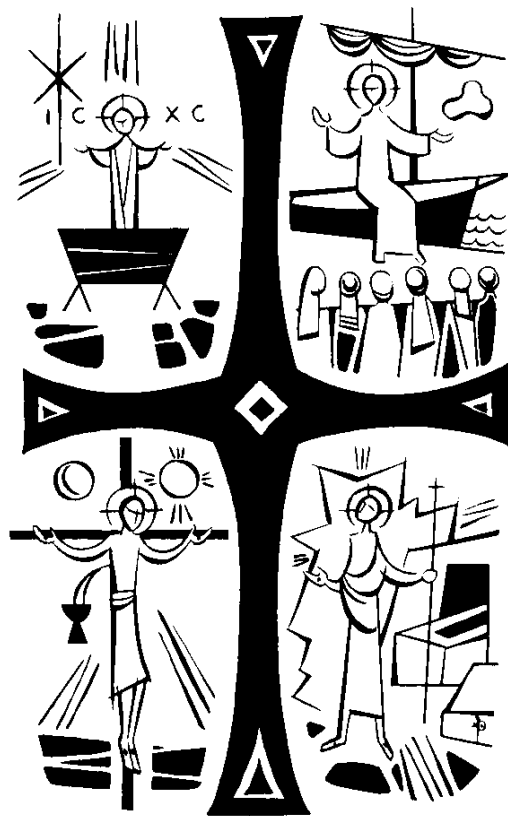


# For the Sake of Christ's Commission

The Report of the  
Church Growth Study Committee



The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

*For the Sake of Christ's Commission:  
The Report of the Church Growth Study Committee  
of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*

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The Seal of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

## Preface



GOD GAVE US JESUS CHRIST AND HIS BRIDE, the Holy Christian Church. “For God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19). That was Good News. That *is* Good News for His church now. The risen Lord is still in the midst of His church to give her forgiveness of sins, life and salvation by means of His Gospel preached and His Sacraments administered.

The Gospel and the Sacraments of Christ are the saving treasures of the church. Faithfulness to this Gospel, by which alone the church lives, must remain the central concern of Christ’s church on earth. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has been blessed by the use of these treasures. The enemy of God and of mankind, however, has never allowed this Gospel to remain unopposed.

In a previous generation, the unity of the Missouri Synod was shaken by controversy over the divine authority of Holy Scripture (formal principle). By the grace of God, the Synod emerged from that struggle with a clearer confession of the inspiration and authority of the Bible.

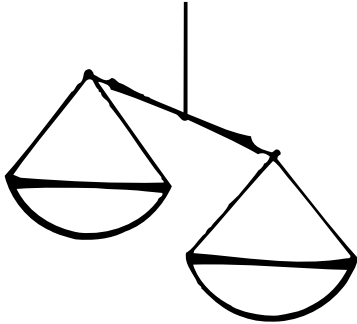
In this generation, the unity of the Synod is threatened by diversity of doctrine and practice originating from influences that have their sources in Evangelicalism and the Church Growth Movement. Here the content of the Gospel itself is at stake (material principle). Therefore, we address below numerous theological and cultural issues *vis-à-vis* the Church Growth Movement in the hope that the Synod’s mission and evangelism ministries may ever be faithful to Biblical and confessional teaching.

While earlier studies<sup>1</sup> on this topic have been presented to the Synod, this study is in response to the request of the 1995 Synodical Convention (Res. 3–09, see p. 35). In order to complete our assigned task, this committee divided itself into two groups, one concentrating on theology and the other on the culture. Our report reflects this division of labor. This document seeks to define “Church Growth” in the words of the leaders of the movement itself. It also aims to address some of the effects of American Evangelicalism and the Church Growth Movement on the public confession and worship life of the LCMS that have emerged in the past decade.

Faithfulness to the Great Commission shapes the continuing mission of Christ’s church until He comes again: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19–20).

This report is offered to further the cause of Christ-centered church growth and genuine evangelism. The principles it sets forth should serve to sort out helpful strategies from those that, however unintentionally, obscure the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ.

## What Is the Church Growth Movement?



THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH IS BY NO MEANS synonymous with the “Church Growth Movement,” anymore than, for example, “education” is the same as the “National Education Association.” The Church Growth Movement may not be defined simply as any plan or suggestion to promote the growth of the church. Rather, it is a particular historical development, marked by particular dates, leaders, books and characteristics. It can be correctly understood and defined, therefore, only on the basis of its own recognized standards and texts. The book *Church Growth: State of the Art* defines Church Growth in the following way:

The science that investigates the nature, function and health of Christian churches as they relate specifically to the effective implementation of God’s Commission to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19). Church growth is simultaneously a theological conviction and an applied science, striving to combine the eternal principles of God’s Word with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences, employing as its initial frame of reference the foundational work done by Donald McGavran and his colleagues.<sup>2</sup>

In his book, *Foundations for Church Growth*, Kent Hunter reflects this common definition:

Church growth can be formally defined as that science which investigates the nature, function and health of Christian churches, as they relate to the effective implementation of the Great Commission to “. . . make disciples of all nations.” (Matt. 28:19) Church growth is simultaneously a theological conviction and an applied science, striving to combine the eternal principles of God’s Word with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences.<sup>3</sup>

Adds Hunter: “Church growth is a process which, like yeast in dough, slowly but surely revolutionizes and reforms every segment of the church.”<sup>4</sup>

According to *Christianity Today*, the movement’s “basic book” is Donald McGavran’s 1970 *Understanding Church Growth*.<sup>5</sup> McGavran, who was a long-term Disciples of Christ missionary in India, tried to reassert the primacy of evangelism in an ecumenical setting that had largely forgotten it. The 1990 version of his book was revised and edited by C. Peter Wagner, McGavran’s successor as leader of the movement.<sup>6</sup> The *Christianity Today* article cites Wagner’s conclusion: “I don’t think there’s anything intrinsically wrong with the church-growth principles we’ve developed, or the evangelistic techniques we’re using. Yet somehow they don’t seem to work.”<sup>7</sup> He sees “Third Wave” neo-Pentecostalism as the solution. Elsewhere Wagner had paid tribute to

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Robert Schuller, who in turn is indebted to Norman Vincent Peale. Wagner states:

Possibility thinking boils down basically to a synonym of what the Bible calls "faith." Schuller's definition of possibility thinking is "the maximum utilization of the God-given powers of imagination exercised in dreaming up possible ways by which a desired objective can be attained." He is convinced that "the greatest power in the world is the power of positive thinking."<sup>8</sup>

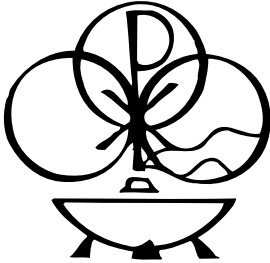
In his foreword to Carl F. George's *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (1992), C. Peter Wagner hails the volume as "the most significant step forward in church-growth theory and practice since 1970." The book advocates the "meta-church" concept, which "highlights the lay-led small group as the essential growth center," so that "everything else is to be considered secondary to its promotion and preservation."<sup>9</sup> This book and other Church Growth literature and materials have exerted enormous influence on the official and unofficial mission and evangelism thinking of the Missouri Synod and its districts. See also Kent Hunter's recent defense of the Movement in his *Confession of a Church Growth Enthusiast* (1997)<sup>10</sup> and the numerous endorsements by LCMS leaders contained in the book.

Some emphases of the Church Growth Movement have highlighted the importance of mission work and a desire for healthy growth. There is certainly nothing wrong with common sense suggestions that might make a church more accessible and relational—the need for visibility, adequate parking space and facilities, ways of making a congregation more welcoming to new members, and the like. Such ideas are helpful. The problems with the Church Growth Movement have to do with the assumption that God's Word is not sufficient, that it needs to be supplemented with "contemporary social and behavioral sciences." In practice, this means changing the church—its worship, its self-understanding, and its confession—so that it conforms to contemporary American culture. Marketing techniques turn sinners in need of salvation into consumers. The church adapts its practices to attract consumers and seeks thereby to grow in numbers. Institutes and mega-church workshops and church-growth materials are potential sources of introducing alien doctrines into the life and mission of the Synod. Tragically, the Gospel itself is sometimes compromised, redefined, or treated as secondary.

The goal of many Church Growth proponents, to win souls for Christ through the Gospel, is a worthy one. Ironically, many of the Church Growth techniques work instead to undermine the Gospel. Church Growth principles have roots in American revivalism, which suggests that people have within them the free will to "make a decision for Jesus." This implies that gaining new Christians is a human work—a matter of rhetorical and emotional manipulation, applying the correct techniques, and following the right principles—rather than the work of God. Typical Church Growth techniques minimize the Means of Grace, which are God's way of conveying the salvation of Christ, and instead confuse Law and Gospel, mingle the Two Kingdoms, and promote a theology of glory over the theology of the cross. Such things, however sincerely done, undermine the very Gospel they are intended to proclaim.

## Part One

# The Theological Issues



THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS SPELL OUT BIBLICAL principles for genuine evangelism, in which God Himself grows His church by bringing sinners to faith. Therefore, they are a means of assessing the theology and the various practices advocated by the Church Growth Movement.

### I

**The saving presence of God the Holy Trinity through the means of grace (Word and Sacrament) is the heart and center of the church's life, worship and growth.**

- The Word of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God for salvation (John 6:63; Rom. 1:16).
- Holy Absolution, as an application of that Gospel, actually bestows forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name (John 20:21–22; Ap. XII).
- The Sacrament of Holy Baptism is the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5, Matt. 28:19–20).
- The Sacrament of the Altar is the actual body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and the wine, given to us Christians to eat and to drink for forgiveness of sins, life and salvation (1 Cor. 10:16, Luke 22:14–20).
- The Gospel and the Sacraments are the distinguishing marks of Christ's church on earth and the means by which God the Holy Trinity grants His forgiving and life-giving presence among His people (SC; AC V & VII; Ap. VII & VIII.7; XIV.4; SA III, viii.10).
- Our churches confess a clear theology of worship embracing sermon, Sacrament, and prayer. This is not a matter of adiaphora (ACXXIV, Ap. XXIV, XV.42–43).
- All rites and ceremonies that serve the Gospel purely preached and the Sacraments rightly administered are observed for the sake of faithfulness to the Gospel, and for unity and continuity in the faith (AC XXIV, XXVI.40–42; Ap. XV.20; FC SD X.5).
- All liturgies, hymns, and agendas used in the churches of our confession are to be doctrinally pure and in accord with the faith of the one, holy, Christian and apostolic church (FC SD RN.10).

**It follows that spiritual growth does not happen entirely or in part through man-made devices and methodologies.**

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Therefore, it is spiritually harmful:

- When absolution and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion are minimized in favor of personal religious efforts, relational concerns or church activities.
- When people-oriented social sciences and methodologies subtly dominate the God-centered Means of Grace.
- When small-group (meta-church) organization and interaction are considered essential or compete without the public ministry of God's Word and Sacrament.
- When "spiritual gifts" are substituted for the Means of Grace as the organizing principle of the church.
- When every-busy church activism is substituted for God-pleasing service in daily Christian vocation.
- When programs of "leadership training" result in (1) substitution of lay leaders for public ministers of the Gospel or (2) inadequate training for the proper theological preparation of preachers.

## II

### **The mission of the church is God's mission.**

- In the Divine Service, the corporate worship of the church, the risen Christ publicly nurtures and feeds His people by means of the Word and the Sacraments. All Christian witness in home, church and society flows from and leads to this corporate worship (1 Cor. 10:17, 11:26; Heb. 10:23–25; Acts 2:42).
- The gifts of the Gospel, forgiveness and life given in Word and Sacrament—are God's own means for evangelizing the lost. (See section III.) This is how Christ builds His church (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20–22; Col. 2:19).
- God created all people—regardless of sex, race, generation, or culture—but all have sinned and are equally in need of salvation. God desires all to receive in faith the redemption already won for all through His Son, Jesus Christ, and delivered in His Word and Holy Sacraments.
- The Holy Spirit through the Holy Scriptures has given us one Gospel for all people in whatever culture they live (Acts 4:12; Gal. 1:6–9).
- God has given the church a unique and different message, which the sinful world cannot understand or appreciate (1 Cor. 1 & 2, esp. 2:14). This message must be treasured and proclaimed so that the Holy Spirit can change the hearts of people.
- God has called the community of faith in every place to welcome visitors and inquirers warmly and openly. He calls His church lovingly to adapt her outreach to the culture of the hearers without giving up any of the doctrinal and sacramental fullness of the Gospel (Lev. 19:34; Matt. 25:35; 1 Cor. 9:22; Heb. 13:2).



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**It follows that the church's mission is to be viewed theologically rather than sociologically.**

Therefore, it is spiritually harmful:

- When an artificial tension is postulated between the church's worship and the church's mission.
- When mission is shaped mainly by its attractiveness and friendliness to unbelievers, thus pandering to the old Adam.
- When secular culture in one way or another controls the shape of the church's mission.
- When multi-cultural emphases override the one transcultural mission of the church to all people, thus promoting a different Gospel for each subculture.
- When the decisive criteria for the church's mission become techniques of commercial marketing, rhetorical persuasion, statistical success, or external appearances of happiness or harmony.
- When recently popularized small groups (meta groups) are viewed as foundational in mission. [Foundational gatherings, or the "house churches" referenced in Acts 2:42-46 were apostle-led gatherings of Word and Sacrament ministry.]

### III

**Pastors are shepherds of Christ's sheep called to feed them with His Word and Sacraments and thus to lead them in the mission of the church.**

- Jesus Christ gave His church the preaching office precisely for the missionary proclamation of the Gospel (Rom. 10:14,15; 2 Cor. 3:6; 4:5; 5:20; AC V & XIV).
- God has given pastors to His church to feed His flock and defend it against error. This includes both teaching the pure doctrine, and overseeing the doctrine and life of the community of faith (John 21:15-17; 1 Tim. 3:1; 4:13 & 16; Titus 1:5 & 9; 2:1; Heb. 13:7 & 17; AC XXVIII).
- The ordination and installation rites of our church specify the real responsibilities of the pastor and the promises of God concerning the Holy Ministry.
- Since Christ builds His church through the Gospel, the preaching of that Gospel is the highest office or activity in the church and the chief instrument of its mission (Acts 6: 1-7, Rom 1:16; 10:14-17). "Practical and clear sermons hold an audience. The real adornment of the churches is godly, practical, and clear teaching, the godly use of the Sacraments, ardent prayer, and the like" (Ap. XXIV.50-51).
- In addition to public preaching of the Word, administration of the Sacraments, and confession and absolution, a pastor's own responsibilities include teaching, comforting the sick and dying, admon-

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ishing the erring, evangelizing the lost, counseling the inquirer, reconciling the alienated, etc. (Luke 15; 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim. 4:5).

**God's people are a glorious priesthood  
(priesthood of all believers), which is far greater than  
and different from the new idea of "everyone a minister."  
The public Gospel ministry, in turn, serves this priesthood of all God's people.**

Therefore, it is spiritually harmful:

- When the modern concept "everyone a minister" is equated with the priesthood of all believers: a) This denies the true priesthood of all believers, which is exercised not only in worship and prayer, but also in daily vocation (i.e., the work of one's earthly calling, Christian witness in daily life, parental teaching in the home, etc.) (1 Pet. 2:9; Rom. 12:1–2); b) It confuses individual Christian lives with public offices in the church. (Acts 6); c) It can be used to undermine Jesus' gift of the office of preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments (pastoral office) (Eph. 3:7–10, 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:28–29 (AC V, XIV, XXVIII [8])).
- When congregations or small groups are encouraged to regard fellow lay Christians or church staff personnel as their pastors rather than those men properly trained, qualified, called and ordained to the pastoral office.
- When the pastor is viewed as a chief executive officer, administrator, or director whose primary purpose is to train laity to do the real pastoral care.
- When it is held that some ethnic groups or small congregations do not need properly educated, called and ordained ministers of the Gospel.
- When pastors lord it over their flocks, not giving patient attention to careful instruction and faithful service as Christ's undershepherds to His sheep.

## IV

**Worship is the center of the  
church's life both in this world and in the next.**

- Christ's church is the assembly of saints gathered around His Gospel and Sacraments (Eph. 2:20; 4:5,6; Heb. 12:18–24; AC VII).
- Though ceremonies and rites for such gatherings are not dictated, Christ's holy presence and His promised gifts determine both the substance and the reverent style of the Divine Service.
- Christian freedom with respect to rites and ceremonies is defined and determined by Scripture and Confessions. In part, our churches retain ancient worship forms for the purpose of teaching, order and continuity with the worshipping church universal as our joyful confession of the presence and life-giving treasures of Christ (Ap. VII and VIII, 33; XV, 38–39; 44; 51; FC X ).

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- Because church fellowship rests on true confession (agreement in the apostolic doctrine), not on an assumed “faith in the heart,” loving pastoral care in public worship leads a congregation in the practice of close(d) communion (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11:27–30).
- Worship is first of all God’s service to us—His giving forgiveness, life and salvation in Christ; only upon receipt of His gifts by faith can worship be said to be our offering to God.
- The church’s life in its worship is transcultural. The Law and Gospel message of the church is otherworldly and is not a servant to satisfy the felt needs of the world. Rather, felt needs provide an occasion for the clear proclamation of Law and Gospel.

**It follows that not all humanly devised ceremonies faithfully confess the presence of Christ in worship.**

Therefore, it is spiritually harmful:

- When it is taught that worship is essentially “celebration” rather than receiving the mercies of Christ in His Word and Sacrament.
- When man-centered ceremonies replace God-centered worship.
- When orders of service are subjectively devised quite independently from orders of worship that are the property of the church universal and that faithfully confess and receive the presence of Christ in His Word and Sacrament.
- When the church’s preaching, teaching, music and worship are changed to be more like the world in order to be accepted by the world.
- When the church’s solemn public worship is treated as a matter of experiment and entertainment.
- When the loving God-given practice of close(d) communion is abandoned for the sake of perceived friendliness, inclusiveness in worship and numerical growth.
- When so-called “liberty” in worship ceremonies, customs and rites leads to orders of worship that compromise our confession (FC X). The Divine Service includes those rites that confess the saving presence of the risen Christ in His Gospel, such as confession and absolution, Law and Gospel preaching, Creed, the Lord’s Supper, prayer for the church universal, etc. (Ap. XXIV).
- When music and hymnody used in worship focus principally on human sentiment and emotion rather than on the Biblical content of the Christian faith.
- When well-meaning pious language is substituted for the historic creeds of the church.

V

**The Lutheran church has a distinct confessional identity.**

- The three Ecumenical Creeds (Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian) are to be upheld, and initiatives to alter, amend, or replace them with contemporary compositions must be resisted.
- The Ecumenical Creeds articulate the faith confessed by the church universal, as opposed to the teachings of heretics and sectarians (FC Ep. RN.3).
- Because the language and expressions of the Creeds have been carefully refined, any change in words or phrases may result in distortion or loss of the life-giving truths confessed so clearly by the church down through the ages.
- When the Ecumenical Creeds are subject to individualized reformulation, they are no longer ecumenical nor are they what they have been for centuries, a tried and true doctrinal standard.
- Preaching and teaching provide the opportunity for presenting Lutheran Confessional identity in the contemporary context.
- The name Lutheran should be retained among congregations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod because “Lutheran” signifies not a cultic following of Martin Luther but rather fidelity to Christ and His Word (Preface to the Book of Concord).

**It follows that Lutheran distinctives should not be eliminated in favor of a generic Christianity.**

Therefore, it is spiritual harmful:

- When the name and confession known as “Lutheran” is replaced by a generic Christian identity, which may include heterodox teaching and practice.
- When the name Lutheran is removed from our churches, jeopardizing the visibility of some of the key teachings of our Biblical confession, such as the real presence and compromising conscientious Lutheran pastoral care exercised in the loving Biblical practice of close(d) communion.
- When a generic Christianity downplays controversial Biblical truths in favor of a least-common-denominator approach to doctrine, practice, and fellowship, thus compromising Christ's mission on earth (FC SD X, 5–7).
- When pastors or congregations presume to change or alter the wording of the Ecumenical Creeds to suit their local circumstances.

VI

**The "theology of the cross" defines  
the mission and ministry of the church.**

- The Holy Spirit uses the "foolishness" of preaching Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:21) together with Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper to build Christ's church on earth.
- This great treasure of the Gospel of the cross, and it alone, offers the power of God for salvation to all mankind. Any alternate ways to build Christ's church are illusory, essentially deny God's Word, and are contrary to God's revealed will (Rom. 1:16; Gal. 1:6-10).
- The risen Christ has won this salvation, not by what the world would recognize as victory, but by the humiliation, suffering, and defeat of the cross (John 12:23-25; John 12:32).
- As the Son of God, in taking the form of a servant, humbly hid His majesty in the lowly manger and on the despised cross (Phil. 2: 6-11), so He continues His work under the lowly cover of preaching and Sacraments. And just so He draws close to His children in their sufferings and weakness (2 Cor. 12:9-10).
- As at Pentecost, God built His church with dramatic increase in numbers through the proclamation of the cross; so in the days of Noah, Elijah, and Jeremiah, He built His church in times of decreasing numbers (1 Pet. 3:17-22).
- Faithfulness on the part of pastor and congregation includes the work of evangelism, that is, the proclamation of Christ crucified in community and world (1 Cor. 9:16-19; 1 Pet. 2:9; 3:15-16).
- In an unbelieving world, as Christ's faithful bride, the church lives under the cross, she may expect contempt, hardship, struggle, and suffering (Matt. 10:19-25; Mark 10:28-30).

**It follows that the "theology of glory"  
(the wisdom of the world) misleads the church.**

Therefore, it is spiritually harmful:

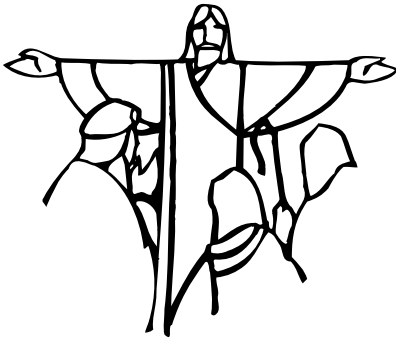
- When spiritual life is measured in terms of personal happiness, earthly success and appearance, worldly wisdom and human glory (1 Cor. 1:21-25).
- When behavioral and social sciences are given a shared authority with the Word of God as a measure of spiritual truth.
- When it is thought that saving faith can be imparted by human market strategies or that the growth of the Holy Christian Church can be adequately or accurately measured by numbers (Matt. 7:13-14; 16:18; Acts 2:47; Col. 2:19).
- When a congregation sees itself as necessarily more faithful because it is not growing. Or, conversely, when a congregation views growing numbers and income as an indication that Christ

is necessarily building His church. Numbers, large or small, are not a litmus test of the Gospel's power (Matt. 7:24-27).

- When anything other than faithfulness by pastor or people to the pure Gospel and Sacraments of Christ is used to measure the "health" of a congregation (1 Cor. 2:2).

## Part Two

### The Cultural Issues



THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT IS AN ATTEMPT to address the contemporary culture, which has become increasingly secularized and in need of evangelization. The question then becomes, to what extent should the church change its practices to accommodate the culture? Clearly, Christians exist in a particular culture, as do the non-Christians we hope to reach with the Gospel. The church must communicate in a language and in a way that the surrounding culture can understand. On the other hand, following the lead of a secularized culture can only lead to a secularized church.

Further complicating the matter is the fact of cultural pluralism. America today embraces many different cultures, so that attempts to appeal to one (for example, affluent white baby-boomers who live in the suburbs) may not appeal to others (African-Americans, Hispanics, rural midwesterners, Generation-Xers). These pluralistic cultures are themselves under assault from the commercial "pop culture" which reduces all cultural expressions to a homogenized commodity to buy and sell.

The Lutheran Church is blessed with a theology that offers a specific, comprehensive framework for addressing the relationship between the church and culture. The doctrine of the Two Kingdoms can help us address the cultural issues raised by the Church Growth Movement in a positive way.

The Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions state that the world in essence is essentially good but accidentally evil. (The Confessions utilize Aristotelian terms to describe both "essence" and "accident"). Original sin is not of the nature or essence of man (FC SD I.55-58). Therefore, the earth is the Lord's. In Luther's two-kingdom paradigm, the kingdom of power is where God operates as the Creator. It is not the world of Satan. Both Christians and non-Christians co-exist in the kingdom of power.

#### I

**The Lutheran Theology of the Two Kingdoms teaches that God reigns in all cultures, but that the church is to be ruled by the Word of God alone, and not by the culture.**

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- The Two Kingdoms are defined as the Kingdom of Power, which God rules today by virtue of His creation, and the Kingdom of Grace, which Jesus Christ rules today by virtue of His redemption.
- God's earthly kingdom—or “Kingdom of the Left Hand” or “Kingdom of Power”—includes all persons in the world whether they are Christians or non-Christians, and remains subject to God's Law, His created orders and His providential care.
- God's spiritual kingdom or “Kingdom of the Right Hand” or “Kingdom of Grace”—includes only those persons who have been given faith in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, are thus under the Gospel.
- God's earthly kingdom is subject to human reason, cultural dynamics, and scientific laws. God's spiritual kingdom is subject only to His Word. Both kingdoms belong to God (AC and Ap., XIV, XVI, XXVIII).
- God is active in His earthly kingdom, for both Christians and non-Christians, through human vocations—the family, citizenship and the workplace—in order to provide our daily bread and other needs of this life.
- Christians are citizens of both kingdoms: the earthly kingdom by birth and the spiritual kingdom by rebirth in Baptism.
- Christians exercise their citizenship in the earthly kingdom in their vocation and in the spiritual kingdom in the life of the church.
- Christians are to be in the world, but not of the world (John 17:15–18).
- The Two Kingdoms are not to be confused or mingled with each other.
- The church is not to imitate the culture. Nor must individual Christians think they must create some separate Christian culture or attempt to conquer the world for Christ. God already reigns, even in the most secular culture among those who do not know Him.
- The church, as a supernatural institution present in the world and called into being solely by God, is distinct from the culture, even as its members are constructively engaged in the culture through their vocations.

**It follows that the culture is not to set the agenda for the Church.**

Therefore, it is spiritually harmful:

- When the church changes its teachings to follow prevailing cultural trends.
- When theology is determined by cultural considerations rather than by the Word of God.
- When worship is shaped not by theology but by currently popular styles.
- When Christians ignore their responsibilities to serve their neighbors and to apply God's moral

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law in the cultures in which God has placed them.

- When Christians believe that only “church work” is a valid way of serving God, so that they neglect their earthly vocations.
- When the church is operated as a purely secular corporation, with the pastor functioning as the “C.E.O.,” the elders being reduced to a Board of Directors, and the congregation treated as workers, all organized according to a business plan to market a product.
- When the “Priesthood of All Believers” is taken to mean “every member a minister.” This view denigrates the secular vocations (in implying that everyone ought to be engaged in ministerial functions to serve God, as if their existing callings were not equally spiritual in God’s sight). It also can be used to denigrate the pastoral vocation (in implying that everyone can do what the pastor has personally been called to do).

### II

**American culture offers many blessings,  
but it currently includes features that can undermine the faith.**

- The American legacy of religious and political freedom, economic prosperity and technological progress is a great blessing from the hand of God.
- Though God continues to work in today’s secular culture, many of our cultural problems can be seen in terms of human rebellion against God’s kingdom.
- Certain thought-patterns in American culture, however appropriate in the earthly kingdom, can raise problems when brought into the spiritual kingdom of the church.
- The American philosophy of pragmatism aims only at quantifiable results, assuming that the desired outcomes can be produced when the barriers are removed. Such a view—concerned only with the question “Does it work?”—often neglects issues of objective truth and the radical consequences of the Fall.
- American culture is often oriented to hedonism, which makes human pleasure the highest priority. This view caters to our sinful flesh.
- American culture is influenced by utilitarianism, which evaluates ideas and principles in terms of their usefulness. This view is human-centered and, when applied to moral decisions, rejects the absolutes of God’s Word.
- American culture promotes subjectivism, which evaluates knowledge and values on the basis of personal inner feelings. This view neglects the objective truths ordained by God.
- Americans are often consequentialists, believing that the end justifies the means. This view justifies negative behavior in the name of an ultimate good, a position that rationalizes sin and violates God’s Law.
- Today’s postmodern culture denies that there are any absolutes. Truth is relative; morality is



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relative; and religion is nothing more than a privatized, interior meaning-system with no connection to transcendent realities.

**It follows that adjusting the church's practice to appeal to today's American culture, as advocated by the Church Growth Movement, will be particularly problematic.**

Therefore, it is spiritually harmful:

- When the "success" of a particular church is assumed to consist in quantifiable results, such as its budget or its number of new members.
- When pragmatic or utilitarian considerations—however helpful in their sphere assume an authority over that of God's Word.
- When worship is shaped by the hedonistic desire for entertainment.
- When subjective religious experience takes the place of the Word and the Sacraments.
- When certain doctrinally-based features of the church—its liturgy, hymns, moral stances, theological teachings, or culturally unpopular practices (such as close[d] communion and refusal to ordain women)—are construed as barriers that need to be eliminated for the church to grow.
- When it is assumed that the church grows through the application of principles, prescriptions, programs and other human actions, as opposed to the work of the Holy Spirit in the Means of Grace.

### III

**Cultural pluralism does not mean cultural relativism; rather, it means that the church has the opportunity to reach out to human beings in all of their God-given diversity.**

- Though America has its distinct cultural qualities, America is also a land of cultural pluralism. There have always been many different cultures that constitute America, and the rise of immigration and the acceleration of generational differences are rapidly increasing our cultural diversity.
- The various cultures of the world and within this country experience God's manifold blessings in His earthly kingdom, even though these cultures are tainted by sin.
- Folk cultures of every kind, with their traditional values and ethnic identities, are being undermined by a homogenous popular culture, which has its origins in mass technology and economic consumerism.
- Whereas the music, customs, and other artifacts of ethnic cultures transmit and preserve com-

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munity values, artifacts of the pop culture exist to be bought and sold to the largest possible market.

- The pop culture favors products that entertain, that do not demand thought or effort on the part of its audience, and that satisfy the subjective tastes of the buyers.
- The pop culture also is eroding the high culture, the realm of human achievement, education, and expertise. Quality music, literature and art are giving way to the shallowness of pop music, soap operas and computer games.
- The fact of cultural diversity does not mean that truth or morality are relative; rather, all cultures are limited in their knowledge, tainted by sin, and are in need of the transcendent truths of God's Word.
- Christ died for all peoples. The same Gospel is for all the world (Acts 1: 8).
- God's Word is not culturally-specific nor culture-bound. Christianity is for "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9).
- The historic church, unified in all of its diversity in the one Lord Jesus Christ, embraces every time, extending back through history, constituting a communion of all the saints who still worship their Lord in heaven.
- The Christian church—with its universal claims, its liturgies that have transcended times and places and nationalities, and its message that continues to change the hearts of people in every nation, tribe and language—is the one genuinely multi-cultural institution.

**It follows that, in a climate of cultural diversity,  
the church must recover its universality.**

Therefore, it is spiritually harmful:

- When the church emulates the commercial pop culture at the expense of traditional Biblical practices.
- When the transient styles of pop music drive out classic hymns and liturgies that have withstood the test of time.
- When church practices are judged by their entertainment value, rather than by their Scriptural faithfulness.
- When different messages are devised for different cultures or sub-cultures.
- When the church is divided upon cultural or generational lines, violating the unity of diverse peoples in the Body of Christ (Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 12:12–31).
- When the church, attempting to blend into a homogenized culture, does not affirm its unique identity.

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- When a congregation aims at an undifferentiated, generic Christianity, rather than taking its distinct place as the Holy Christian Church in a diverse religious landscape.
- When the church attempts to appeal to only one segment within the congregation, thereby dividing God's people against each other.
- When the cultural range of the church is narrowed by adapting to a single, momentary cultural expression (such as that of white, middle-class baby-boomers) that will soon pass away.
- When Christians become culturally parochial, neglecting missions and outreach to people different from themselves.
- When the church changes with each prevailing culture and with every new generation, thereby losing its catholicity, pitting cultures and generations against each other, and, ironically, losing its relevance to any culture.

### When to Follow the Culture and When to Counter the Culture

Christians are to be engaged in their cultures, being “in the world, but not of the world,” acting in their vocations as parents, citizens and workers. At the same time, the spiritual kingdom, found in the church, is to be separate from the world, governed not by human reason nor by human power but solely by the Word of God.

Matters of culture are susceptible to change, revision and sociological applications (under God's Law). Matters of theology, on the other hand, are subject to God's Word alone, and may not be altered for cultural considerations.

#### *Community dynamics are cultural*

Churches should be sensitive to their local cultures. The value placed upon “friendliness”—and the different ways of expressing it from culture to culture—should be appreciated. Other local customs should be respected and used as means of outreach into the community.

Demographic research and other information about the community can be helpful in the process of church planting and evangelism. Social issues, particular needs of people in the congregation, and cultural problems should also be the concern of the local church.

#### *Worship is intrinsically theological*

The church's worship is the worship by the baptized, those who are gathered in the name of the Holy Trinity. The church's worship is not primarily for outreach to unbelievers. How the church worships should be determined according to its theology, not according to human desires, popular tastes or cultural trends.

Though certain practices in worship are adiaphora, those too are matters of theological emphasis, not cultural accommodation. Though changes in worship are sometimes necessary so that worshippers can better understand its significance, they are to be done in a theological way.

The development of liturgies and hymns is a complex process, requiring scholarship, in-depth

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theological analysis and musical expertise—as evidenced in the Synod's new hymn book project. Over the course of this ten-year project, the LCMS has the opportunity to reconcile the varying claims of the traditional and the contemporary, and other controversies. It is to be hoped that the new hymnal will be adopted by all of our congregations, thereby restoring Scriptural and confessional coherence in worship.

### *Communication is cultural*

Language, thought-forms and ways of thinking change from culture to culture, and in a single culture over time. Churches must communicate the unchanging truths of God's Word in a way that they will be understood.

But because the Christian church is bound to God's Word, the focus will be on language—specifically, God's language in Scripture—which is the substance of our liturgy, our preaching, and our teaching.

### *Preaching is theological*

A sermon must always be the proclamation of the Law and the Gospel, in which God Himself promises to work in a powerful way.

It is being said by some Church Growth proponents that “people don't want to hear about sin”; they want a more positive, affirming message that builds up their self-esteem. This approach eliminates the Law. Since “self-esteem” theology encourages faith in oneself—rather than in Christ—it also eliminates the Gospel.

Another motif of Church Growth homiletics is that people want “practical Biblical guidelines” for everyday life, instead of heavy-duty theology. The most popular sermons, therefore, will draw principles from the Bible about practical issues—such as how to manage money, how to handle family problems, and how to avoid stress. Such sermons, in one sense, are all “Law,” but they manage to water down the Law so that it seems easily achievable, a matter of self-help rules, rather than the demands of a righteous God. Such sermons, however popular, can never bring anyone into faith.

Certainly, the Scriptures give guidance for life, and the Third Use of the Law has an important function in the Christian life. But pastors must be very careful to avoid the cultural temptation to preach sermons that are merely “therapeutic,” as opposed to bringing their listeners to repentance, through the Law, and to faith, through the Gospel of free forgiveness through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### *Technology is cultural*

The advance of the Reformation was greatly aided by the invention of the printing press, the technological innovation that made it possible for everyone to own and to read the Bible. By the same token, other technological developments should be gladly embraced by the church as ways to help fulfill its mission.

The LCMS was a pioneer in using radio and television to spread the Gospel. Today, the

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Internet and other information technologies hold great potential for use by the church.

We can agree with Church Growth experts on such things as the need for plenty of free parking, which is merely an acknowledgment of the importance of transportation technology in contemporary American culture.

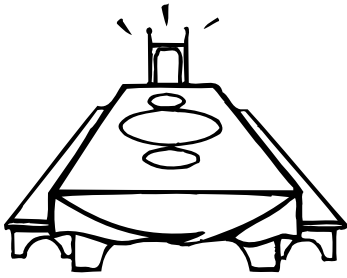
### *Teaching is theological*

If there are no moral absolutes, if God's Word is not objectively true, if religion is no more than a private, interior consolation with no reference to a transcendent, universal reality—as today's culture tends to believe—then Christianity is completely invalid. The teaching of the church, in this cultural climate, must be more thorough, more intentional, and more wide-ranging than ever.

The Great Commission says to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28: 19) The Greek word for “disciple” includes the sense of being a student; the text is rigorously sacramental, emphasizing both Baptism and Christ's real presence in the church; and it stresses the necessity of teaching “everything” in God's Word, as Jesus said: “If you continue in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:31–32)

The key to how well the church thrives in today's culture is surely in how well and how thoroughly the church teaches. This is not a time to cut back church membership classes to one Saturday afternoon, as some are doing. This is not a time to turn Bible classes and the Sunday School into “sharing times,” rather than training in God's Word. This is not a time to minimize doctrine, morality and discernment of error. Rather, the church must pay new attention to catechesis, not only of young people and new members but of the whole congregation struggling to live as Christians in a non-Christian culture.

## Lutheran Evangelism in American Culture



THE CHURCH GROWS IN NUMBERS through evangelism, when unbelievers hear the Good News of Jesus and receive the gift of faith. This is the work of the Holy Spirit operating through the Means of Grace. Calling into question certain features of the Church Growth Movement should by no means lessen our churches' commitment to evangelize the lost. The Reformation under the leadership of Martin Luther emphasized how God provides the growth of His church through the Word and the Sacraments. "The Holy Spirit does not come without the Word," he wrote, "but He wants to come through the harp, that is, through meditation on the Word or through the voices of father, mother, or others. Otherwise, the devil comes" (Stl. 2:263).

Luther was so convinced of the power of the Spirit working through the Word that he explained the meaning of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed in those terms: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me with the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith" (SC, Third Article).

The Lutheran Confessions emphasize what causes true growth. Speaking of the Gospel and the Sacraments, the Augsburg Confession says, "Through these, as through means, He [God] gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where He pleases, in those who hear the Gospel" (AC V).

In America, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod from the beginning was evangelistically-minded, emphasizing how God provides growth in the church through Word and Sacrament. C. F. W. Walther, one of the key founders and the first president of the LCMS, wrote, "A congregation should do its share that the Gospel may be brought to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death . . ."11

Reflecting upon our Synod's past and future, a pastor said over forty years ago, "In addition to the responsibility of keeping safe every soul in the church for the Lord Jesus, the church also has the responsibility to conduct an effective soul-winning program."12

God has truly blessed The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as we have used His Word and Sacraments. We now have more than 2.5 million members in more than 6,000 congregations and students in more than 1,000 schools—the largest parochial school system of all Protestant churches. We have two seminaries that are preparing men of God who proclaim the clear Word of God.

Today our Synodical president, Dr. A. L. Barry, is encouraging our entire church body to "Tell the Good News About Jesus" in the years 2000 to 2010. He put it this way at the Synod's 1998 convention: "As we move into the final years of this present century, and the opening years of the next, we are going, with great zeal, to reach out to those around us who do not know Jesus Christ and the Good News of His salvation. And we are going to do it with untiring vigor in the Lord." The Synod in convention wholeheartedly adopted the outreach emphasis of "Tell the Good

News About Jesus.” There could not be a better theme and motive for a church body that believes and practices that God causes His growth through the means that He has given us, the Word and Sacraments.

These means do, in fact, bring people to faith, as they have for centuries. Dire warnings that churches will “die” unless new and questionable methods are employed cast doubt upon God’s faithfulness and His active work in bringing sinners to Himself. We do not need anything new or unique to cause growth; God can and will grow His church by the means God has given the church.

## Conclusion

### Tell the Good News About Jesus!



APOSTLES, PASTORS AND PEOPLE HAVE BEEN doing that ever since Pentecost. When persecution scattered the first believers, “those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” (Acts 8:4) This has been the consistent pattern also in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Blessed by God with fidelity to His saving Word and dedication to His mission for more than 150 years, our passion continues to be “Tell the Good News About Jesus!” To be practical, that comes down to you in your daily life within the home and society, and to your local congregation as the church in the world. Pastors and congregation leaders should jointly study this report, seeking to bring their congregation’s worship life and outreach into harmony with Scripture and our Lutheran Confessions. Then out of loyalty to Christ and love for the lost, each congregation must explore new opportunities to tell the Good News, asking such questions as:

gation as the church in the world. Pastors and congregation leaders should jointly study this report, seeking to bring their congregation’s worship life and outreach into harmony with Scripture and our Lutheran Confessions. Then out of loyalty to Christ and love for the lost, each congregation must explore new opportunities to tell the Good News, asking such questions as:

- How can we bring the secular world to the church without secularizing the church?
- What opportunities do we have to “teach (all nations) all things” in our community?
- What classes can we offer our community, and in what new locations that will reach the hearts and lives of people with the Gospel?
- How can we train members to be sponsors for inquirers, accompanying them to adult catechetical classes and serving as mentors in Christian faith and life?
- What locations in our community lend themselves to distribution of Christian tracts, books and literature?
- How can we develop and publicize a web site for our church that is not only attractive, but also informative and invites contact with us?
- How can we strengthen our members as royal priests in their daily vocations, demonstrating Christian virtue

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in a culture growing increasingly godless and wicked?

- How can we build relationships between our members to assist each person in his/her vocation and to strengthen marriage and the family?
- How can our worship publicly confess the unseen reality of the presence of the Holy Trinity among us, with all His life-giving gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation?

There are countless ways to get the attention of people outside of the church so that they will hear the Gospel. We can convert no one. The Spirit of God does that. What we can do is our best to bring the greatest numbers possible into contact with God's Word and Sacraments. These Means of Grace are at the heart and center of a Lutheran understanding of the growth of Christ's church. From the weekly gathering around the pulpit and altar, God's baptized people go forth each week to serve Him in their daily lives. Refreshed and renewed by His Word and Supper, they bear His Word in their hearts and on their lips—and that Word will not return void. All those who hear and believe also will be gathered into Christ's church in earth and heaven. This is our conviction in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. And so God's mission continues among us and through us: Tell the Good News About Jesus!

### Recommendations

IN LIGHT OF THESE THEOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL considerations of the Church Growth Movement, the following recommendations are made:

1. That the President of the Synod share this study with other Synodical entities, including doctrinal reviewers.
2. That district presidents, members of boards and commissions, and others who supervise Synodical programs, auxiliaries and RSOs consider the issues raised in this report as they plan programs and documents for use within the church.
3. That pastors use this report in their studies within their circuits and districts, and as they serve their congregations in their ministries.
4. That congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod work towards a greater unity in their worship through the use of Synodically-approved hymnbooks and liturgies.
5. That congregations commit themselves to the work of evangelism, trusting in the power of God's Word, rather than in humanly-devised systems.



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## To Address the Church Growth Movement

1995 St. Louis Convention Resolution 3-09

Overtures 3-104-106 (CW, pp. 182-83)

**W**HEREAS, HOLY SCRIPTURE TEACHES, "SO THEN FAITH comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17). And again, our God says: "As rain and snow come down from heaven . . . so will My word be that I speak. It will not return to Me empty but it will accomplish what I want and achieve what I had in mind" (Is. 55:10-11). And again, "He saved us, not because of any righteous works which we have done, but because of His mercy. He saved us by the washing in which the Holy Spirit gives us a new birth and a new life" (Titus 3:5). And of the Holy Supper our Lord Jesus says concerning His own body and blood, "Take, eat, . . . My body given for you . . . Drink . . . My blood, poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-25); and

WHEREAS, Martin Luther, therefore, taught us that there is only one way in which people are both brought to faith in Christ and caused to grow in this faith, namely: "the Holy Spirit has called me *by the Gospel*, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth" (SC II 6). And, also in the Augsburg Confession we confess: "In order to obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry [German: *das Predigtamt*], that is, provided the Gospel and the Sacraments. Through these, as through means, He gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, *when and where He pleases*, in those who hear the Gospel" (V 1, emphasis added); and

WHEREAS, Some Church Growth materials and practices are a denial of the efficacy of the Means of Grace, e.g., reliance upon principles, programs, processes, and contemporary social and behavioral sciences to produce numerical growth in the church (Evangelism and Church Growth, CTCR 1987; pp. 40-42); and

WHEREAS, Some Church Growth materials and practices suggest that numerical growth in the church depends upon the proper discovery, development, and employment of "spiritual gifts" (Evangelism and Church Growth, CTCR 1987; pp. 43-44); and

WHEREAS, In much of Church Growth materials, as well as in actual practice, there is a confusion of the Priesthood of All Believers with the Office of the Holy Ministry, e.g., the pastor as manager and organizer, a misunderstanding of the Call, and a misunderstanding of Christian vocation (Evangelism and Church Growth, CTCR 1987; pp. 42-43); and

WHEREAS, The Church Growth Movement often promotes worship forms and practices which focus the worshipper on his feelings and experiences as evidence of God's grace rather than on the objective and gracious work of God delivering His forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake through Word and Sacrament, as found, for example, in the historic liturgy of the Lutheran Church (*Evangelism and Church Growth*, CTCR 1987; pp. 41-42); therefore be it

RESOLVED, That circuit and District pastoral conferences, District staffs, and congregations of Synod be urged to study the CTCR report *Evangelism and Church Growth*, the report from The

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Standing Committee for Pastoral Ministry titled *Toward a Theological Basis, Understanding and Use of Church Growth Principles in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, as well as other resources which critically examine the Church Growth Movement, e.g., “*Church Growth*” *As Mission Paradigm: A Lutheran Assessment* by Kurt Marquart, and *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* by Os Guinness; and be it further

RESOLVED, That congregations, Districts and entities of the Synod which are using Church Growth materials and practices examine them carefully and use them with proper discernment; and be it further

RESOLVED, That the Lutheran Witness, Reporter and other publications of the Synod report on the errors in some Church Growth materials and practices and also in fairness show how some materials and practices may be used in the service of the Gospel and the advancement of the Kingdom; and be it further

RESOLVED, That the President of the Synod consider appointing a committee to study and address how the truth of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions might be clearly proclaimed in light of the Church Growth Movement and the influences of American culture and pluralism; and be it finally

RESOLVED, That the findings of this committee, if appointed, be shared with all of the Synod as soon as possible.

## Notes

1. *Toward a Theological Basis, Understanding and Use of Church Growth Principles in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, Prepared by The Church Growth Strategy Task Force of the Standing Committee for Pastoral Ministry (St. Louis: Board for Higher Education Services, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1991); *Evangelism and Church Growth* (St. Louis: The Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1987).
2. C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn, and Elmer Towns, eds., “A Glossary of Church Growth Terms,” *Church Growth: State of the Art* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1986), p. 284.
3. Kent R. Hunter, *Foundations for Church Growth* (New Haven, Mo.: Leader Publishing Company, 1983), p. 23.
4. Hunter, *Foundations*, p. 29.
5. Ken Sidey, “Church Growth Fine Tunes Its Formulas,” *Christianity Today* (June 24, 1991), p. 45.
6. Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, third edition, revised and edited by C. Peter Wagner, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990).
7. Sidey, p. 46.
8. C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1976), p. 58.
9. Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Tarrytown, NY: F. H. Revell, 1991), p. 41.
10. Kent R. Hunter and David L. Bahn, *Confessions of a Church Growth Enthusiast* (Lima, Ohio: Fairway Press, 1997).
11. C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Congregation Independent of the State*, translated by J.T. Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, Reprinted 1987), Thesis 65, p. 185–186.
12. Carl Gaertner, *The Means of Grace in an Effective Church Program* in Volume III of *The Abiding Word* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), p. 415.