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Sustainability of Urban Church Growth in the Modern Era

Social change and new beliefs on what is moral and good has challenged the long standing institution of the American church. According to research groups like Barna and Pew Research Center, statistics show that since 2015 “the share of American Christians are declining” (Barna) and that they “are attending church less and experiencing and practicing their faith outside of the church’s four walls” (Pew Research Center). This trend can be observed in no better place than the metropolitan cities that function as hotbeds for revolutionary thoughts across the United States. Social change born from changing American morality and political policy has had a profound impact on the churches that call these urban centers home. Different beliefs and ideas that were decades in the making have come to fruition and forced the church to make difficult decisions that may lead to ruin. On the inside, the church body and leadership must build proper and healthy foundations of faith in the mission of the church so that growth becomes sustainable. When faced with these emerging social issues, an ever-changing political landscape, and various inward theological issues, what must a church do to not only survive, but thrive? The urban church’s ability to navigate the ever-changing minefield of social change and resolve inward political issues among the leadership and congregation determines the sustainability of church growth in the modern era.

To explain the methods of church growth it is important to define sustainable urban church growth. Sustainable church growth is when any given urban church thrives by gaining

new members, accomplishing its goals, and pursuing the mission of the church put forth by the Bible. This mission is often interpreted in different ways by different denominations, which leads to varying results in terms of growth. While one church may thrive, another may fall because of their view on how or why their own church should grow. The mission of the church can be found in Matthew chapter 28, verses 18 and 19; “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...”

Two Theories on Sustainable Urban Church Growth

There are several theories on what brings sustainable and successful church growth to the urban churches around the United States, yet most can be lumped under two main theories: secular church growth theory and scriptural church growth theory. Each theory seeks to explain the best model for sustainable church growth. There are many instances in which secular church growth theory and scriptural church growth theory hold ideals and strategies that overlap. Yet there are a few defining differences between the two that amount to an entirely different type of growth.

Secular Church Growth Theory

Secular church growth theory refers to a more logistical and numerical approach to building the foundations of healthy church growth with less of an emphasis on faith. Rather than a firm belief in the divine mission of the church and the will of God, those urban churches that follow the secular church growth theory take matters into their own hands and put their faith in data from studies conducted by sociologists across the nation. The data collected from these studies form models of growth that church leaders follow in order to

grow their congregation. While adherence to logistical and numerical church growth models is not unique to either theory, “the difference lies in the types of models used to research and produce growth” (Iannaccone 706). Secular church growth then, is a result of effective outreach programs, appeal, or tolerable handling of any given church doctrine or social issue. Urban churches that follow the secular church growth theory seek to remain on the progressive side of various social issues that abound in today’s world.

These social issues, especially in recent years, have put the urban churches at odds with society’s more radical and liberal side. Major changes in moralistic thought that brought on the 2015 Supreme Court ruling that allowed same sex couples to get married across all states left many urban churches reaffirming or compromising their bi-laws in order to remain afloat. Discussion over overtly moralistic topics such as abortion or the treatment of women in society have the same effect. Pew Research Center, in a study of various types of political partisans, cited that the majority of Americans support the institutions of homosexuality, a woman’s right to abortion, and the idea that women are unequal to men in modern society. Each of these social issues cause discussion and discomfort in the urban churches of the United States, as Biblical doctrine and a changing social landscape seemingly drive a deeper and deeper wedge between the church and society and its potential converts.

Some social issues are more easily resolved, while others, such as more pressing topics like homosexuality and abortion, test the timelessness of Biblical doctrine. When doctrine is challenged by a social issue, one of two things happens; the church either changes its interpretation of the Bible in order to foster peace and perhaps a relationship with those progressives or the church remains at odds with those who disagree with doctrine and cling to

what they as a congregation believe (Hadaway 379). Those churches that compromise are grouped under secular church growth theory, since they are allowing modern social issues to influence their strategy of sustainable growth.

In order to continue sustainable growth, those urban churches that place faith in secular logistical models and compromise with pressing social issues begin the process of inward adjustment. These churches focus their sole attention on resources to bring new members into the church and the commitment of said members to the church's cause (Stoll and Petersen 252). These resources include material things such as money and grand facilities. A survey of fourteen urban churches conducted in Memphis, Tennessee revealed that those churches with more money could invariably draw larger crowds due to the fact that the "church experience" was better than any given church with less money (Stoll and Petersen 253). This is to say that those urban churches in Memphis that provided beautiful and gigantic sanctuaries, expensive and high-quality multimedia sound and video systems, and accommodating facilities such as coffee bars or elevators fostered a greater sense of commitment or appeal to potential members than churches lacking in any of these aspects. While grand gestures of beauty and convenience are included in any secular model of growth, long-term commitment to an urban church hinges on the church's ability to align with a potential member's moral compass (Stoll and Petersen 257).

Although gorgeous and expensive accommodations begin the process of sustainable growth, what sets secular church growth theory apart from scriptural church growth theory is the handling of what comes after a potential church goer walks through the doors of the church. When the potential church member begins questioning whether or not any given

church is a fit for them, they look to the church's morality and bi-laws. If the church agrees with society on issues such as homosexuality, abortion, the treatment of women, or divorce, then they have gained a new member if he or she identifies with the majority of social morality. This then, is how the secular church growth theory gets its name, because growth came from the church's stance on social issues that favor secular thought rather than fundamentalist thought.

The term "secular" refers to anything not connected with religious or spiritual matters. If the urban churches across the nation devise their church growth strategies based on how they should react and align themselves with society's standards, then they are placing more importance on drawing members in through their treatment of worldly aspects. For example, churches like GracePointe Church in Nashville that accept homosexuality and homosexual couples follow the secular church growth theory. By siding with the progressive and liberal side of society, GracePointe has opened its doors to a new demographic of people while still maintaining its status as a megachurch.

A compromising social consciousness is the best indicator of an urban church practicing the secular church growth theory model. Secular models of growth such as Stoll and Petersen's market-based approach and Iannaccone's view that growth is merely a "product derived from time, money, and a moral social consciousness" (Iannaccone 710) characterize the secular movement towards sustainable church growth. The mission to the church given by Jesus in Matthew 28 is then seemingly fulfilled by filling the pews of the church with people who feel welcomed, accepted, and loved.

Scriptural Church Growth Theory

Scriptural church growth theory adheres to an entirely different school of thought.

While secular church growth theory advocates the use of church growth models that focus on bringing in people who feel welcomed and loved because of the church's high quality buildings and services and stances on social issues, scriptural church growth theory focuses on faith in God and what could be called conservative values. While no church would claim to put less focus on God and how He is growing a church, secular churches differ from scriptural churches in the way they interpret the Bible and then in response handle and spend resources and social issues. Scriptural church growth theory places more of an emphasis on models of growth that do not compromise Biblical doctrine. While resources such as time and money whose importance to growth was discussed by Stoll and Petersen and Iannaccone remains equally important to urban churches adhering to scriptural church growth theory, the difference in the various social secular models of growth lie in the mutualism between society and the church. To the urban churches that reject secular church growth theory and its models of growth, homosexuality is indeed unacceptable, divorce is justifiably wrong, and abortion goes against what sound Biblical exegesis states. Most urban megachurches, such as Southeast Christian Church and Lakewood Christian Church, follow this school of thought and type of church growth. By standing firm in these decisions, those urban churches believe that sustainable growth will come, not because of the church's decisions or because of some complex decision on the morality of society, but because remaining rooted in faith is righteous. Righteousness to these urban churches means remaining uncompromising in the face of social issues and clinging to a more fundamentalist view of Scripture.

Scriptural church growth often ignores practicality for the sake of purity. To compromise with social qualms is to defile the “bride of Christ” which was what the apostle Paul referred to as the church in Ephesians chapter 5, verses 22 through 33. It is practical to side with the majority of society so that a bridge of mutual benefit and trust can be formed. However, scriptural church growth theory states that sustainable growth cannot come from constantly agreeing with whatever moral issues society decides to dredge up. Although it is important not to ignore such issues, “compromising basic Biblical principles for the sake of peace and acceptance leads to the destruction of the modern church (Shenk 12). Thom Rainer, a respected authority on church growth, warns that “a potential danger of the enthusiasm and pragmatism of church growth is the elucidating of principles without scriptural foundation.” (Rainer 102). The acceptance of social issues at odds with “scriptural foundations” defiles the church. The urban church that accepts the scriptural church growth theory would follow certain guidelines pertaining to modern social issues set forth in the Holy Scripture. For example, passages found in Leviticus and 1 Timothy condemn homosexual behavior. While many different interpretations of Scripture exist, those urban churches following the scriptural church growth theory tend to follow a more fundamentalist view of the Bible. Scriptural church growth theory and fundamentalist thought would argue that since the church is an institution founded on principles established from the very same book, any compromise made with society is not only illogical but the wrong way to sustainably grow a church.

It is not right, however, for an urban church to remain completely at odds with society. Urban churches are tasked with evangelizing and growing in a very intense, densely

populated hotbed of new and old ideals held by various cultures. It is important that an urban church practicing the scriptural church growth theory to remain culturally aware, which is different from a compromising social consciousness. All churches should be aware of their surroundings and the people they are witnessing to, and urban churches who side with scriptural church growth theory should be especially wary and successful in fostering cultural awareness (Livingston 242). Urban churches “must learn what religious knowledge is eternally unchangeable, and what is culturally negotiable” (Broom). Inevitably, when sustainable church growth is threatened by preexisting cultural or social ideals, the urban church is tasked with either compromising and working towards mutual agreement or standing firm and attempting to convert those who would hold a secular belief. The church empowers and informs the world because it’s origins are unworldly, not the other way around.

It is crucial to the church growth movement to believe in a God who empowers and gives purpose to the church. A Christian would say that God historically works through various nations, tribes, and people groups in order to accomplish His will, therefore there is no social issue the urban church cannot overcome. There is no right or wrong social structure, because the gospel is universal (Tippett 28). Scriptural church growth theory remains at odds with secular church growth theory in the manner that it handles this idea. The Word of God is relevant to all people, as the Word is infinite and people and their social structures and beliefs are not. As such, the scriptural church growth theory demands that urban churches acknowledge this principle and allow their faith in the word to inform their decisions over complex social issues.

Raymond Bakke in his article, “The Urban Church in Global Perspective: Reflections on the Past, Challenges for the Future,” said that “Christology must inform ecclesiology.” (Bakke 4). This means that the study of Jesus Christ and his teachings gives way to “proper” church growth. In order to understand the church and how it can grow, the source of all theology and doctrine should remain rooted in scripture. Sustainable church growth then is a result of good theology, and good theology is proper understanding of Jesus Christ’s teachings. The understanding that the church is a worldly institution with a heavenly mission is vital to the success of the institution itself according to scriptural church growth theory.

An example of an urban church grounded in the scriptural church growth theory is Southeast Christian Church located in Louisville, Kentucky. The former lead pastor and founder of Southeast, Bob Russell, wrote in his book *“When God Builds a Church”* about the concept of truth. He made the point to “believe, teach, and apply the truth.” The truth he refers to is the truth of the gospel and its uncompromising message that life should not be lived by society’s way, the homosexual’s way, the average church goer’s way, the average man or woman’s way, but God’s way. This truth, which forms the backbone of the scriptural church growth theory, points out that only transcendent truths such as the deity of Jesus Christ, the authority of Scripture, and the Ten Commandments are absolute and bring order to not only the urban church, but direction in the journey towards sustainable church growth.

Conclusion to the Two Theories

The two theories share similarities in the way that they point out certain barriers to sustainable church growth, yet differences arise in their deconstruction of these barriers. All churches, secular or scriptural, pursue sustainable growth. However, where one urban church

neutralized with social issues by embracing the new norm, such as GracePointe Church in Nashville, another remains respectfully at odds with society and prefers to work around the issue in hopes of resolving things on their own terms, such as Southeast Christian Church in Louisville Kentucky.

Gracepointe and Southeast may both be equally committed to Biblical truth, yet they each understand that truth differently. Most megachurches in the urban centers of the United States would look more like Southeast with their fundamentalist views and adherence to scriptural church growth. Every church in the United States would claim to be rooted in Biblical doctrine, with differences in interpretation that lead to varying views on social issues and different strategies of growth. It's not a matter of whether or not a given church's interpretation of Scripture is right or wrong, but whether or not that interpretation leads to sustainable growth.

Southeast and fundamentalist, scriptural church growth theory churches alike want to sustain growth by remaining in what they believe to be true: faith in a Biblical foundation that does not compromise. Gracepointe and progressive, secular church growth theory churches seek to sustain their own growth by believing in their own Biblical truths by compromising with society in order to draw people in so that they might gain more members to help accomplish goals. Although secular church growth theory seems as though it would reasonably sustain growth more easily than scriptural church growth theory, both theories aim to accomplish the same thing: to include people into an exclusive organization.

Ultimately, these two theories seek to explain how urban churches should navigate the ever-changing minefield of social change so that sustainable growth can be achieved.

Sustainable growth then, may be achieved through either theory so long as members keep flooding through the doors, no matter the reason. Urban churches that offer secular views on homosexuality give those people who seek acceptance to such institutions admission and an opportunity to know God. On the contrary, urban churches that hold a more conservative view of social issues as well as a skepticism of putting too much faith into sociological models of growth offer potential church goers an avenue to practice their faith. So both theories of growth are necessary in order for the church as a whole to grow. Although one church growth theory may take precedence over the other, they both have benefits to the institution of the church and its survival.

A recent study performed by David Haskell in 2015 revealed that conservative urban churches that fall under scriptural church growth theory seem to be on the rise whereas liberal urban churches following the secular church growth theory are declining. It would seem that this new study would point to scriptural church growth as the obvious frontrunner in the search for the answer to the question of how urban church's should go about pursuing sustainable growth, at least in today's world. While this may be the case for the majority of urban churches, many liberal megachurches still thrive in their respective cities, such as GracePointe. Given the recent evidence that favors scriptural church growth theory, it would seem that the more dependable model of sustainable urban church growth in the long run would be to adhere to the scriptural church growth theory. In the modern era, however, given the amount of social change and the minefield that is the political landscape of the current United States, to keep progressive and secular church growth theory and its logistical models around and in some urban churches would guarantee that Jesus Christ and the Bible be kept in

a positive light for the liberals and remain in conversation inside and among both partisan parties, allowing urban churches to keep a foot in the door and sustain growth on either side.

Fundamentals of Universal Urban Church Growth Theory

Regardless of which theory any given urban church follows, there are several other principles of urban church growth that determine the sustainability and extent of church growth. The urban church's handling of social issues is important, and that is why the two church growth theories are so vital to sustainable growth. A church that follows the secular church growth theory in a conservative, southern city may not see as much success as one that follows the scriptural church growth theory and vice versa. However, there are other factors that have an influence on the urban church's growth, such as location, amount of resources, effectiveness of leadership, and potential preparation. A combination of ideal conditions and effective use of either one of the theories is what sustains church growth in the long run.

Naturally, some urban churches may be prone to quicker, easier, more sustainable growth simply because their location is ideal and the time for growth is prime. "Churches are profoundly affected by their settings. To be sure, they may grow or decline in nearly any urban location, but in some areas the possibilities for growth or decline are clearly better (or worse) than in others" (Hadaway 372). A church consists of a congregation that comes from the surrounding neighborhoods. If these nearby neighborhoods can provide substantial numbers for a growing congregation, then sustainable growth can occur. Such is the case for a church like Southeast, who started with 55 members in 1962 and grew into a megachurch of

20,524 members since 2001 (Russel 286). The Louisville suburbs provided the numbers and Southeast provided the correct theology, and “fit” (Hadaway 373).

A church is often shaped by the community that surrounds it. According to Hadaway, “when a church initially forms it becomes structured around the class character, values, and actual residents of the neighborhoods it serves” (Hadaway 373). In this way, a community surrounding a growing church determines which theory and growth models the church uses. Progressive, liberal churches crop up in those areas where strong potential church leaders share that political or moral ideology. Urban churches tend to be more conservative in the southern region of the United States, because more of those types of communities exist. Because of this, those conservative communities and churches depend on each other to grow and fulfill the community’s religious needs respectfully. “The Bible Belt” exists because conservative churches draw and supply conservative communities. It would seem that urban churches are often just a reflection of the city that surrounds them and destined to ascribe to one theory of church growth or political ideology based on local demographics.

However, data shows that most urban megachurches in the United States would be classified as conservative (Pew Research Center), especially in the Northeast United States where liberalism is strong. This shows that though some secular church growth theory churches exist, the majority of people looking for a church must hold conservative beliefs based on Hadaway’s theory (Hadaway 373). Whether this is evidence that only a certain type of person goes to church or evidence of a split community, the need for churches that appeal to all types of people of various political parties is crucial to sustain urban church growth.

Regardless of whether some communities are liberal or conservative in their beliefs, another factor to consider is tithing. Richer or more generous communities are able to grow urban churches faster and more efficiently than those churches lacking in funds (Perrin et al. 78). Those churches that collect in tithes at a considerable rate are able to push their agenda, afford more lavish outreach programs, and provide better facilities to generate even more growth more so than those churches lacking communities with that sort of funding power.

One last fundamental aspect to consider in terms of sustainable urban church growth is the political climate of the modern era. As more and more millennials identify as liberal Democrats (Pew Research Center), the secular church growth theory becomes more and more relevant. The right wing and the church have maintained a sort of bond through morality and idealism that is evident through many southern Republican states and the majority of their churches. The need for a plethora of different types of churches is vital to the growth of the urban church, as both liberal millennials and right wing conservatives search for a church to attend, fund, and further the mission of the church.

Conclusion

Strong leaders and congregations capable of drawing upon their local communities and implementing either the secular church growth theory or the scriptural church growth theory is necessary to sustain urban church growth. The sweeping, ever-changing social and political landscape across the urban centers of the country threatens to leave long-standing institutions like the church behind. That is why churches of all kinds, progressive and fundamental, are needed in order to keep the church not only relevant, but growing. Whether it be secular church growth theory with its logistical models based on acceptance and change

or scriptural church growth theory complete with its fundamental ideals, the urban church must cling to its beliefs and strategies and work with what they are given by their cities and communities in order to survive and thrive.

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