

# [The church growth movement theology religion essay](https://assignbuster.com/the-church-growth-movement-theology-religion-essay/)

Disciples of Christ missionary, Donald Anderson McGavran, upon his return from evangelistic work in India, wrote and published in 1955 a book entitled The Bridges of God. Many advocates and critics of what is now commonly called the Church Growth movement credit this book with providing the movement its first and primary theoretical foundation. McGavran later published a second volume, How Churches Grow (1959), based on his research of church growth in various places throughout the world. These two books and McGavran’s efforts to establish in 1961 at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon, the Institute for Church Growth eventually propelled the movement into prominence in the United States. Particularly important to the movement’s expansion was McGavran’s appointment in 1965 as founding dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. McGavran’s collaborations with Fuller colleagues, along with the publication in 1970 of a third volume, Understanding Church Growth, solidified the movement’s eventual significance within and influence on North American churches throughout the late 20th Century and into the 21st Century.

Critics and supporters alike agree that Church Growth in its varied expressions since the 1960’s has had a profound influence on church ministry, particularly on evangelistic efforts and strategies. McGavran, the son and grandson of missionaries, was influenced by the Reconstructionist Movement and its aim to “ Christianize” entire societies. McGavran crystallized his research and thinking into three primary principles that he argued were the core of Church Growth. First, Church Growth is evangelistic. McGavran was passionate in his conviction that a primary responsibility of Christians is to live out the Great Commission, in other words, to encourage all people to become followers of Jesus. The central purpose of the church is to grow. The second primary principle grows out of the first. Research, said McGavran, uncovers the causes of and barriers to church growth in diverse contexts. Finally, leaders and churches are to set goals and develop specific evangelistic strategies based on what is learned through research.

Another core characteristic of the movement is its emphasis on “ cultural free” evangelism. What this means is that strategies for church growth include acceptance of diverse human cultures and support the cultural homogeneity of local churches. Advocates of church growth applaud the movement’s evangelistic success. Critics charge that the movement fails to adequately to promote ecumenism.

Because McGavran’s primary interest and emphasis was international missions, he focused his initial teaching efforts on pastors from places outside the United States. A Fuller colleague, Peter Wagner, began to apply McGavran’s church growth strategies to North American contexts. One of Wagner’s students, Win Arn, founded in 1972 the Institute for American Church Growth. Wagner and Arn are respected as influential pioneers of the Church Growth movement in North America. Equally important to the growing influence of Church Growth in North America was the development of Fuller’s doctor of ministry emphasis in Church Growth and the formation of the American Society of Church Growth. Since the 1970’s, many organizations and groups have incorporated Church Growth research strategies into their efforts to “ market” Christian congregations. The well-known Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, Illinois, exemplifies the explosion of what have been termed “ seeker-friendly” churches that design outreach strategies based on demographic research. Another example is popularity of the “ purpose-driven church” model developed by Rick Warren, author of the international best-seller, The Purpose-Driven Church, and pastor of the Saddleback Church, a mega-church in Lake Forest, California. Warren earned his doctor of ministry degree at Fuller Theological Seminary and bases his ministry efforts on The Great Commission in the New Testament and uses marketing strategies to shape related programs. Warren’s second book, The Purpose Driven Life, has sold more than 30 million copies.

Since McGavran’s death in 1990 and the closure of Fuller’s Institute for Evangelism and Church Growth in 1995, and in part as a result of the explosion of church growth models such as Willow Creek and the Warren’s purpose-driven church, the Church Growth movement as McGavran articulated it has become less focused and has diminished in prominence. The influence of Church Growth in its diversified forms, however, remains visible in many denominational and congregational ministries such as cell groups, long-range planning, conflict management, and leading change. Also, thousands of pastors and church leaders have adopted seeker-sensitive and/or purpose-driven approaches to church management and growth.

A new term that is being used in some circles as an alternative to Church Growth is “ church health.” Some “ church health” advocates, such as Christian Schwartz who wrote Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches, are critical of the Church Growth movement. Observers note that Schwartz and others who are defining “ church health” utilize research techniques not unlike those developed by McGavran and Wagner in the 1970’s and 1980’s.

McGavran himself insightfully recognized that Church Growth was and would continue to be controversial. Certainly, the many ministries that have emerged since McGavran published his principles and strategies and that are considered to be part of the Church Growth movement have elicited divided and divisive responses. Zondervan published in 2004 a book that includes five different evaluative views of the movement. Critics of the movement argue that seeker-oriented, market-based approaches to church growth too readily replicate the marketing and growth strategies of major secular corporations and are too willing to utilize elements of popular culture to appeal to persons unaffiliated with Christian churches. Others criticize the theological views of those church growth leaders like Rick Warren who have gained international prominence and whose perspectives thus have significant public influence. Advocates respond that church growth leaders and congregations have a genuine concern for the salvation of persons. A study conducted in 2007 by the Willow Creek Community showed that while involvement in seeker-sensitive programs led to numerical church growth, it did not always translate into spiritual growth and maturity. Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek, and other church leaders have published the findings of the survey in a book entitled Reveal: Where Are You? and are considering next steps.

## Resources

McGavran, Donald A. Understanding Church Growth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

McIntosh, Gary, Towns, Elmer, et al, eds. Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

Schwartz, Christian A. Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches, trans. Lynn McAdam, Lois Wollin, and Martin Wollin (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996).

Wagner, C. Peter. Your Church Can Grow: Seven Vital Signs of a Healthy Church (Ventura: Regal, 1976).