward methods and means.

Significantly for the CGM, during the 1980s, Wagner recognised this overemphasis on pragmatism and began shifting his focus away from the movement's scientific research foundation towards engaging with the supernatural.[181] John Wimber's teaching on 'power evangelism' encouraged a newfound openness to Pentecostalism and spiritual gifts, with the two men forging a crucial relationship that brought together the spiritual and social-scientific aspects of church growth.[182] It marked a new chapter for the CGM and a key dimension of the widely impacting 'Third Wave of the Spirit', later known as the 'New Apostolic Reformation'.[183]

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[179] Suttle, *Shrink,* Chapter 2.

[180] McGrath, "Theology, Eschatology and Church Growth", 105.

[181] Cook, "The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement", 26.

[182] John Wimber with Kevin Springer, *Power Healing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), x.

[183] Jon Bialecki, "The Third Wave and the Third World: C. Peter Wagner, John Wimber, and the Pedagogy of Global Renewal in the Late Twentieth Century," *Pneuma* 37.2 (2015): 179. Bialecki defines the Third Wave as 'an American charismatic revival movement in the late twentieth century… a successor to the two previous 'waves ofthe Spirit': Pentecostalism in the early twentieth century and the mid-century charismatic movements that occurred in the various established denominations … It is questionable whether terms ofmore recent coinage, such as the "New Apostolic Reformation" or "Apostolic Networks," are any better.'

3.6.2. Overemphasis on Numerical Growth

For many critics, this is the most aggravating issue of the CGM, which conversely plays down the need for other types of growth. Equating numerical increase with missional 'success' has generated huge misunderstanding in churches, often leading to triumphalism and arrogance.[184] Effectively, a statistical approach to evaluation makes it possible for churches to 'keep score' against others, as they focus on *doing* and not on *being.* In that sense, Newbigin cautions against churches being transported into a 'world of military campaign or commercial sales drive' when numbers are the chief criterion for judgement, adding undue pressure to leaders.[185]

Writing to champion the CGM, however, Eddie Gibbs contends that McGavran's early overemphasis on numerical growth was a refreshing and 'necessary corrective' to widespread avoidance of the issue.[186] Even CGM critic René Padilla agrees that quantitative growth is a 'legitimate concern' in Christian mission, in harmony with God's desire that all will 'come to a knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:4), a central Christian confession.[187] However, this is challenged by others who doubt such a pervasive concern in the New Testament.[188] Nevertheless, even if McGavran offered a corrective back then, perhaps it is overstated today. The CGM did challenge pious excuses for lack of evangelistic success and offered some vital recalibration, but numerical growth cannot be made the *ultimate* goal of mission or church planting. Whilst we cannot be indifferent to growing numbers in churches, particularly in Europe, Orlandas Costas justifiably challenges that it can only be a 'penultimate goal', with growth primarily measured by people 'participating in the bringing about of a new order [and] in establishing a community of love'.[189] Active participation in God's mission and engagement in the *qualitative* life of the church is the answer to 'ecclesial obesity'[190] and obsession with size, widespread in much of the Western Church today.

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[184] Yong-Gi Hong, "Models of the Church Growth Movement Transformation", in *International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 21/2, (April 2004), 101-11.

[185] Newbigin, *The Open Secret,* 127.

[186] Eddie Gibbs, *I Believe in Church Growth,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1982), 136.

[187] C René Padilla, "Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6/1 (1982), 29.

[188] For the alternative view, see Carl R. Holladay, "Church Growth in the New Testament," in *Restoration Quarterly 26* (1983): 83–102. He notes that a motivation to use statistics to measure growth is purely self-aggrandizing and self-promoting.

[189] Orlandas Costas, *The Integrity of Mission: The Inner Life and Outreach of the Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 56-57.

[190] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 123.

3.6.3 Churches Divided on Homogenous Lines

Significant objection has also been made about converting McGavran's 'homogeneous unit' concept into a universal and practical principle for Church Growth. Although Wagner asserted it was an observation rather than prescription, his reach for biblical precedence is challenged by Gibbs as 'reading between the lines'.[191] Paas similarly insists that 'intentionally homogenous churches' have no biblical grounds and are incompatible with the dimension of ethnic reconciliation intrinsic to the gospel (Ephesians 2:11-22).[192] However, in cautioning churches against 'people blindness', obscuring churches from seeing critical cultural differences, Wagner maintained that distinctive congregations are strategic for numerical growth.[193] In response, many have sharply contended that this only reinforces 'hyper-segregated churches',[194] 'fostering apartheid churches' that are the antithesis of diversity in the Body of Christ.[195] Others even levied accusations of racism towards McGavran when he first outlined the principle.[196]

Defending the homogeneous unit, however, Towns asserts that it was never intended as a 'tool' for Church Growth but observed as a scientific principle that describes the practice of groups.[197] A better understanding may lead to respecting and reaching sub-cultures more effectively, which Murray endorses in missional endeavours, but then rightly separates this from the establishment of 'homogeneous churches…that simply mirror divisions in society'.[198] Such churches may be legitimate but never complete in themselves. Murray would go as far as calling them a 'perversion of the gospel', which is only witnessed effectively through the heterogeneity of the church.[199] Likewise, Padilla rightly expands the notion of conversion being solely a religious experience to becoming part of a community, where new identity is found primarily in Christ rather than in race, social status or

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[191] Gibbs, *I Believe in Church Growth,* 126. Refers to Wagner's doctoral thesis, *Our Kind of People,* and a chapter entitled 'Church Growth in the New Testament mosaic.* Gibbs notes, 'While it is true that eleven of the twelve disciples were Galileans, they represented different traders and political convictions…. There was heterogeneity alongside a degree of homogeneity, which contributed to the learning situation as they rubbed against each other.'

[192] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 121.

[193] Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth*, 173.

[194] Craig S. Hendrickson, "Ending Racial Profiling in the Church: Revisiting the Homogenous Unit Principle", in *Mission Studies 35,* (2018): 345.

[195] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 135,.

[196] Towns, "The Rise and Decline", 177.

[197] Towns, "The Rise and Decline", 178.

[198] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 136-7.

[199] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 137

gender.[200] Pragmatic church planters may be tempted to isolate particular groups of people through social profiling, but churches are essentially called to transcend social and cultural barriers.

3.6.4 Consumer-Driven Approach to Ministry

Driven by numerical success, many see a pervasive consumerist mentality running through the modern CGM, heavily influenced by aspects of commercial business. George Barna, who popularised the idea of marketing the church, unapologetically states that churches 'must be run with the same wisdom and savvy that characterizes any for-profit business', corresponding profit to the 'saving of souls'.[201] To that end, effective churches should identify homogeneous groups in the community (segmentation) and determine strategies for those they can best serve (targeting)'.[202] Such crass views have repelled CGM critics who contend that Western consumerism has altered the missional agenda, positioning churches as *vendors* and people as *consumers*.[203] George Hunsberger writes that such a shift has eclipsed the gospel, where the driving force of the church has become 'gaining the loyalty of members and retaining that loyalty'.[204] Whilst some challenge the recent CGM for being sidelined by Western consumerism, others go back to the problematic roots of McGavran's two-stage process of 'discipling' before 'perfecting', setting the stage for counting quicker conversions to an increasingly diluted gospel.[205] Costas, therefore, unmercifully packages the CGM gospel as 'forgiveness of an abstract sinfulness by faith in an unhistorical Christ.'[206] A self-indulgent 'conversion' that is divorced from any consequential demands is similarly challenged by Paas as mere 'denominational recruitment'.[207] The purpose of the gospel is to produce a radical reorientation of one's life, not just transact salvation.

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[200] Padilla, "Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle", 29.

[201] George Barna, *Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You About Church Growth* (Sutherland: Albatross, 1988), 26.

[202] Robert E. Stevens and David L. Louden, *Marketing for Churches and Ministries* (New York: Haworth, 1992), 45-47.

[203] Van Rheenen, "Reformist View", 175.

[204] George Hunsberger, "Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God," in *Missional Church*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 84.

[205] Dybdahl, "Anatomy of the Church Growth Movement", 10.

[206] Orlandas Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1982), 80.

[207] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 121.

These are sharp criticisms, but some balance is needed. Darren Cronshaw reviews the uses and cautions of marketing in the CGM and recognises that the language of consumerism *is* the language of our culture, but positions it as secondary to the church's primary language, which must be theologically informed.[208] Our methods must be regularly appraised against the nature of the gospel and the *missio Dei.* Marketing and organisational principles can support church leadership but should never negate reliance on God. CGM critics are not alone in sounding this alarm, as Barna also warns: 'We are not replacing our confidence in God's leadership. Neither are we "selling Jesus", for we do not own Him. God remains the Lord of all creation, the only One capable of creating positive change in people.'[209]

3.6.5 Lack of long-term sustainability and influence

Despite its rich history and undeniable impact on recapturing an urgency for evangelism, many conclude that the CGM is a trend that has run its course. Even the phrase 'church growth' has been marred by many who see it as 'carnal, mechanistic, or myopic', rendering it unsuitable for its intended purposes.[210] 'Church health' developed as an alternative term to gain some distance from the CGM, although McMahan notes this also has its liabilities and limitations.[211] However, McGavran's original emphasis on conversion growth has been challenged repeatedly by those who claim the kingdom of God is far more central to Jesus' teaching.[212] In elevating the evangelistic mandate of the church over a cultural mandate, Wagner invites similar criticism from those who contend that the Gospel is unequivocally intertwined with the social participation of the church, as extension of the *missio Dei.*[213] Murray champions these perspectives as theocentric rather than anthropocentric, shifting the emphasis from just the local church to a more profound concern for the world at large.[214]

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[208] Darren Cronshaw, "Uses and Cautions of Marketing as a Church Growth Tool," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth,* Vol 15/1 (2004), 18.

[209] George Barna, *A Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing: Breaking Ground for the Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1992), 17.

[210] Alan McMahan, "Church Growth by Another Name: Challenges and Opportunities for the Future of a Movement," *Great Commission Research Journal,* Vol 1 (2009), 10.

[211] McMahan, "Church Growth by Another Name", 12. He notes that some pastors began to self-define the health of their churches, with non-growth quickly justified or even seen as normative, despite the perspectives offered by Church Health movements.

[212] Dybdahl, "Anatomy of the Church", 10. Also see Padgett, "A Wesleyan Critique", 146.

[213] Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1989), 102-3. Also see Hong, "Models of the Church Growth", 110.

[214] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 37-39.

Such sound arguments are often dismissed by those trenched in cultural expressions of church or well-versed in CGM paradigms, requiring a teachability that Stezer notes is frequently absent.[215] The irony is that such ignorance hinders the CGM from reaching its ultimate goal, which is to become more effective in reaching people for Christ. However, whilst many have written off the CGM as outdated and irrelevant, others claim that McGavran's foundational questions are just as pertinent and necessary today.[216] Historically, the CGM emerged as a response to a church that had drifted in focus, but some have called for the movement to reinvent itself and stand against the theological and institutional drift that distracts the church from effective evangelism.[217] Perhaps the critique it has received offers a new prophetic opportunity to reexamine its roots, challenge its practices and become a klaxon call again for the Church to keep advancing into a new age.

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[215] Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth", 93.
[216] Goodhew, "Towards a Theology of Church Growth", 35.
[217] McMahan, "Church Growth by Another Name", 15

3.7 Summary

The goal of this section has been to offer an analysis and critique of the CGM, to provide a more insightful understanding about the continuing impact on church planting today. McGavran's passion for evaluating mission strategy has been widely commended, stimulating the Church worldwide to engage afresh with evangelism. In challenging some long-held paradigms about how the gospel spreads, McGavran advocated for a fresh focus on understanding context and culture to see an increase in conversion growth, which he deemed the goal of evangelism. However, many have been rightly concerned about the drift away from McGavran's missiological roots towards a CGM that majors in methodology and determines success based on numerical growth. In that sense, 'growth' has been accented as central to the health of a church, which has been challenged as drawing less from theology and more from pragmatic bases.[218] As a result, some have argued for growth on broader terms, entailing qualitative aspects that reflect different dimensions of health and impact. Others have sought to abandon the framework altogether. Nevertheless, agreeing with McMahan, I believe the priority of winning people to Christ must continue to be elevated as a chief concern for the Church.[219]

McGavran said in *Bridges of God* that a 'new age is upon us. A new pattern is demanded. A new pattern is at hand, which, while new, is as old as the Church itself.'[220] This language unfortunately and ironically sabotages his core philosophy, which sought to provide *principles* for growth, not patterns, practices or methods. However, that is where the emerging CGM failed. In this 'new age', we need to recapture McGavran's principles yet constantly review our practices to ensure that 'new churches' planted are more theologically informed and missionally engaged for the contexts we are called to. A return to the questions the CGM posed in the past will hopefully bring fresh, missional impact in the future.

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[218] Van Gelder, "Gospel And Our Culture View", 88.
[219] McMahan, "Church Growth by Another Name", 26.
[220] Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955), 68.

Chapter 4 - Church Growth and Planting New Churches

4.1   Church Planting claims

Significant claims about the importance of church planting in the CGM are underscored by Wagner's oft-quoted assertion that 'the single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.'[221] His statement is based on a theological premise that 'the chief and irreplaceable purpose of mission is church growth', with effective evangelism focused on conversion metrics.[222] Through that lens, Wagner deemed it a 'strategic blunder' to separate evangelism and church planting, contending that as the number of those being evangelised increases, so must the number and variety of churches.[223] This conviction is widely endorsed, with supporters like Tim Keller boldly arguing that 'vigorous church planting is one of the best ways to renew the existing churches of a city, as well as the best single way to grow the whole body of Christ'.[224] McRaney similarly highlights that by planting 'kingdom-expanding churches', there is an implicit rebuke to 'institutional maintenance' in established churches that have drifted from their missional focus.[225] Both authors liberally offer anecdotal evidence to propose that church planting is a major catalyst in evangelism, renewal of the Church and furtherance of the gospel. The subsequent conclusion therefore drawn is that *more* and *better* churches are urgently needed, with a supporting logic that new churches grow faster, engage people quicker, and can better strategically focus on specific people groups.[226] Keller also adds that new churches are more likely to raise up new, innovative leaders to catalyse the wider church to action – an appeal to the pragmatism of the CGM.[227]

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[221] Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, 11.

[222] McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 24.

[223] Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, 12. Wagner later advocates for using demographic research to identify 'target audiences… different people groups, homogenous units', which impact the variety of churches needed (81).

[224] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 358.

[225] McRaney, "Church Planting as a Growth Strategy", 73.

[226] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 125. Paas summarises four axioms found in church planting literature to support the claim that it furthers church growth: 1) New churches grow faster than older churches; 2) Smaller churches grow faster than larger churches; 3) New churches extend the range of options for religiously interested people; 4) Church planting challenges other churches.

[227] Keller, *Center Church,* 360.

However, Murray challenges the jump to such conclusions, observing a common overemphasis in denominations on the *number* of new churches, rather than critical questions about the *nature* of what is being planted.[228] When the former is emphasised, the means quickly become an end in themselves; 'more' becomes the focus of the mission. From a different angle, Paas contests the logic behind sweeping statements that link church planting and church growth, scrutinising their validity in a secularised, post-Christian European context, where many other historical and cultural factors are at play.[229] He challenges a straightforward assumption between the age of a church and its growth, although accepts it as a factor, but argues instead that the demographic location, quality of leadership and missional focus of a new church are far more important.[230] From that perspective, there is an oversimplification in McGavran's claim that 'only the creation of multitudes of new, vital congregations will reconvert the myriads of European Christo-pagans'.[231] Whilst *more* churches can find niches in a religious landscape that is constantly changing, an insight which Paas draws effectively from 'Religious Market Theory', church planting cannot automatically be assumed as a 'silver bullet' for church growth or a remedy against the decline in Europe.[232]

Murray correctly highlights a better question about 'what *kind* of churches' are needed to effectively make new disciples in new contexts, rather than simply pursuing an end goal of *more* churches.[233] Against just cloning existing models, church planters must consider a variety of factors that determine the shape of a new church, reflecting on how they consequently frame success and measure what matters.

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[228] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 126.
[229] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 180.
[230] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 159.
[231] McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 19.
[232] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 145.
[233] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 136.

4.2   The Challenge of Determining Shape

The starting point for determining what kind of churches should be planted are the questions of *who* the Church is called to be and *what* it is here to accomplish.[234] The metaphorical 'shape' that new churches take should be visible expressions of their witness, where the form and function of the church are intimately joined, or as Marshall McLuhan infamously noted, where 'the medium is the message'.[235] The shape of the early church was key to its expansion, but when numerical growth becomes the primary focus today, critical reflection is often neglected and replication of existing church models dominate.[236] Church planters default to familiarity rather than grasping what is acknowledged by Van Gelder, that 'new contexts require new expressions for understanding the church.'[237]

'Shaping' new churches should not suggest that church planters alone determine the final product, which is a criticism of the CGM's lean towards pragmatism. Craig Ott and Gene Wilson discuss a variety of factors that bear on decisions regarding church shape, including God's leading, the historical and cultural context, available resources, uncontrollable external factors, or influences from within the community.[238] Murray more succinctly offers three factors that determine the kind of church being planted, which provide a helpful pathway for further critical reflection:

I.   The convictions of the church planters,

II.   The context in which the church is planted,

III.   The constraints that impact or limit the planting process.[239]

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[234] Milfred Minatrea, *Shaped by the Heart of God: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), Perlego edition, Chapter 8.

[235] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGaw-Hill, 1964), 23.

[236] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 130.

[237] Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 40-41.

[238] Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 110.

[239] Stuart Murray, *Planting Churches in the 21st Century,* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 140-144.

4.2.1 Convictions: Shaped by the Gospel

According to Murray, all church planters carry theological or ecclesial convictions that inform their approach.[240] Writing from a 'Gospel and Culture' perspective on Church Growth, Van Gelder notes a central theological question that must intersect with every strategic decision made in church planting – namely, 'What is the gospel?'[241] If numerical growth becomes the chief concern of new churches, Cronshaw warns against the emergence of a 'gospel of customer orientation' that is significantly watered-down and self-indulgent.[242] Keller also notes that where the purity of the gospel is not maintained or built upon, a church may grow numerically but not in vitality, inevitably 'exhibiting symptoms of lifelessness.'[243] Whilst the gospel needs to be communicated with relevance and by all means, it should never be at the expense of its power or purpose. Ott and Wilson highlight the dangers of 'syncretism and fragmentation' in the CGM, where the gospel is compromised with elements of secular ideology, or communities are fragmented through modelling on the 'homogenous unit principle'.[244] Both dangers distort the gospel, the only thing that truly transforms lives. While CGM advocates offer defence,[245] there is a call for church planters to prayerfully listen to the gospel at every turn, critically reflecting on their convictions about its message as they consider the shape of the new church emerging.

4.2.2 Context: Shaped by the Culture

The shape of the church should be determined by the gospel it seeks to embody but also the cultural context where it is engaged in mission. Bob Roberts notes that while all churches are connected theologically and organically, 'each church has to design itself based on its local context'.[246] Murray urges active cultural adaptation to better participate in communities, motivated by the theological principle

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[240] Murray, *Planting Churches in the 21st Century,* 140.

[241] Van Gelder, "Gospel And Our Culture View", 115.

[242] Cronshaw, "Marketing as a Church Growth Tool", 17. Also see Marva J. Dawn, Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 166, 295;

[243] Keller, *Center Church,* 82.

[244] Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 124-5.

[245] John Michael Morris defends the Homogeneous Unit Principle in his article "McGavran on McGavran: What did he really teach?", in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Missions and Evangelism,* Vol 2 (2016): 9–24. Drawing support from others, he claims the Homogeneous Unit Principle is not meant to exclude anyone and is only a starting point for evangelism and mission, pointing to examples of homogeneous churches that abound, that join together in wider heterogeneous gatherings.

[246] Bob Roberts, *The Multiplying Church: The New Math for Starting New Churches,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 77.

of the Incarnation.[247] Ministering in a post-modern environment, new churches need to remain 'flexible and alert', engaging with fresh missional thinking to respond to a changing culture, without succumbing uncritically to secular paradigms and thought.[248] To that end, the CGM provided helpful frameworks to exegete a community, but Stetzer caveats that cultural contextualisation is not a blank slate to redraw the biblical parameters on what constitutes a church.[249] *How* those parameters are outworked is determined by context, but *that* we do them is already determined by Scripture. Churches should necessarily be shaped by culture, with the purpose of engaging in mission, but they are also called to shape the culture they are in. Reflecting on failures in the 'Decade of Evangelism' and how the church should move forward, Robert Warren rightly notes that prayerful discernment is crucial in knowing what must be welcomed in culture, adjusted to or confronted.[250] There will always be a tension between the church taking on new shapes to inhabit new contexts, whilst remaining foreign as the gospel should challenge and transform the world.[251] Effective church planting must be determined by both.

4.2.3 Constraints: Shaped by the Spirit

Murray suggests a list of very real practical 'constraints' that may limit what church planters can achieve, highlighting the importance of responding honestly but imaginatively.[252] However, there is also a sense of 'restraint' that the Spirit provides, as church planters seek alignment with where God is already active in a community (Gal 5:25). James Dunn calls this prayerful discernment 'the first act of mission'.[253] Church planters with pragmatist and activist tendencies may quickly overlook this step, particularly within a Pentecostal tradition where the Holy Spirit is primarily viewed as an external force to empower the church (Acts 2:1-4). In response, Niemandt charges missional leaders to adopt a posture of 'openness and

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[247] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 153-4.

[248] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 147.

[249] Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth", 99.

[250] Robert Warren, *Signs of Life: How Goes The Decade of Evangelism* (London: Church House, 1996), 53. The decade of the 1990s was declared the 'Decade of Evangelism' in the United Kingdom, by resolution of the Lambeth Conference of 1988.

[251] Andrew E. Walls, "The Gospel as the Prison and Liberator of Culture,", *Missionalia,* Vol 10/3 (November 1982), 98-99. Walls notes this as the tension between the 'pilgrim principle' and the 'indigenous principle', between transforming the culture with the gospel, and finding new expressions in new contexts.

[252] Murray, *Planting Churches in the 21st Century,* 143.

[253] James D. G. Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit: Collected Essays*, Volume 2: Pneumatology, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 72.

attentiveness, fuelled by empathy' as they consider the *missio Dei* in the world.[254] Van Gelder likewise highlights the Spirit as 'our key resource for shaping the ongoing development of the church',[255] an implicit challenge to the 'methodological mania' of the modern CGM.[256] Without heeding that warning, church planters risk falling foul of the same sin of self-sufficiency judged in the Laodicean church (Rev 3:17).

Listening to the Spirit in shaping strategy is not always easy or obvious amongst other competing stimuli in church planting. Murray notes the temptation is often to 'clone' churches instead, replicating existing models without any prayerful reflection.[257] We ultimately miss the opportunity for missiological creativity when the Spirit is reduced to a tool we possess rather than a Person offering insight and understanding about where God is at work. Pausing to listen is a healthy restraint to charging ahead in church planting, which goes hand-in-hand with good planning. Incidentally, in his book with Jim Montgomery, this is precisely what McGavran suggests, that goal-setting and planning can be 'an intensely spiritual activity…done with much prayer and seeking God's will… an honest attempt to obey more effectively.'[258] Through sincere prayer and open ears to proactively listen to both the Spirit and the community, churches can be shaped much more effectively than adopting the cookie-cutter approach endorsed by the modern CGM.

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[254] C.J.P. Niemandt, "Discerning Spirituality for Missional Leaders," in *Leading in a Vuca World: Integrating Leadership, Discernment and Spirituality,* ed. Jacobus Kok & Steven C. van den Heuvel (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Open, 2019), 172.

[255] Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 43.

[256] Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth", 90.

[257] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 128.

[258] Donald McGavran and Jim Montomery, *The Discipling of a Nation* (Santa Clara, CA: Global Church Growth Bulletin, 1980), 130.

4.3   The Challenge of Defining Success

McGavran claimed that church growth is a matter of faithfulness to God and a 'chief consideration in estimating church welfare'.[259] However, without essential qualification, CGM proponents often conclude that conversion growth is the *key* criterion of success. If a church does not grow or reproduce, serious questions are raised about its faithfulness.[260] However, is church planting success simply a matter of finding the right shape and approach to achieve a predetermined numerical goal?

On the one hand, the quantitative dimension of a new church is vital to 'church survivability', where new churches must find ways to grow in order to survive.[261] Joel Comiskey dramatically notes how church planters face real pressure: 'Do or die. Reach out or close the doors. Without growth, the church folds. This reality keeps church planters on their knees.'[262] From that perspective, pragmatism and faithfulness are complementary, even *crucial* to each other. Van Engen also concedes that 'yearning for numerical growth is the true mark of the Church', yet caveats that even when a church is being 'most true and obedient' to sharing the gospel, numerical growth is not always apparent because of factors outside of human control.[263] The church *should* be faithful in inviting and recruiting, but Paas, on the other hand, questions whether significant numerical growth is really 'normal' in every context, particularly in Europe, where a struggle for faithfulness is often about maintaining a Christian witness in the face of rampant secularity.[264] In that context, success must be redefined to incorporate parameters much broader than bringing people into the church. I agree with Stetzer's challenge against using models as guaranteed 'rules for success', despite a yearning for growth, for churches united around the same mission instead: 'to glorify God by being an indigenous expression of church life where they are'.[265] Yet, there is still tension to address about how success in that mission is measured in the life of a church.

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[259] McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 6.

[260] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 115.

[261] Ed Stetzer and Philip Connor, "Church Plant Survivability Study," *Center for Missional Research,* North American Mission Board (2007).

[262] Joel Comiskey, *Planting Churches That Reproduce Starting a Network of Simple Churches* (Moreno Valley: CCS Publishing, 2009), 31.

[263] Charles Van Engen, *The Growth of the True Church: An Analysis of the Ecclesiology of Church Growth Theory* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 1981), 451. He notes potential historical, sociological, political, anthropological, religious and cultural factors that determine the actual amount of numerical growth, so such a measure cannot point to the trueness of a church.

[264] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 119.

[265] Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth", 106.

4.3.1 Faithfulness or Fruitfulness?

Against the notion of numerical success, Briggs suggests that *faithfulness* is the only measure that counts – any other standard is 'corrosive' to church planters and a damaging compass for evaluation and focus.[266] From a different angle, Newbigin notes how the Apostle Paul's ultimate concern and criterion for judgement was the faithfulness of his churches and the integrity of their witness.[267] These ideas are an understandable response to the CGM, but there is also a concerning oversimplification. When faithfulness is void of *faith* for increase or steps that involve some level of risk and boldness, it is unlikely to pave the way to fruitfulness. Drawing on Paul's analogies of gardening when addressing the Corinthian church (1 Cor 3:9), Keller highlights that gardeners must be faithful *and* skilled in their work, or the fruit will fail.[268] Whilst the degree of growth or 'success' is determined by factors out of the control of the gardener, there remains a healthy pressure to ask hard questions when faithful ministries bear little fruit.[269] The CGM contributed much to helping church planters consider key questions, directing their attention towards certain tools and approaches. However, their overemphasis can put enormous pressure on church planters seeking to 'produce' success. Therefore, rather than just isolating faithfulness as the primary goal, I agree with Keller's affirmation that there is a better barometer for success that directs attention towards *fruitfulness* as well.[270] With that focus, leaders are held accountable for doing their best yet not crushed by unexpected results. There does not have to be an unhelpful dichotomy between faithfulness and fruitfulness; in the divine economy, both are closely intertwined.[271]

4.3.2 Mega-church or Multi-church?

Notions of success also hold a tension between 'getting bigger' or 'going smaller', polarising church expansion and reproduction, despite CGM support of church planting. Murray notes the potential problems if church planting becomes the end rather than the means, when new congregations are only redistributing members of existing churches or resources are stretched so thin that volunteers experience

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[266] Briggs, *Fail*, 51.
[267] Newbigin, *The Open Secret,* 140-1.
[268] Keller, *Center Church,* 13.
[269] Keller, *Center Church,* 14.
[270] Keller, *Center Church,* 14.
[271] Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally,* Chapter 7, Section 'How Big is Too Big?'. The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) demonstrates the connection made here between faithfulness and fruitfulness.

burnout.[272] Nevertheless, he contends that church planting and the growth of existing churches can be mutually enriching, even catalytic, for numerical growth.[273] Ott and Wilson also challenge a false dichotomy between numerically larger churches and efforts towards planting new churches, when an 'either-or option' is presented.[274] Milfred Minatrea implicitly makes this claim by pitting 'maintenance' and 'missional' churches against each other, where bringing people into church is somehow at odds with equipping them to live out their faith as disciples.[275] Whilst he notes that 'the measure of success is not about size, but about service', he misses the point raised by Van Engen that the true church is 'one that *yearns'* for growth.[276] Growing bigger should be celebrated and anticipated, but not at the expense of equipping and releasing people to start new expressions of church. Accordingly, Richard Bauckham rightly argues the 'permanent value of two directions of movement' in the New Testament church – 'centrifugal and centripetal' – enabling it to breathe healthily, both in and out.[277] Both dimensions are crucial to any measure of success.

Church planting, therefore, involves risk. For existing church leaders to release church planters, Keller observes that it means giving up control, even of the *shape* of the new church itself.[278] An unwillingness to surrender control will undermine efforts to contextualise or incarnate the community effectively. Some franchise multisite models may struggle with this, but Minatrea contends that only a church that refuses to define success by numerical growth alone will make the necessary sacrifice in personnel and resources to 'release rather than retain'.[279] Helpful support is offered, ironically, by megachurch Pastor J.D. Greear.[280] Drawing on Jesus' teaching in John 12:24, he contends that success is not in how large we grow the storehouse but by how widely we distribute its seeds; the true measure of a church is 'not in its *seating* capacity, but its *sending* capacity.'[281]

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[272] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 195.
[273] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 194.
[274] Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 28. Research claims that new churches that planted a daughter church within the first 3 years grew *faster* on average that churces that did not. Such churches had an average attendance of 130 after the fourth year, whereas churches that did not plant had an average attendance of less than 80. Stetzer and Connor (2007).
[275] Minatrea, *Shaped by the Heart of God,* Chapter 10.
[276] Van Engen, *The Growth of the True Church,* 451.
[277] Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 77.
[278] Keller, *Center Church,* 358.
[279] Minatrea, *Shaped by the Heart of God,* Chapter 10.
[280] J.D. Greer, *Gaining by Losing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015). Author is the Senior Pastor of Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham, NC.
[281] J.D. Greer, *Gaining by Losing,* 16. Emphasis added.

4.3.3 Abundance or Size?

New benchmarks of success need to be developed that celebrate reproduction and multiplication, not just unlimited expansion. Accordingly, Stetzer and Bird suggest a more organic mindset that focuses on 'abundance' over size, where churches connect with their reproductive nature rather than controlling or containing growth.[282] Ott and Wilson likewise warn that churches who never think about reproduction as a natural part of their lifecycle may 'become numerically impressive, but remain sterile'.[283] In light of our 'multidimensional mandate' in Scripture, a healthy church should have a natural appetite for reproducing itself in new life forms and structures, with a greater vision than merely adding more people to a single location.[284] However, whilst an emphasis on reproduction highlights the urgency of evangelism and the imperative of mobilising new leaders, it must be balanced with effective discipleship and maturational growth. Ott and Wilson warn that forcing church reproduction sometimes 'backfires', often fuelled by unhealthy drives that were already behind church expansion.[285] Keller likewise cautions against 'defiant church planting', where churches are birthed 'unnaturally' through controversy, philosophical differences, or just simply the result of personality clashes.[286] Such church plants often bypass the significant opportunity offered for proper missiological and theological reflection to determine the shape of the church and its parameters. Therefore, despite an emphasis on reproduction, the *kind* of churches being planted is still paramount, over the blind pursuit of just planting *more*,

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[282] Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 202.

[283] Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 65.

[284] Lee, "A Holistic Framework for Measurement", 154. The 'multidimensional mandate' refers to the three directives of the Great Commission, Creation Commission and the Great Commandment.

[285] Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 78.

[286] Keller, *Center Church,* 356.

4.4   The Challenge of Measuring What Matters

Rather than ignoring numbers and overstating qualitative measures to assess effectiveness, Ott and Wilson uphold both forms of feedback as valuable and complementary if used holistically to build a broader picture.[287] Statistics offer one perspective on the story but cannot render effective conclusions alone. Unfortunately, the balance is often lost when organisational or marketing principles are indiscriminately woven into church planting foundations. Writing from a business perspective, Jon Doerr contends that the objectives that 'matter' can be measured effectively through four 'superpowers': focus, align, track and stretch.[288] His mantra for entrepreneurs offers an essential pragmatic foundation: 'Ideas are easy. Execution is everything.'[289] However, Vaters opposes this approach in church planting because often 'the things that matter don't make it easy to measure'.[290] In that sense, numbers can discourage or deceive church planters into thinking they know more than they actually do.

While God expects His church to grow, Costas suggests a multi-dimensional metric that evidences growth in three ways – *breadth,* reflecting numerical growth; *depth*, reflecting experiential growth as a worshipping and nurturing community; and in *height,* as a visible pointer towards new life in Jesus.[291] This is a simple but helpful framework, although he would support the application must be broader than just corporate church gatherings. Unfortunately, the research conclusions offered by Jim Memory suggest a narrow tendency in church planters across Europe to still prioritise weekly attendance as the chief metric, followed by a series of other quantitative factors.[292] Perhaps this is because quantitative evaluations are made more efficiently within a limited scope of measurement or, more concerningly, because of convenience in measuring success against others. However, Paas contends that a focus on Sunday services is essentially an ecclesiological decision because 'what we define as church growth depends on *how we see the church*'.[293]   Moreover, our understanding of mission may fundamentally shape how we see the church.

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[287]Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 197.
[288] John Doerr, *Measure What Matters: OKRs – the Simple Idea That Drives 10X Growth*, (Great Britain: Penguin, 2018). The four superpowers are referenced in chapter titles 4, 7, 10 and 12.
[289] Doerr, *Measure What Matters,* 6.
[290] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 123.
[291] Costas, *The Integrity of Mission,* 37-38.
[292] Memory, "How Can We Measure?", Chapter 14, Part 2
[293] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 152 (emphasis added).

4.5   *Missio Dei* and the Mission of the Church

Two key concepts have dominated missiological thinking over the past century, both the Great Commission and the concept of the *missio Dei*.[294] An evangelical priority on Matthew 28:19-20 has given rise to a 'mandate model' of mission, binding the Church to take responsibility and initiative, which D.J. Konz argues has exaggerated human effort and agency in the economy of salvation.[295] However, a *missio Dei* theology offers a different angle to inform our mission endeavours, seeing our actions 'as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's mission…for the redemption of God's creation.'[296] In that way, God is reoriented at the centre of mission, which Wicker proposes is a shift from a 'church-centred mission to a mission-centred church.'[297] The mission is not about the world filling the church; the mission is for the church to fill the world. Rather than people being held by an order or obligation, Kirsteen Kim conversely frames mission as *invitation*, 'finding out where the Spirit is at work and joining in', which provides an essential overarching context for the Great Commission in Matthew 28.[298]

However, reconciling human agency and participation within a *missio Dei* framework raises crucial questions for church planting. Eddie Arthur summarises two points of view as being either 'Christocentric' or 'Cosmocentric'.[299] The first view emphasises God focusing on Christ's work in and through the Church as a chosen 'instrument' for His mission, which then moves out and influences the world.[300] However, a second opposing view considers the Church as an 'illegitimate centre' for

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[294] D.J. Konz, "The Even Greater Commission: Relating the Great Commission to the Missio Dei, and Human Agency to Divine Activity, in Mission," *Missiology,* Vol 46/4 (2018), 334.

[295] Konz, "The Even Greater Commission", 335.

[296] C.J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 22.

[297] P. L. Wicker, "Mission from the Margins: The Missio Dei in the Crisis of World Christianity", *International Review of Mission,* Vol.369 (2004), 187. David Bosch also notes, 'To say that the church is essentially missionary does not mean that mission is church-centred. It is *missio Dei.* It is Trinitarian. It is meditating the love of God the Father who is the Parent of all people, whoever and wherever they may be. It is epiphany, the making presented in the world of God the Son. It meditates the presence of God the Spirit, who blows where he wishes, without us knowing whence he comes and whither he goes.' D.J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 505.

[298] Kirsteen Kim, Joining in with the Spirit: Connecting Local Church and World Mission, reissue ed. (London: SCM Press, 2012), 1.

[299] Eddie Arthur, "Missio Dei," in *International Development from a Kingdom Perspective,* ed. James Butra-Kiyovu, (California: William Carey International University Press, 2010), 53.

[300] Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 390-91.

mission,[301] emphasising God's work in the world as being *outside* the Church, even *in spite* of it.[302] In that sense, God is not limited by the actions or inaction of Christians. Whilst this second view is perhaps a helpful corrective to pure pragmatism in church planting, Peter Pikkert argues that it unfortunately distorts our missional objective 'to something which God Himself does directly using various and sundry ways and means'.[303] By that token, the Church's identity is implicitly diminished and overlooked as the body of Christ, deeply loved and valuable to God.[304] Whilst this paper does not allow for a full critique of these positions, it highlights a spectrum of thought on how *missio Dei* relates to the Church, which can be challenging to reconcile. However, Newbigin helpfully draws them together and acknowledges their relationship, arguing that 'mission is not *just* something that the church does; it is something that is done by the Spirit…who changes both the world and the church, who always goes before the church on its missionary journey.'[305] From that perspective, adopting a *missio Dei* framework does not reduce the church to some sort of obstacle to God's mission, but importantly safeguards its mission within the parameters of what Konz describes as the 'precedent missionary activity of God'.[306]

4.5.1 Opportunity versus Obligation

When church planting is consciously set within a context of *missio Dei,* this has tremendous significance. Prospective church planters are invited first to consider how they can more faithfully participate in God's *existing* work, fuelled through spiritual intimacy and observation, rather than docile obligation to the 'order' in Matthew 28. To that end, Murray highlights that church planters must give attention to personal spirituality, prophetic discernment and activities such as prayer-walking, emphasising that mission 'is towards the world rather than the church'.[307] The kingdom-centric lens provided by *missio Dei* offers a much broader framework for mission than conversion growth alone, challenging a false dichotomy between social

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[301] Hans Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out* (London: SCM, 1967), 38-39
[302] Konz, "The Even Greater Commission", 337.
[303] Peter Pikkert, *The Essence and Implications of Missio Dei*: *An appraisal of today's foremost theology of missions,* (Ancaster, ON: Alev Books, 2017), 7.
[304] See Bible references: 'one body in Christ' in Rom 12:5, 'one body' in 1 Cor 10:17, 'the body of Christ' in 1 Cor 12:27 and Eph 4:12.
[305] Newbigin, *The Open Secret,* 132. Emphasis added.
[306] Konz, "The Even Greater Commission", 337.
[307] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 41.

action on the one hand and evangelism on the other.[308] As Darrell Guder notes, whilst the transformative message of the Gospel is essentially at the core of *missio Dei,* our call is to be witnesses of Christ by demonstrating His love, concern and relevance to the world.[309] The two cannot and must not be separated, regardless of a CGM focus on evangelism and conversion growth.

4.5.2 Obedience versus Success

Mission is essentially God's activity, which presents an inherent tension in defining or executing His ultimate goals in church planting. The quest to be *successful* can quickly jump to conclusions about how God should or will work in a particular context, which consequently takes away from His sovereignty and mystery. Using the analogy of gardening, Alan Roxburgh reflects on the planting process having far less to do with the 'imposition of his will', but rather becoming part of a process that is much greater than what tools are being used, a process that is, 'at its heart, profoundly mysterious'.[310] The notion of *missio Dei* provides a 'healthy dose of doubt' on dependable church planting models, which are sometimes more about controlling outcomes than selected out of understanding and insight.[311]

Nevertheless, there needs to be some caution with a more radicalised *missio Dei* ideology that negates any value in measurement or goal-setting at all. Indeed, these tools offer helpful feedback in areas where church planters have some control, or in reviewing and making decisions alongside others. However, Bryant Myers states that our foremost responsibility is 'obedience to God, not success'.[312] Transformation is only something that God can bring, so 'all we can do is discern what [He] is doing and obediently join in'.[313] However, the problem is this perspective can risk being too theologically vague and subject to individual interpretation.

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[308] At the 1968 World Council of Churches in Uppsala, McGavran argued vehemently against overstating the 'horizontal' and social aspect of mission, at the ignorance of reaching and making disciples. He set out biblical reasons about why a fixed preoccupation with the temporal, social needs of the world's agenda are a betrayal to those two billion who had still not heard the gospel. However, in elevating evangelism as the core aspect of mission, challenge has been made to his neglect of the wider evangelistic lens offered by *mission Dei* paradigms. See Donald McGavran, "Will Uppsala Betray the Two Billion?", *Church Growth Bulletin,* Vol. 4/5 (May 1968): 292.

[309] D. L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000),120.

[310] Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional-Map Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 184.

[311] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 204.

[312] Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 163.

[313] Myers, *Walking with the Poor,* 163.

Therefore, Konz holds the tension well by upholding that mission is mandated but not just 'handed over' to the Church; we are essentially called to 'keep in step with the Spirit' (Gal 5:25) and align our mission with God's ongoing work across the world.[314]

4.5.3 Originality versus Uniformity

The context of *missio Dei* also means a commitment to innovation and creativity in church planting, reflecting the nature of a 'missionary God' rather than a 'monochrome uniformity' that is observed when methodology and models become paramount.[315] In their book, *The Shaping of Things to Come,* Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch claim that 'the real hope lies with those courageous leaders who will foster the development of alternative, experimental, new communities of faith'.[316] Such innovative leaders are deemed to be crucial to returning the church to its missionary roots, although this claim will be explored further in Chapter 6. Yet, in the diversity of a rapidly changing European context, the church must be able to continually adapt and reinvent itself whilst holding onto its theological moorings and sense of calling. There is a valid caution when innovation loses its biblical foundation, a common criticism of some newer forms of church. However, *missio Dei* thinking provides church planters with a radical set of questions for reflection and renewal, rather than quick answers about what God is or is not doing in each context.[317] It allows for experimentation in church planting, which Michael Moynagh advocates as 'learning by doing', through trial and error because there is no single answer, and one size does not fit all.[318] It inoculates new churches against being steered more by 'branding' and style than serious missiological and theological reflection. In dialogue with both the Spirit and the community, innovative approaches can introduce new and pioneering answers to the whole Body of Christ.

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[314] Konz, "The Even Greater Commission", 342.

[315] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 41.

[316] Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 16.

[317] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 136. Examples of such questions can be found in Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth", 105-6 – 'What style of worship/music will best help this group to worship in spirit and truth? What evangelism methods should I use here to reach the most people without compromising the gospel? What structure of church will best connect with this community? How can this church be God's missionary to this community?'

[318] Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context* (Loncon: SCM Press, 2014), Perlego edition, Chapter 15: 'Action-Based Learning'.

4.6 Summary

Claiming that church planting is 'the most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven' understandably leads to a logical conclusion that *more* churches should be planted.[319] However, divorced from the context of *missio Dei,* Murray contends that such a goal becomes little more than denominational recruitment or 'ecclesial expansion'.[320] An obsessive focus on the number of churches being planted can easily overlook the nature of *what* is being planted, which is crucial to making disciples in new contexts. New churches need strong biblical and theological underpinnings but should continually be shaped by gospel truth and their unique cultural contexts, under the direction of the Spirit. Only then will new church plants maintain their relevance in a rapidly changing world.

A *missio Dei* lens provides a justified correction to churches becoming obsessed with expansion and growth, by crucially maintaining God at the centre of mission. David Bosch claims that the concept 'has helped to articulate the conviction that neither the Church nor any other human agent can ever be considered the author or bearer of mission.'[321] Human self-reliance on models will struggle to submit to such a claim, but they are not 'rules for success'; the missionary nature of God cannot be domesticated to reproducible methods.[322] As Jim Memory notes, we cannot 'reverse engineer what God is doing in one place, [to] bring it under our control and reproduce it elsewhere.'[323] It is God's mission first. From that perspective, success is more about following God in obedience and listening to the voice of the Spirit than achieving set numerical goals. Therefore, the essential role of church planters is faithfulness *and* fruitfulness, consistent in stewarding opportunities and resources to the best of their ability, but ultimately leaving growth and transformation in the hands of God. Whilst the influence of the CGM has undoubtedly given fresh focus to evangelism and church planting, the critical pushback has opened up new questions about the church's identity and function, paving the way for fresh responses to the challenge of reaching and discipling people in new ways.

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[319] Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, 11.
[320] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 40.
[321] Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 391.
[322] Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth", 106.
[323] Memory, "How Can We Measure?", Chapter 14, Part 4.

Chapter 5 - New Questions Towards Reframing Success

5.1   Alternative Frameworks

In light of the *missio Dei,* it could be suggested that any measurement of human success is therefore futile and redundant, yet some still advocate for agreed-upon metrics that help 'talk become walk', connecting orthodoxy to orthopraxy.[324] Kenn Oke defends a particular method that starts with a 'working definition of church' so church planters know the task at hand, including where to direct energy and resources to make progress towards a clear end goal.[325] Recognising the temptation to measure what is *easy* over what is most *important*, Oke proposes that measurement is targeted at observable outcomes rather than church planting activities.[326] With an equally pragmatic approach, Steve Pike proposes to expand the number of 'gauges' on the dashboard that offer feedback to church planters, with the premise that 'what gets measured gets done'.[327] Acknowledging the paramountcy of making disciples as something that needs to *get done*, he suggests ten data-based questions that measure effectiveness at every step of the discipleship journey.[328] However, these approaches and others like it are claimed by Roxburgh as reflecting an 'ecclesio-centric obsession' at their core, where church planters become more fixated on building a successful church rather than successfully engaging with our God's mission.[329] Whilst Roxburgh's phrase is loaded with negative assumptions, it does offer a cautionary correction to where mission has perhaps become too church-centric. Paas is a little more generous in his analysis, contending that any definition of a 'disciple' is fairly subjective and open to interpretation, which is the reason many church planters inevitably drift towards more

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[324] Steve Pike, *Next Wave: Discovering the 21st Century Church* (St. Charles, MO: ArtSpeak Creative, 2021), 155.

[325] Kenn Oke, "Church-Planting Metrics: Measure What's Important", *Evangelical Missions Quarterly,* Vol 49/3 (July 2013), 282.

[326] Oke, "Church-Planting Metrics", 286. John Doerr, similarly refers to these as 'objectives and key results' (OKRs) in *Measure What Matters,* 3.

[327] Pike, *Next Wave,* 151-2. Beyond measuring 'noses and nickels', Pike offers 10 further gauges that can be used to assess effectiveness on the discipleship journey, with numerical values against each one: awareness, connections, relationships, spiritual conversations, belong, believe, engage, grow, minister, and multiply.

[328] Pike, *Next Wave,* 151.

[329] Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011). 48.

data-driven criteria to report their growth.[330] However, numbers can only be celebrated if they lead to success in other crucial dimensions, which presses the urgency for church planters to reflect carefully on alternative frameworks that will help them assess the church they are becoming.

In response, Jim Memory helpfully proposes a focus on church planting *practice* rather than the *product*, reframing the four marks of the church in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic) as four dimensions of missional engagement (relationality, fidelity, catholicity, and contextuality).[331] By attempting to link a classic understanding of church identity with its function, Memory's framework provokes different questions to measure effectiveness in church planting, a helpful lens for further critical engagement.

5.1.1 Relationality – being one with each other

Any measure of church planting effectiveness must consider the quality of our relationships with Christ and with those around us.[332] There is a crucial question for new churches as they grow: *how well are we being 'one' with each other?* For Memory, relational health and connection should be a principal measure of effectiveness, confronting an increasingly individualistic Western society head-on. A similar cultural conditioning is observed in CGM mindsets as it evolved, with the highest priority being placed on the salvation of individual souls.[333] However, Scripture challenges such individualism, noting that we are not just saved *from* something; we are saved and baptised *into* the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). Myers rightly reminds us that Trinitarian theology has an essential relational dimension, which we are compelled to mirror in the life of Christian community, over the values or elevation of the individual.[334] To that end, a growing number of smaller contexts, alongside larger gathered events, are essential to facilitating relational connection and deeper communal life, as a more authentic gauge of church growth. Whilst the church must adapt to individualisation in society, it is also called to swim against the tide of Western culture, so the essential relational dimension within the body of Christ is emphasised and maintained.

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[330] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 149.
[331] Memory, "How Can We Measure?", Chapter 14, Part 4.
[332] Memory, "How Can We Measure?", Chapter 14, Part 4.
[333] Arthur, "Missio Dei," 56.
[334] Myers, *Walking with the Poor,* 24.

5.1.2 Fidelity – reflecting the love and goodness of God

The church is essentially holy, a people called by God to be steadfast in representing Christ on earth. Therefore, a measurement of fidelity to that responsibility provokes another question for church planters: *How faithfully are we reflecting the God we love and serve?*[335] As a visible and tangible expression of God's kingdom, Paas highlights the church's mandate to offer 'stability of place' – to faithfully incarnate God's presence in a given geographical area.[336] To that end, any measure of success must acknowledge consistency in showing up for people, regardless of their initial resistance or response. Although McGavran emphasised a focus on places of particular *receptivity* to the gospel to faithfully further church growth, radical faithfulness in areas of Europe where there is no or little existing Christian presence demands a different lens of evaluation.[337]

With a focus on progress in discipleship and fruitfulness, Ott and Wilson draw out seven dimensions of growth in a local church that cannot be isolated from each other.[338] Two of these dimensions draw on Scriptures that indicate 'social justice and care for the needy', followed by 'unity amid ethnic and other differences', as areas of growth expected by God.[339] These provide a helpful correction to an overemphasis on conversion evangelism, with effective witness also involving faithfulness and consistency to demonstrate the presence of God in visible terms.

5.1.3 Catholicity – collaborating with the wider Body of Christ

The term 'catholicity' is used by Memory to denote the *fullness* of the local church under Christ, rather than just its diversity or universality.[340] As Miroslav Volf states, 'a local church can be catholic only by way of connection with an ecclesiological whole transcending it'.[341] Therefore, a vital question for missional effectiveness is: *How well are we building unity alongside the wider Body of Christ?* A temptation is to perceive church planting in Europe as putting 'first boots on the

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[335] Memory, "How Can We Measure?", Chapter 14, Part 4.
[336] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 198.
[337] McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* 245.
[338] Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 232.
[339] *Ibid.* The full list stated frame growth as: 1) in fruit of the HS (Gal 5: 22-23) and maturity in Christ (Eph 4:15); 2) in knowledge of truth from the Word (1 Peter 2:2); 3) in service and prayer (Acts 6:1-5); 4) love and mutual edification (Eph 4:1-6); 5) in witness and missional impact (John 17:20-26); 6) in social impact (Acts 4: 34-37); and 7) in unity amid ethnic and other differences (John 17:20-23).
[340] Memory, "How Can We Measure?", Chapter 14, Part 4.
[341] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 264.

ground' in a new area, neglecting to consider the *missio Dei* or other Christian churches already engaged in local mission. Expansion becomes the focus rather than engagement with where God is already working. Likewise, the uncritical adoption of marketing principles into church planting can emphasise 'brand promotion' over kingdom partnership, just as companies consider their brands as assets to be sold.[342] Murray is right to caution against such competition that is 'divorced from the values and goals of the kingdom', which inadvertently may obstruct what God wants to do through his kingdom.[343] Through the lens of *catholicity*, these approaches undermine the degree to which church plants positively collaborate within the broader body of Christ, a measure which Memory claims is essential for effective church planting.

5.1.4 Contextuality – effectively communicating of the Gospel

An 'apostolic' church has a continual commitment to the teaching handed down by the Apostles, but Memory insists this should be grounded in the *missio Dei,* reflecting how God 'contextualised' himself in the Incarnation.[344] To fully participate in the mission of God, a church must deeply consider its context by asking: *How well are we communicating the gospel in a way that is clearly understood?* Unfortunately, answers to that question are varied when there are 'different understandings' of the gospel, which is aptly highlighted by Van Gelder as a tension in the CGM, despite its claims to theological neutrality.[345] Whilst our mission is centred on the finished redemptive work of Christ, the gospel also involves the continuing active work of the Spirit in the world.[346] To that end, churches will not planted effectively in isolation from culture – although Paul G. Hiebert rightly notes important caveats in his model of 'critical contextualisation'.[347] A crucial balance must be maintained between the extremes of radical 'over-contextualisation', which gives rise to cultural relativism in the church, and rigid 'non-contextualisation', where the receptor culture is ignored.[348] Within that tension, church plants must wrestle with being faithful to the gospel whilst evaluating how they communicate truth in increasingly diverse European contexts.

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[342] Cronshaw, "Marketing as a Church Growth Tool", 19.
[343] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 51.
[344] Memory, "How Can We Measure?", Chapter 14, Part 4.
[345] Van Gelder, "Gospel And Our Culture View", 109.
[346] Van Gelder, "Gospel And Our Culture View", 108.
[347]Paul Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009)*, 26.*
[348] Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts,* 18-20.

5.2   Summary

Measuring and evaluating church planting success must be broader than just gathering numerical data, yet alternative qualitative frameworks offer feedback that is sometimes too vague and subjective. Challenges to a CGM focus on numerical growth are sometimes overstated, dismissing the value of clear metrics in supporting decision-making, goal-setting or managing resources. Furthermore, Oke rightly suggests that reviewing key measurements over time can provide a 'glimpse' into what God is doing, which may encourage more significant steps of faith than might otherwise be taken.[349] The oft-stated dichotomy between pragmatism and patient faithfulness is succinctly answered by Pike, who embraces the tension between human endeavour and God's sovereignty in church planting as 'one part sweat and one part mystery'.[350] Therefore, a critical distinction between a metrics-*driven* and a metrics-*informed* approach to church planting must be drawn. Tracking and reflecting on numbers are important and helpful gauges, but they cannot drive a church plant or determine its 'success' or 'failure' alone. Numbers offer a one-sided story and limited scope for reviewing progress, particularly in Europe. As Stetzer notes, we must develop a 'new scorecard' for measuring success that focuses on establishing a faithful church and praying for a growing church, but also transforms communities and 'never finds a boundary where change stops'.[351]

By way of alternative frameworks, Stetzer highlights a measurement matrix developed by Northwood Church in Keller, Texas, which acknowledges and uses a set of traditional numerical metrics, but intentionally places more emphasis on measures of individual and community transformation instead.[352] Dadswell and Ross note a similar perspective adopted by Tas Valley Cell Church in Norfolk, who articulate memorable values against which growth can be measured and owned by the whole church community: 'all involved, becoming disciples, creating community,

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[349] Oke, "Church-Planting Metrics", 288.

[350] Pike, *Next Wave,* 156.

[351] Stetzer and Bird, *Viral Churches,* 162.

[352] Stetzer and Bird, *Viral Churches,* 163-4. The authors note that NorthWood Church still counts in traditional ways (giving, attendance, small-group connection), but believe that progress is measured best in terms of *transformation*. The first three measurement points take place in a believer's life: 1) Interactive relationship with God, 2) Transparent connections with other Christians, 3) Glocal impact, by using one's vocation to touch the community locally and globally. The second three measurement points are about making a lasting difference together, in community: 4), Church multiplication, 5) Community development and social impact, 6) Global engagement, through mission.

doing evangelism, encountering God'.[353] These brief examples are positive attempts to expand the narrow notions of success framed by CGM proponents, responding to the refocus urged by Memory towards church planting *practice* rather than product.[354] As Scripture reveals, we can and should be busy in planting, but it is 'only God, who makes things grow' (1 Cor 3:7).

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[353] Dadswell and Ross, "Church Growth Research Project", 67.
[354] Memory, "How Can We Measure?", Chapter 14, Part 4.

Chapter 6 - Evolving Responses in Church Planting

6.1   What kind of churches?

Approaches to church planting in Europe continue to vary in response to the questions above, with some still advocating that 'launching large' is preferable over starting small and tailored to context.[355] Megachurch Pastor Dave Page unapologetically claims that the old-school metaphor of planting and patiently waiting for a church to grow is outdated, whereas 'launching big' from the start is more appropriate for a postmodern, informational age marked by innovation and creativity.[356] Although Page concedes that *large* is a relative term, he insists that starting with a sizeable crowd has overwhelming advantages over smaller groups, boldly stating that 'churches that start small normally stay small'.[357] Such a sweeping statement ripples through the logic of his defence, with claims that larger beginnings offer more opportunity for evangelistic success, financial stability, community credibility and potential for reproduction.[358]

However, Murray questions the relevance of 'launching large' in a post-Christian context like Europe, where grassroots and cause-driven activism is replacing hierarchical structures, requiring missional strategies that are 'humble' rather than 'overbearing'.[359] Phil Allen also argues that larger churches informed by 'colonialistic and capitalistic philosophies' offer insufficient spaces for discipleship, intimacy and belonging as they grow.[360] Church planters with misplaced aspirations to become 'mega' often overlook the benefit of starting small, where people can be 'seen, known and heard' and more effectively mobilised into ministry.[361] These are valid points, but Andy Stanley, Pastor of Northpoint Church in Atlanta, offers a counter-argument.[362] He contends that attractional church models are not so much a by-product of capitalistic culture but intentionally and deeply missional in their

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[355] Dave Page, "Church Launch: Start Small, Stay Small – Launch Large, Grow Larger!", *Great Commission Research Journal,* Vol. 5/2, (2014), 195.
[356] Page, "Church Launch", 198.
[357] Page, "Church Launch", 214.
[358] Page, "Church Launch", 200. Anecdotal evidence is given to support these claims, but they are not substantiated with adequate research.
[359] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 194.
[360] Phil Allen Jr, "Leading for Belonging: The Organic Intellectual as Alternative to Evangelical Megachurch Leadership", *Journal of Religious Leadership,* Vol. 21/2, (Autumn 2022), 17.
[361] Allen, "Leading for Belonging, 47.
[362] Andy Stanley, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 16-18.

approach, directly levering consumer mindsets to engage people better.[363] His quick defence does not resolve the tensions raised by critics, but it demonstrates the need to appreciate diversity in approaches between 'launching large' or beginning small. Beyond the size and model of a church, there is a more important question regarding motive. An unhealthy 'drive for size' can pervade even the smallest beginnings.

6.1.1 Structure – Organisation or Organism?

For those who argue that only larger churches have an elevated voice and necessary clout in the social or political sphere, church planting can sometimes be viewed as a hindrance.[364] Others who insist on smaller contexts that emphasise relational connection may refute the 'hierarchies, bureaucracies, and power struggles' of larger churches, yet potentially ignore the safeguard that structure provides for maintaining communities.[365] The argument frequently centres around the question of the church as an institution or a community – an organisation or an 'organism'.[366] Of course, both perspectives are valid: the church is the body of Christ but *also* an organisation, albeit unique. Some newer, more missional church expressions intentionally reject all secularly influenced ecclesial structures, as stated by Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, who advocate for dismantling 'all systems of control…to reconstruct a corporate culture according to the patterns of the kingdom', to allow new churches to emerge.[367] In that sense, control is seen as the enemy of renewal, limiting what God wants to do. However, Hunter condemns this as 'docetic ecclesiology', which often maintains 'the body of Christ is not a real human organisation, though it *appears* to be'.[368] As old Docetism claimed that Jesus' body was not real, which was condemned as heresy, Hunter upholds the body of Christ as a real organisation that requires leadership and structure.[369] Paas affirms the tension

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[363] Stanley, *Deep and Wide,* 16.
[364] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 198.
[365] Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical* (London: Triangle, 1995), 144. 'Large churches present to a postmodern people what they reject in the outside world: hierarchies, bureaucracies, and power struggles… This is not a time for churches to be working towards 'bigger', 'better' and 'more powerful'.'
[366] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 195.
[367] Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Church: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2006), 194.
[368] Hunter, "The Theological Roots", 15.
[369] Hunter, "The Theological Roots", 14.

between the two but also challenges a simplistic insistence on structure by crucially asking, 'How much structure and which structure exactly?'[370]

Despite advocating for 'organic churches', Neil Cole endorses structures that are 'simple, reproducible, and internal' rather than externally imposed, building support and strength as the 'organism' grows.[371] Life should dictate structure, not the other way around. Cole argues that many churches today seek refuge in inflexible traditional structures, more concerned with the protection of their model or brand, rather than organic structures that release the natural reproductive life of the church.[372] His viewpoint echoes McGavran's early emphasis on models *serving* the mission and being evaluated accordingly. In that sense, structures must be servants – we should never become their slaves. New churches must resist institutional control that prevents them from thinking missionally, with a single focus on numerical growth, but must organically and systematically empower everyone to be disciples, encouraging reproduction at every level of the church.

6.1.2 Language – Planting or Birthing Church?

In seeking to have some sort of 'control' over outcomes, Paas distinguishes both 'horizontal' and 'vertical' factors that influence choices in planning for church planting in Europe.[373] 'Horizontal planning' looks around at other successful churches to adopt their models and ideas to determine practice but often ignores a 'complex interplay of factors' that present a certain unpredictability in outcomes.[374] 'Vertical planning' is informed by certain ecclesial or theological outlooks, so the kind of church being planted is almost pre-determined from the outset, based on tradition or style.[375] Whilst church planting does not happen in a vacuum, these two dimensions deserve critical reflection, noting their insight but resisting their inhibition to think missionally and innovatively. Some traditional models may yield a level of predictable success, but Paas cautions against a 'virtual reality' that puts church planting supposedly under our control.[376]

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[370] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 196.
[371] Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005), Perlego Edition. Chapter 9: 'Epidemic Expansion Starts in the Genes', Section 2: 'Exoskeleton vs Endoskeleton'.
[372] Cole, *Organic Church,* Chapter 9.
[373] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 201.
[374] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 201.
[375] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 207.
[376] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 204.

With that in mind, some have actively moved away from the notion of 'planting churches', suggesting that it props up the language of empire and 'conquest of space' through the imposition of particular models in every context.[377] Offering an alternative, missiologists Frost and Hirsch refer to 'emerging indigenous faith communities' that emerge slowly from interaction with a subculture.[378] Although that language is clumsy, the idea is that churches are not so much imported into a community as 'birthed' at the right time, after gospel seeds have been sown and nurtured. Similarly, the *Mission-Shaped Church* report attempts to define church planting without mentioning the word 'church' at all.[379] A case is made to reposition mission at the core of ecclesial identity by holding back on premature language and labels. However, in seeking more flexible language around church planting, we must not lose sight of essential ecclesiology, which the early CGM corrected. In agreement with McGavran, theologian Nicholas Healy rightly rejects 'blueprint ecclesiologies' that were eventually emphasised in later CGM thought, but calls for a refocus on the double-task of the church: witnessing to Jesus Christ and making disciples, yet 'within particular, ever-changing contexts'.[380] Whether churches are 'planted', 'birthed' or 'launched', the establishment of the church is still central to Jesus' mission (Matt 16:18).

6.1.3 Models – Reclaiming or Reframing Church?

The Church must continually reshape itself while remaining faithful to its calling, although Ott and Wilson note how some new models have been controversial rather than merely unconventional, as innovators reinvent what it means to 'be the church'.[381] Frost and Hirsch define 'missional churches' as 'always outward looking, always changing…always faithful to the Word of God', yet concede that in many places they are so radical they barely resemble traditional churches at all.[382] As leading voices, however, they contend for a shift away from models that are

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[377] Allen, "Leading for Belonging", 33.

[378] Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come,* 26.

[379] Cray, *Mission-Shaped Church,* 32. The report suggests church planting is, 'the process by which a seed of the life and message of Jesus embodied by a community of Christians is immersed for mission reasons in a particular cultural or geographic context. The intended consequence is that it roots there, coming to life as a new indigenous body of Christian disciples well suited to continue in mission.'

[380] Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 36, 39.

[381] Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 124.

[382] Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come,* 7.

'attractional, dualistic and hierarchical', abandoning old Christendom assumptions and measures, to embrace outward-facing mission not just as an activity of the church, but 'the very heartbeat and work of God'.[383] Against just planting more 'introverted' churches, Michael Goheen similarly contends the need for more 'faithful missional congregations rooted in Jesus Christ whose presence, deeds and words make the gospel known'.[384] These concepts are not new, but they actively reject the hubris of models and techniques that predetermine what the church should be, reclaiming its core identity as a people 'sent' by God. However, by emphasising an incarnational lens for mission to inhabit specific contexts and reach particular people, Frost and Hirsch ironically endorse a church planting strategy that embraces the Homogenous Unit Principle (HUP), critiqued in the CGM.[385] They acknowledge the critique but offer little solution to the tension of missional congregations being established around specific subcultures. In response, Towns actually credits the CGM for inspiring numerically growing churches that are ultimately *more* inclusive, with far fewer barriers to race, class or ethnic background.[386] Therefore, holding these views together, effective church planting should embrace the big *and* the small – both the HUP as a mission strategy to reach people groups but with a crucial discipleship strategy that draws people into more expansive, heterogeneous gatherings, reflecting essential unity in diversity.[387]

Frost and Hirsch acknowledge a further critique of missional churches regarding the place of Bible teaching and doctrine.[388] They advocate for what Moynagh terms 'learning by doing', reflecting on Scripture whilst actively involved in mission, rather than being passively subjected to teaching.[389] CGM advocates also endorse this 'two-way conversation' of the gospel as a way to better engage people

[383] Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come,* 18.

[384] Michael Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History and Issues,* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014)*,* 390

[385] Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come,* 51.

[386] Towns, "The Rise and Decline", 179.

[387] *Cf.* Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992). George describes the Meta-Church approach to being and doing church, maintaining the tension of growing bigger while becoming smaller. Also see Murray, in *Laying Foundations,* 190-2. Drawing from sociological identification of primary, secondary and tertiary level groups, Murray describes 'three-level churches' as operating at cell, congregation and celebration level gatherings. Tertiary-level churches need primary-level groups to be effective, and vice versa. However, he contends that 'a semi-autonomous model, where the secondary-level congregations are able to develop their own style, mission priorities and leadership, but remain networked together for various purposes, perhaps offers the best way forward'.

[388] Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come,* 27.

[389] Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context* (Loncon: SCM Press, 2014), Perlego edition, Chapter 15: 'Action-Based Learning'.

in their context.[390] However, an 'emerging movement' of churches has taken this further by actively creating spaces for questioning existing theological constructs that have historically informed Christian community, worship and mission.[391] With a broader focus on kingdom theology and inclusivity, many have 'deconverted' from evangelical Christianity in 'emerging churches' by seeking to dismantle practices that hinder fresh expressions of the church, possibly in reaction to restrictive corporate models.[392] Whilst a full critique of these views is beyond the scope of this paper, considerable opposition has challenged 'emerging churches' on theological grounds, immature spirituality, adaptation to individualism and collusion with contemporary culture.[393] Yet, interestingly, these same criticisms have also been levied towards the CGM and its influence on church planting.[394] In one sense, Robert K. Martin concedes that the charge of cultural acclimation could be levied towards *all* churches and new expressions, where theological moorings are not critically maintained.[395] However, these cautions must be recognised if we are to remain faithful to the gospel in every new age. Whilst innovative approaches to reframing evangelism, mission and the church must be given room to breathe, it is crucial that church plants frame success against their central biblical mandate: to make disciples of all nations.

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[390] Hunter, "The Theological Roots", 5.

[391] Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Church,* Perlego Edition, Chapter 2. Authors concede the difficulty in attempting to define the emerging church with particular statements or labels, but draw insight from other practitioners to try and frame the various perspectives. One such view summarises the emerging church as 'a quest for a more integrated and whole life of faith. There is a bit of theological questioning going on, focusing more on kingdom theology, the inner life, friendship community, justice, earth keeping, inclusivity, and inspirational leadership.' Admittedly, they focus on what the church is emerging *from,* as opposed to what they are emerging *into.* In that sense, the emerging church movement asks many questions, but provides little answers.

[392] Ryan P. Burge and Paul A. Djupe, "An Emergent Threat: Christian Clergy Perceptions of the Emerging Church Movement," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol 56/1 (2017), 29-30.

[393] Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Church,* Perlego Edition, Chapter 2; Burge and Djupe, "An Emergent Threat", 28. For critique on the unique model of 'Fresh Expressions' and its relationship with the traditional church, see Robert K. Martin, "New Ways of Being Church: The Promise of *Fresh Expressions", IJPT,* Vol 23/2 (2019): 287-305.

[394] Refer to Sections 3.6 and 4.2

[395] Martin, "New Ways of Being Church", 301.

6.2   What kind of leaders?

As Europe changes, significant questions are also raised about the kind of leaders needed to remain relevant and visionary, not bound by traditional measures of success. Frost and Hirsch acknowledge the abundance of *leaders* today but advocate for a 'new *type* of leadership' as paramount in a move towards planting missional churches.[396] Warren likewise credits courageous leadership as the 'great common denominator in every growing church', those that boldly expect and plan for their congregations to grow.[397] Although attractional and missional models of church emphasise this differently, Robert Clinton's perspective agrees with both, framing leadership as when someone with a 'God-given capacity influences a group of God's people toward His purposes for the group'.[398]

However, critics in the emerging church often tend to frame leadership as facilitation and conversation rather than 'influence' and control, some even experimenting with running 'leaderless groups'.[399] In seeking to dismantle leadership hierarchy, emerging church 'leaders' resist being labelled – yet, they ironically end up compromised as their voices inevitably shape and inspire new kinds of churches. Frost and Hirsch challenge this as misunderstanding 'apostolic leadership', the right and best response to an 'overly religious, bureaucratic, top-down model', which they claim stifles creativity and innovation.[400] Whilst that may be true, Paas is not so quick to dismiss the more authoritarian structures behind the prolific house-church movements in places like China, albeit in a very different context to Europe.[401] His caveat highlights that one 'mode' of leadership cannot and will not promise church planting success. When Wagner claimed the absence of 'pastors as strong leaders…[as] a major barrier to church growth', the CGM went on to offer pragmatic training and equipping, but perhaps some course corrections are now necessary.[402] What follows are four key emphases that potentially reframe what *kind* of leaders are needed to plant new churches in Europe today.

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[396] Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come,* 165.

[397] Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church,* 398.

[398] Robert J. Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988), 173.

[399] Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Church,* 192. Burge and Djupe, "An Emergent Threat", 29. Authors reference a term attributed to Peter Rollins, a supporter of the Emerging Church Movement, regarding 'leaders who refuse to lead'.

[400] Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come,* 21.

[401] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 203.

[402] C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth: A Guidebook for Clergy and Laity* (Ventura: Regal, 1984), 9.

6.2.1 Missional, not Maintenance

In *Leading Your Church to Growth,* Wagner narrowly defines leadership 'for membership growth', rejecting the model of 'pastor as care-giver' in favour of 'pastor as equipper', actively seeking ownership from people towards set goals.[403] Although Wagner's goal focuses on numerical growth, his sentiments about pastoral leadership are somewhat shared by Newbigin, who notes an overemphasis on the caretaking of existing congregations, with far less orientation of ministers being trained towards mission and kingdom.[404] Likewise, Ellis and Mitchell believe that elevation of the term 'pastor' has marginalised apostolic or prophetic leadership, resulting in a 'lopsided safe church…which often lacks a cutting edge'.[405] Church planting leaders, therefore, provide an essential challenge to a 'maintenance-oriented view', which is crucial in birthing missionally-minded churches.[406]

However, to break free of plateaus or predetermined models of church, new church planters must be trained with a greater aptitude for theological reflection and exposure to other perspectives. Murray notes that some church planting training is significantly limited in scope, resulting in cloning models rather than encouraging creativity.[407] Even though it may reference the language of mission, it conceals an underlying institutional maintenance, which Hirsch suggests just feeds a cycle of church decline.[408] Therefore, new church planters must have a missional boldness that resists drifting towards traditional measures and frameworks, asking crucial questions about evangelism and mission, and remaining open to new answers that emerge.

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[403] Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth,* 77-79.
[404] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 231.
[405] Roger Ellis and Roger Mitchell, *Radical Church Planting*, (Cambridge: Crossway Books, 1992), 115.
[406] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 212.
[407] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 227.
[408] Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come,* 180.

6.2.2 Pilgrims, not Professionals

As the church is increasingly marginalised in a changing culture, Guder contends that such 'exile requires more than the priest, pedagogue, or professional'.[409] The gap between clergy and laity must be closed otherwise it will limit the multiplication of new churches.[410] Rather than being 'professional Christians' with quick answers, church-planting leaders should be pilgrims on the journey of discovery with others, identifying themselves as disciples first. Dr Bartran Kelechi perfectly captures this by coining the phrase 'learner-leaders' – where the leader is learning at the same time as he is leading.[411] In that sense, no one is 'professional' but moving towards maturity and mission together.

However, Vaters contends that in an increasing culture of meritocracy, measuring credibility by competency to grow churches, there is undue pressure on church planters to have the answers and 'deliver' success.[412] Newbigin agrees that when battling for survival, church planters become 'salesmen or soldiers… rather than chiefly shepherds caring for sheep'.[413] Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer go even further, suggesting that the role of pastors as 'leaders, or entrepreneurs or visionaries' is actually *unbiblical*.[414] Where business terms define leadership more than biblical ideas, such correction is critical, but McKnight and Barringer must not jump to conclusions and overreach their point. Leaders as *learners,* or pilgrims alongside others who are discerning together, are well-placed and essential in shaping creative church planting. From that perspective, some contend for a reappraisal of the advantages of bi-vocational leadership in church planting.[415] Escaping immersion in church culture, they are more easily able to model an incarnational lifestyle, integrate the sacred and secular spaces, and identify with those they are seeking to mobilise to mission.[416] Towards that goal, Wagner's early endorsement of bi-vocational church planters in CGM literature was crucial.[417]

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[409] Darrell Guder and Daniel Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 218.

[410] Minatrea, *Shaped by the Heart of God,* Chapter 10.

[411] Dr. Bartran O. Kelechi and Irewole Olusegun Samuel, "Discipleship Approach to Leadership in the Church Context", *Practical Theology Lagos,* Volume 14 (2021), 94.

[412] Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 58.

[413] Newbigin, *The Open Secret,* 127.

[414] Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer, *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture That Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2020), 201.

[415] Murray, *Laying Foundations,* 225.

[416] Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 322.

[417] Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, 72.

6.2.3 Curators, not Celebrities

Rather than adopting a hierarchical leadership style described by Dave Page, which positions a team subserviently to the church planter's vision and philosophy of ministry,[418] Phil Allen contends for an 'organic intellectual leadership' that fosters belonging, subverting institutional priorities to 'prizing people' instead.[419] Such leaders crucially 'see bodies rather than count bodies'.[420] Whilst vision and missional imagination are indispensable to creative church planting, Allen is right that team members must be honoured and not appropriated. Leaders must become *curators* of others, cultivating a culture that helps people discover and function in their gifting and calling. Stetzer agrees by stating the opposite: when the 'priesthood of all believers is minimised' and neglected, the potential for gospel impact and reproduction is lost.[421]

These views rightly underscore the importance of team ministry in church planting against models that unhealthily 'platform' the leader and elevate their vision above all others.[422] Katelyn Beaty frames this kind of 'celebrity leadership' as the antithesis of the gospel, which chases 'social power without proximity' and dangerously objectifies people to get a job done.[423] However, curating a culture where others can flourish does not mean leadership voices are somehow redundant, as those in the emerging church would suggest.[424] JR Woodward rightly affirms that leaders are 'cultural architects' in shaping new communities.[425] However, there is an essential argument that recalibrates leadership as service out of love rather than imposition and control, which Nouwen notes as an easy substitute for the hard task of love, but is far less fruitful.[426]

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[418] Page, "Church Launch", 203.

[419] Allen, "Leading for Belonging, 18, 35.

[420] Allen, "Leading for Belonging, 45.

[421] Stetzer, *Viral Churches*, 12. Referring to 1 Peter 2:9. ' We must discover how to empower the indigenous laity of each church so that as they become believers, they can function in a priestly role themselves, bringing their own lost families and friends to Christ. True reproduction occurs when people are given permission to function as God has gifted and directed.'

[422] Vaters notes that pastors must 'resist the relentless pull towards celebrity' through a reappraisal of the platform, which can remove them from relational proximity and narrow the spotlight on one person. He contends that pastors need to 'lower the platform', 'share the platform' and even 'leave the platform regularly'. Vaters, *Desizing The Church,* 85-87.

[423] Katelyn Beaty, *Celebrities for Jesus: How Personas, Platforms, and Profits are Hurting the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022), 17.

[424] Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Church,* 204-5. Authors subtitle a section on emerging church leadership as moving 'From Exclusive Decision Making to Inclusive Concensus Building'.

[425] JR Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World,* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 61.

[426] Henry J. M Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus,* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 77. His book outlines 3 subtle temptaitons that every Christian leader faces: the temptation to be relevant, the temptation to be spectacular, and the temptation to be powerful.

6.2.4 Innovators, not Imitators

Frost and Hirsch claim that new kinds of churches will require leaders that value 'imagination, creativity, innovation and daring'.[427] Michael Moynagh writes extensively to defend the 'discipline of innovation' as an essential practice to contextualise the church in each new age.[428] Essentially driven by a hunger to improve things, innovation goes beyond doing something new or creative; it essentially 'changes the rules of the game'.[429] It encourages radical questioning of existing approaches to church planting, which is a significant opportunity for much deeper biblical and theological reflection.[430] Eugene Peterson considers this key leadership responsibility as 'keeping the community attentive to God', which requires a different pace to popular pursuits of 'success'.[431] In doing so, there is a greater chance of connecting with the *missio Dei* and gaining visionary foresight into where God is already at work.

When new church planters stop being attentive to God, perhaps by driven ego or ease, the temptation is to seek shortcuts and copy what is working elsewhere. This shift is noted in the history of the CGM, where McGavran's missional foresight and innovation gave way to the popularity of replication. An original focus on principles of reproduction was confused with replicating practices of church growth.[432] Therefore, the challenge for church planters is not to confuse innovation with imitation. Ott and Wilson note that 'church reproduction will *always* involve a step of faith beyond the safe, predictable and calculable'.[433] New kinds of churches need bolder leaders who are not intimidated by cultural narratives or socio-scientific predictions of decline, but are equally willing to reflect on questions that demand more honest appraisal so they can respond with fresh ingenuity and imagination.[434]

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[427] Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come,* 7.

[428] Michael Moynagh, Church in Life: Innovation, Mission and Ecclesiology (London: SCM Press, 2017), 9.

[429] Moynagh, *Church in Life*, 8.

[430] Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come,* 192-3.

[431] Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 1-2.

[432] Towns, Elmer, "Effective Evangelism View", 50. Towns notes, 'Each local church must take the eternal principles of Church Growth and work them out in application to its context and within its resources,' but later acknowledges that 'the annual meeting of the American Society of Church Growth did not apply the direction needed to keep all factors focused on the original tenets of Church Growth.

[433] Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 291.

[434] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 145.

6.3   Summary

Launching large churches and planting smaller expressions *both* provide unique opportunities for evangelism, but success must importantly be framed by the central mission of the church, which is to make disciples of Jesus. The answer is not just to plant *more* churches, a driving paradigm behind the CGM, but to foster more deeply *missional* churches actively engaged in training and releasing disciples to reach new people. Perhaps language around 'church planting' needs more critical reflection to facilitate that goal and avoid the uncritical replication of existing models into new areas. New leaders must be committed to innovation and attentiveness to God, rather than overreaching for 'counter-Kingdom methods' to establish 'Kingdom community'.[435] Paas is right to caution against such models that offer an illusion of control and success but often ignore the mystery in church planting that should lead to greater humility and prayer.[436] In that sense, church planters need to position themselves as pilgrims on a journey of discovery rather than professionals with all the answers; curators of a culture that serves to release people rather than retain them. In doing so, perhaps we can reclaim our missional roots, with the potential to reframe the church in new contexts today.

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[435] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 206.
[436] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 206.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion

7.1   Closing Summary

This paper argues that any 'successful' approach to church planting today must start with a more holistic definition and framework for measuring success. A critical appraisal of the CGM has shown that an overemphasis on numerical growth is imbalanced and misleading, and any measures of effectiveness must incorporate a broader range of equally important qualitative values. Whilst church growth and multiplication are important and endorsed by Scripture, the pressing issue is not just about planting *more* churches but deeper consideration about what *kind* of churches will more effectively fulfil the Great Commission: to make disciples of all nations. Church planters must adopt a 'new scorecard for success' that puts more emphasis on church principles rather than product – on the nature of the church rather than just the numbers it attracts.[437] To that end, a renewal in missional ecclesiology is essential in restoring European church planting to biblical integrity, where reflective missional thinking is crucially placed before importing models of ministry from elsewhere.

However, whilst the pragmatic overuse of socio-scientific research and business principles has been rightly challenged by critics of the CGM, there was also something refreshing in its unashamed focus on growth. Paas rightly contends that 'two simple truths' must be upheld, even as qualitative measures are endorsed over quantitative in church planting.[438] Firstly, 'winning people' for Christ is a clear imperative of the New Testament and church planting should always focus towards that goal.[439] Secondly, without an effective process for raising new leaders, churches will eventually die.[440] Adding to those points, I suggest that churches that prioritise maintenance over mission, prefer to retain leaders rather than release them, or refuse to modify according to context, will fail to transform the world around them. Without flexibility and agility in church planting, Paas concludes that faced with 'rapid contextual change, our best may become our worst overnight'.[441] Therefore, creative church planting will involve steps of faith beyond the predictable and calculable in a commitment to birth new kinds of churches to reach people in new contexts.

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[437] Stetzer and Bird, *Viral Churches,* 162.
[438] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 122.
[439] Mead, *More than Numbers,* 16.
[440] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 122.
[441] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 199.

The question posed in this paper asks: *Does church size matter?* In one sense, the CGM provided an affirmative answer in correcting a problematic drift away from evangelism, advocating for proactive church growth and reproduction. However, a *missio Dei* lens significantly maintains God at the centre of mission, faithfully outworking His vision for the church rather than success being equated with size. That being so, this paper has contended for new evaluative frameworks for church planting that are informed by numbers but not driven by them. Measures that review questions about relationality, fidelity, catholicity and contextuality can offer crucial feedback to church planters as they consider progress and impact.[442] Using broader definitions for 'church' than some traditional models offer can make room for fresh thinking, innovation and wider activation of the body of Christ. Church planting leaders who are curators of missional culture and imagination, rather than experts with quickfire answers for church growth, can plant churches that are more malleably shaped by the Spirit.

The potential for impact is far greater when success is less narrowly defined by numerical growth alone. By renewed missiological lenses in church planting that commit to actively reaching and making disciples for community transformation, perhaps the future of the church could and *will* look more like its past.

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[442] Memory, "How Can We Measure?", Chapter 14, Part 4.

7.2   Synopsis of Recommendations

This paper has noted several emerging responses to CGM's influence on church planting but also highlighted priorities that will move towards better frameworks for success.

7.2.1. Greater Theological Reflection

Church planting models must be more theologically driven and less sociologically or methodologically. Regardless of a changing culture, we need theological compass points to hold onto, while navigating new territory with the direction of the Spirit. Deeper theological reflection about the nature of the gospel and the *missio Dei* must intersect key strategic decision-making, to avoid over-contextualization and syncretism on one extreme, but uncritical replication of models and methods on the other.

A renewed understanding of the church's identity is crucial to equipping and releasing a people 'sent' by God. What the church *does* should always flow from who the church *is.* Rather than proof-texting Scripture to prioritise endeavours towards church growth, church planters must be faithful to the 'multi-dimensional goal' of the Great Commission, Creation Commission and Great Commandment, which constitutes the fullness of what it means to be the church, a kingdom community.[443]

7.2.2. Paramountcy of Discipleship

As the crux of our missional mandate, *making disciples* should be at the forefront of church planting, by teaching and leading people to obey Christ and make other disciples. McGavran's focus on conversion evangelism was a passionate correction to an overemphasis on social action, but this should not be separated from a priority on discipleship.[444] According to Vaters, 'discipleship fixes everything' in the local church, but not when numerical growth is seen as a problem to be 'fixed' *per se*.[445] To that end, discipleship is reduced to another tool for church expansion, rather than being the end goal itself. A necessary recalibration will reframe church planters' questions away from focusing on attendance and conversion statistics, towards evaluating people's spiritual health, relational connection and maturity.

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[443] Ott & Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 398.
[444] Padgett, "The Church Growth Movement", 145.
[445] Vaters, *Desizing the Church,* 161.

7.2.3. Broader Community Engagement

Church plants must be postured in greater humility to the kingdom of God rather than consumed by their own ecclesiology or rigid, ill-informed measures of success. Despite having noted McGavran's priority on evangelism as 'the chief concern for the Church',[446] a more holistic kingdom-view of mission is helpful for church planters to adopt, framed by measures about their impact and influence in the community. While the CGM offered tools to gain insight into demographics for the end goal of church growth, Stetzer prioritises '*deciphering* individual communities' instead, an alternative emphasis on understanding and serving people to better communicate the unchanging gospel.[447] Rather than focus on filling buildings, church planters should be driven by more meaningful and effective community engagement.

7.2.4. Openness to New Ways of Being Church

As culture changes and new contexts emerge across Europe, hope for the future lies with church planters who will have the courage and creativity to develop new approaches to church, rooted in deeper theological reflection. Paas notes that 'Christian traditions in Europe are like the proverbial man with only a hammer in his toolbox; soon everything starts to look like a nail.'[448] Such a striking image challenges mega-church or multisite models that lack crucial contextualisation, or church planters driven more by metrics than effective missional mindsets. To avoid blind cloning of existing approaches, there must be a fresh commitment to missional imagination and innovation in church planting whilst remaining faithful to the divine calling and mandate of the church. Greater permission and support must be given to church planting teams to question the 'rules' and traditional models in their quest to plant truly reproducing kingdom communities.

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[446] McMahan, "Church Growth by Another Name", 26.
[447] Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth", 105.
[448] Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West,* 198.

7.2.5. Training for Reproduction

New kinds of churches must train leaders to think in terms of reproduction and multiplication rather than addition. The pursuit of 'size' to qualify success has understandably put undue pressure on church planters, but that is not an excuse to think 'small' in response to the Great Commission. With a vision for greater long-term sustainability and impact, training for reproduction must equip and release *all* believers to use their gifts and become disciples *who make disciples*. Therefore, evaluating effectiveness must place greater emphasis on maturing believers towards mission and church multiplication, mobilising the whole body of Christ, rather than measuring success through the single lens of numerical growth alone.

7.3   Concluding Remarks

It is good for a church to want to grow. Every true church should yearn to see people and communities transformed by the gospel. However, success must be more defined by impact than size, by its capacity to release people rather than retain them. Reproduction must be part of the DNA of a church right from the very start. By adopting new frameworks for success in church planting, away from numerical growth towards making disciples and multiplication, I am confident that we will better reflect the heart of God for the church. As new kingdom communities are more deeply shaped by the gospel, the reality of their context, and the creativity of the Holy Spirit, I am optimistic that the European church can move forward with renewed hope again.

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