

Protagonist Corner

Church Growth Challenge to the Mainline

by D. Cameron Murchison, Jr.

Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia

The tide is moving in, at least for the moment. The concerns of various evangelical groups are being listened to with a new attentiveness. The cause of Church Growth gains ready hearing for a variety of reasons, both good and bad. Yet despite this trend, it may be both possible and appealing for many "mainline" Presbyterians to try to wait out this episode of ecclesiastical history, looking for a day when things will be more like they used to be. Presumably this would include churches prospering without any concerted effort to attract members, a situation in which the culture reinforces church participation and thus relieves churches and church members of having to present the gospel to people standing outside.

To wait for such a future, despite its appeal, would be a crucial theological error. For the tide whose power we are now feeling poses a crucial theological question to all who consider themselves mainline Presbyterians (or Christians, for that matter). The question is: what is the place of evangelism in the mission of the church? To keep the theological challenge clear, it is absolutely necessary to let "evangelism" have a very specific sense in this question, namely: persuading previously unchurched and unbelieving persons to adopt the Christian faith as their own and to embark on a life of committed discipleship in and through the life of a local congregation.

In our insistence upon a broader notion of mission than simply inviting persons to Christian faith, we in the mainline churches have found it possible not to incorporate evangelism in this specific sense into our functional understanding of the church's mission. Save for greater or lesser enthusiasm in support of international missions and an occasional overture to some cultured despiser or another, we have tended to focus the mission and ministry of the church on Christian nurture and social concern. While we do not have to be reminded that the latter emphasis on social concern was a hard won battle with a monolithic definition of evangelism, honesty compels us to admit that we have very likely overreacted.

To put the matter in the most concrete terms, we have many times been engaged in social ministries of various sorts. Much rarer have been the occasions when our ministry in the church has led us into what could aptly be called evangelistic endeavors. To be fair, both to our experience and to the nuances which the Church Growth movement has given to evangelism, we can claim to have engaged in evangelism within the walls of the church, beaming sermons to persons whose level of Christian commitment was admittedly quite tenuous if not openly lacking. And once or twice, usually in connection with pastoral ministry to someone with already existing church connections, we may have found ourselves bearing a Christian witness to someone we perceived to

stand clearly outside of the Christian community. But rarely have we self-consciously made it a priority agenda item for a church in which we have been involved, to undertake an overt, well organized and conceived, evangelistic ministry.

A number of factors could be cited as contributing to this state of affairs. Some possible excuses are even forthcoming from the Church Growth literature, including the possibility that we have not been given gifts of evangelism or the possibility that our own experience of redemption has carried us so far beyond the general experience of most non-believers that the odds of our making meaningful contact with them is meager. Yet such excuses can only function in relation to the specific ministries which we engage in personally. They do not justify the broader fact that in almost no level of our ecclesiastical involvement, have we made evangelism a significant factor in our functional understanding of the mission of the church.

To come directly to the point, the challenge of the Church Growth movement to mainliners is that we either fish or cut bait on this point. We owe it to the integrity of our own life in the church that we face up to the paucity of evangelistic endeavor of any sort in our pursuit of the church's mission. No longer can we in good conscience argue that we are seeking a bifocal understanding of mission: evangelism and social concern. The issue for us is whether we can theologically justify the functional endorsement of nurture and social concern without any specific modes of evangelism as the correct understanding of the mission of the Christian church. Functionally evangelism is not a significant aspect of the mission of the church, at least in the North American context, for mainline protestants. The question is whether we are willing to own that fact publicly and justify it theologically.

The question should not be regarded as a simple matter. A whole range of sensitivities to the autonomy of other persons, the values of other religious traditions, and the tolerance rightly prized in a pluralistic society bear upon the question. Nonetheless, it seems inescapable that we are obliged to trouble through this matter. Proponents of Church Growth are clear that the primary mission of the church includes evangelism. They may vary in the ways in which they link that element of mission to the element of social concern. Mainliners are clear that the primary mission of the church includes social concern, and they vary in the ways they link this element of mission to the element of evangelism. But in most cases the linkage is more rhetorical than factual. We in mainline churches need either to drop the rhetoric or step up the programmatic activity.