

Why Churches Grow in a Free Society - Part 2

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The Core Values of Healthy Congregations

This essay represents an effort to apply the thought of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon to the challenge of developing a church. I write this as an evangelical Unificationist, a person convinced that Rev. Moon and his wife, Dr. Hak-ja Han Moon, are the True Parents of all humankind. This means to me that God has disclosed His heart, love and nature through them in a way that builds upon the world's faith traditions and brings them to fulfillment. I believe that the expansion of this message is the most important event that could take place in the world today. I believe that it is the believer's responsibility to do this and that God works through our imperfect selves and congregations, which are "vessels of clay."

I talk about how Christianity exploded with growth in the United States of the nineteenth century as a result of a certain church model that historians term "populist."^[1] As I explored more, I found that the Divine Principle advocates this approach. Its teachings go so far as to assert that in the era of the Second Coming, after the ages in which God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit took direct responsibility for

the world, "the people of faith on earth and in heaven are to bear the third responsibility to defeat Satan." That is, the first responsibility was God's directly. It went from God to Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and finally the salvation of the world is in the hands of "the people of faith on earth and in heaven." In our present time, God will work directly through common people, and this is the basis of the populist approach. "Hence," the Principle goes on to state, "this period is called the age of the providence based on the believers' responsibility."^[2] Further, I found that Father Moon began his church on a populist model and calls for the same in activities like home church.

I have two axioms. One, the believer's responsibility is to win people to True Parents. Two, to make our church communities as effective as they can be, we can learn from the practices of other growing churches. I present research that shows that the churches that are expanding today in America, and have done so for the last three centuries, are those adopting a specific type of organizational form, to which I apply the term the "populist" approach.^[3]

First, I want to make an aside about the implications of church growth to the "interfaith" project. To grow, churches need a strong conviction that my church is here to save people, which implies that people who are not in my church are not saved and need me to save them. Some people take that to be a militant stance that leads to warfare among faith communities. They point to the history of war among religions - which continues among some religions even today. I'd rather look at a more positive scenario, that of the religiously plural American society that enjoys a separation of church and state and, on that basis, freedom of religion.

I believe that the Divine Principle, in its analysis of the division of nations around the three world wars, views freedom of religion as the sine qua non distinguishing the Abel-type society. Religions in a free market of faiths succeed by competing with their peers to win people's hearts and souls. What is wrong with the makers of Jones's pickle relish believing that theirs is the best, better than Smith's pickle relish? As long as the market is refereed impartially, the public benefits by constant improvements in relish as Jones and Smith compete to excel. The public also benefits when churches compete. That is why it is in freedom societies, in which people can practice the religion of their choice and, naturally, proclaim its superiority, that religion is most popular and the largest percentage of the people believe in God.^[4] After all, it is the nature of religion that if does not claim absoluteness, it will fail. Let's review how religions grow in an open society.

Historical background

American religion has grown by populist principles and practices from the colonial times. Not much has changed in the spiritual dynamics of American culture over the span of two hundred years. Contemporary church growth is tapping into the same dynamics.

Nathan Hatch called this the "democratization of Christianity in a popular culture." With the American Revolution, he writes, "turmoil swirled around the crucial issues of authority, organization, and leadership.... Respect for authority, tradition, station, and education eroded.... To be an American citizen was by definition to be a republican, the inheritor of a revolutionary legacy in a world ruled by aristocrats and kings.... This left an indelible imprint upon the structures of American Christianity."^[5] British historian Paul Johnson calls this "the specifically American form of Christianity - undogmatic, moralistic rather than creedal, tolerant but strong, and all-pervasive of society."^[6]

The churches had to relate to the American character and culture, symbolized by slogans such as "no taxation without representation" and "government of the people, by the people, for the people;" a culture in which leaders are "public servants." This is, in fact, part and parcel of the American ideology. Hatch cites nineteenth century British visitor, Anthony Trollope, who in 1863 wrote of the Americans, "They are willing to have religion, as they are willing to have laws; but they choose to make it for themselves. They do not object to paying for it, but they like to have the handling of the article for which they pay."

And what sort of religion did they make for themselves? They "wanted their leaders unpretentious, their doctrines self-evident and down-to-earth, their music lively and singable, and their churches in local hands." Hatch goes on to state, "The rise of evangelical Christianity in the early republic is, in some measure, a story of the success of common people in shaping the culture after their own priorities."^[7] As owners of their faith, naturally they "threw themselves into expanding its influence." By this energy and ownership, America enjoyed an "explosive combination of evangelical fervor and popular sovereignty," and this combination has sustained religious expansion in America ever since. Johnson perceives "an ecumenical and American type of religious devotion which affected all groups and gave a distinctive American flavor to a wide range of denominations." He sums them up under five heads:

Evangelical vigor
A tendency to downgrade the clergy
Little stress on liturgical correctness
Even less on parish boundaries, and above all
An emphasis on individual experience^[8]

The terms "democratization" and "populist" refer, in Hatch's analysis, to three points:

The recognition of the religious authenticity of each person's experience
The allowance for common people to define their own faith and
The use of Christianity as a force for liberation and popular sovereignty

For better or worse, in America the age of the authority of the common man and woman dawned and religion changed forever. One is reminded of the buildings in Manhattan that display not saints, scholars or political heroes, but mechanics, draftsmen, carpenters and farmers. Rockefeller Center's Fifth Avenue artwork celebrates in bronze the production of basic commodities - wheat, wool, cotton, sugar, molasses, tobacco and so forth. This, not the generals, emperors and philosophers, is what is enshrined in American architecture. Hence the American "tendency to downgrade the clergy," pointed out by Johnson (an English scholar). Consider Joel Osteen, senior pastor of America's largest congregation, Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. He is famous, fashionable and fantastically wealthy, but what are Joel's sermons about? He talks about his friends whose batteries die, who lose their jobs, whose parents are struggling with depression or illness, whose marriage is on the rocks, whose boss is a tyrant, who can't figure out how to get the remote to work. He eulogizes his father, who had a small church and a large family. Joel is someone like me, the listener feels, who succeeded and wants me to succeed. Tens of thousands identify with him and participate in his church.

The Americans enjoyed an abundance of space and it was impossible to police the frontier. The easiest social organization for the pioneers to take west with them was their church. Churches were the primary agents of social organization on the American frontier and ultimately for the nation as a whole.^[9] This was abetted by the separation of church and state and what Hatch terms "a climate of withering ecclesiastical establishments." Therefore, the people were free to organize their lives through their churches and religious associations. It was the Massachusetts Bay Puritans writ over a million square miles. The common people of their own choosing set up missionary societies, Bible societies, women's benevolent associations, the Sunday school movement, reform movements, rooted in the experience of the Holy coming into their farm, their village, their church and making Himself known in their language.

The result was the explosive growth of the churches. While Christians in Europe were struggling over control and power, America enjoyed an "incredible growth of 'upstart' denominations with new styles of church life between 1800 and 1850. The Methodists in 1820 had 250,000 members; they doubled in the next ten years. Baptist membership multiplied by ten between 1783 and 1813 as the number of Baptist churches grew from 500 to 2,500. By 1850, the new denominations - Baptist, Methodist, Christian and African American churches - constituted 2/3 of Protestant ministers and members in the country. In 1775 there were 1,800 ministers in America; in 1845 there were nearly 40,000. A completely new church body, the "Freewill Baptists," had as many ministers as the Episcopalians in the early nineteenth century. "Antimission Baptist" preachers "far outnumbered" Roman Catholic priests and Lutheran ministers; the Christians, a new movement created by Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone in the 1820s, had as many preachers as the Presbyterians. The church of the Puritans, Congregationalism, had twice the number of preachers of any other American church in 1775. But it set itself up as a state church in Connecticut and

Massachusetts. By 1845 Methodist preachers outnumbered Congregationalists by more than ten to one.

The state churches, by their doctrinal rigor, institutional formalism and insistence on having a thoroughly educated clergy, stifled creativity and responsiveness to the changing environment. Religious entrepreneurs roamed the countryside, inspired by the Spirit, gathering multifarious crowds, paying no attention to parish lines or church traditions - other than to challenge them. These self-taught Baptists, Methodists, "New Light" Presbyterians and Independent Congregationalist preachers focused on delivering a direct experience that proved God's authority. They developed new delivery methods, revivalism referred to as "new measures" developed by Charles Finney, the altar call, the "anxious bench" designed to convert the hopeful, face-to-face recruitment, camp meetings, new musical styles based on what people liked to sing, plain messages, "muscular Christianity" that led to dramatic conversions of individuals, families and entire communities.

As we see from the fact that almost all mega-churches are independents, not affiliated with mainstream denominations, these populist dynamics continue today.

I want to point out that the Unification Church has its roots in populist faith. I will explain how the Divine Principle calls for a populist church, how Reverend Moon began a populist church, and current trends toward popularizing our faith.

The Divine Principle calls for a populist church

The Principle of Creation explains that churches grow via the populist approach. The process of "realizing the kingdom in the hearts of believers" is set forth in the Divine Principle explanation of how groups come about and grow:

When the body acts according to the will of the mind, and the mind and body thus engage in give and take action, the individual will live a purposeful life. This individual will then attract like-minded people. As these companions work together productively, their group will grow. - Exposition of the Divine Principle, 31

This passage from the Principle of Creation describes the growth of any group, including a church. We can divide it into four parts. It begins with an individual living a purposeful life with the mind and body united. Everything begins with the unity of mind and body, centered on God. Such a person will attract like-minded people and, given good management sense, they will work together productively and the group will grow. This is the populist model. It describes how True Father began the church. It is Principle 101.

Principle 201 comes from the Principle of Restoration, where we read:

"...the universal tendency to seek out good leaders and righteous friends stems from our innermost desire to come before God through an Abel figure who is closer to God. By uniting with him, we can come closer to God ourselves. The Christian faith teaches us to be meek and humble. By this way of life, we may meet our Abel figure and thus secure the way to go before God." - Exposition of the Divine Principle, 194

This tells ministers and members to be "good leaders and righteous friends" in order to attract God-seeking people. It also says that we need to meet our Abel figure. I've seen many presidents on television, but have I ever met one? No. I've heard Billy Graham preach in a stadium, but did I ever meet him? No. Change comes from human touch, human contact. To the new person, the usher whom they meet is more important than the senior pastor in the pulpit.

In its analysis of the late medieval Catholic Church and Protestant Reformation, the Unification movement extols the populist model, a flat organization focused on spiritual experience. "From the viewpoint of God, the vertical center," Father has said, "all object partners of love are equal."[\[10\]](#) At first glance, the Divine Principle speaks of the Protestant Reformation in glowing terms. "After the Protestant Reformation, the way was open for people to freely seek God through their own reading of the Bible, without the mediation of the priesthood. People were no longer subjected to the authority of others in their religious life, but could freely seek their own path of faith."[\[11\]](#)

The Divine Principle points out that in order for the people to seek God freely, the denominational style Catholic Church, including dysfunctional religious rites and bureaucracy, had to flatten and focus on encounter with God.

"The people...rebelled against the ritualism and rules of the church which were constraining their free devotion. They fought against the stratified feudal system and papal authority which deprived them of autonomy. They protested the medieval view that faith required unquestioning obedience to the dictates of the Church in all areas of life, which denied them the right to worship God according to the dictates of conscience based on their own reading of the Bible." - Exposition of the Divine Principle, 352

As a student of the Unification teachings, for much of my life I considered this to be a celebration of the Reformation wrought by Luther and Calvin, but it is not that simple. The Protestant Reformation was a

multi-faceted event involving conflict between the magisterial reformers, such as Luther and Calvin, and the free-church radicals. The magisterial side, the Lutheran and Calvinist state churches, maintained the "only one church" point of view, with the church and state united. In that system, all people are legally required to attend the church according to location. Tithing is a tax. Church parish lines and political boundaries are the same. Baptism is tantamount to citizenship in the state and so happens at birth; membership in the church is involuntary. The Protestant mainstream denominations, as well as Roman Catholic and Orthodox bodies, maintain this approach to this day. Each operates a system of parishes, districts and regions.

The Divine Principle praise of Protestantism is not for this denominational church style. The Divine Principle identifies with the other side, the free-church, populist approach. The Divine Principle exalts the house church movement of Pietism, in which believers sought authentic spirituality in small groups. It points to the parish-busting neighborhood movement of John Wesley, who later turned his "Methodist society" study groups into a church. It praises the strongly anti-establishment church leadership of George Fox, who was imprisoned for refusing to bend to any human authority, the new age spiritualism of Swedenborg, and the free-range revivalism that characterized the Great Awakenings. Pietism, Methodism, Quakerism and communication with the spirit world..."in these diverse ways, the Abel-type view of life was maturing to form the democratic world of today."[\[12\]](#) In contrast, Luther receives scant praise and Calvin is criticized over the predestination issue.

Thus, the Divine Principle finds God working not through the mainstream churches, Protestant or Catholic, but through the populist trends in Christianity in the "period of preparation for the Messiah."

The Unification Church started with a populist model

Reverend Moon practiced this populist religious style as he planted his churches in Korea. Few young, visionary church leaders attempt to transform old bureaucratic denominational wineskins. Instead they leave behind the old wineskins and make new ones. "What makes this reformation radical," Donald Miller author of *Reinventing American Protestantism* writes, "is that the hope of reforming existing denominational churches has largely been abandoned. Instead, the leaders of these new paradigm churches are starting new movements, unbounded by denominational bureaucracy and the restraint of tradition - except the model of first-century Christianity." This description of the reinvention of Protestantism in the 1970s applies perfectly to Reverend Moon's ministry of the 1940s and 50s.

When established churches in Korea rejected this young country preacher's radical call and maintained their traditions and hierarchies, he separated from them. He established a model that resembled first-century Christianity. He focused on his purpose and his teachings, and generated a powerful relationship with the Father in Heaven and a desperate heart to care for people on earth. He taught those whom he met, investing all his heart and energy, and led spirit-filled worship with fervent singing, prayer and preaching. He called us to do the same as he sent out pioneer missionaries and organized the "home church" and "break through in your neighborhood" ministries.

What he created in the early years exemplified the two characteristics of successful post-modern religious movements. One, it was a flat organization allowing local ownership, not controlled by the western missionaries or Korean hierarchies. Reverend Moon (then called "Teacher") took members into the mountains and to beaches for retreats and recreation, planted rice with members, and slept and ate with them. As do all emerging spiritual movements, the group developed its own music, with songs written by the local members. According to Rev. Kim Zin-moon, in the 1960s Reverend Moon resisted his clergy's pleading for the construction of church buildings.

Two, the church focused on imparting spiritual experience by emphasizing prayer, fasting, street preaching, pioneer evangelism with no cash in hand, and so forth. His worship services featured extended singing, repeating the same songs over and over, generating a Pentecostal atmosphere in which people felt electricity. In Reverend Moon's words, "People who attended called one another shik-ku, or family member. We were intoxicated with love. Anyone who came there could see what I was doing and hear what I was saying. We were connected by an inner cord of love that let us communicate with God."[\[13\]](#) Individuals would be guided spiritually through the streets to the church. Reverend Moon dressed in "laborer's clothes" and waited in the back of the room unnoticed until coming forward to deliver his message straight out of the Bible. He had no seminary training and did not model his ministry on traditional doctrines or liturgical forms. He fashioned his faith tradition through direct give and take with God and thorough reading of the Bible, while experiencing a life of service to others as a poor student belonging to an oppressed nation.

Reverend Moon once described the ascendance of the Messiah in this way: "... he guides them with God's character and true love, [and] they will come to understand the true reality of religion and the universe and they will [receive him]. This will happen because all beings in the universe desire to be absorbed into the sphere of a lord of love on earth who is higher than they. Even birds and dogs will go to a village that loves them more and takes care of them. It is the same for all beings."[\[14\]](#) Churches succeed not by power, property or established social status, but by loving people.

Home church is a populist model

Through home church, True Father called the membership to create a network of hubs in a pluralistic society without parish lines. Thus the Unification spiritual community was to be a network of locally-generated hubs, each of equal authority. "Now is the time when the period of national level organization is over. If you are a Kim, Kwak or any other clan, you should start hoondokhae first with your own families."[\[15\]](#)

Since any number of blessed couples may live in a given geographical area, with each free to develop their community, this is a pluralistic religious society without parish lines: "the standard of activity is not in the province. It is the leaders of the district and the neighborhood... The problem is how to educate the district and the neighborhood and have it sink in.... Everything comes into the district and the neighborhood." This echoes Rev. Moon's words that "There should be a family in that neighborhood... The mother and father have to believe Heavenly Father absolutely; they have to love sons and daughters like Heavenly Father loves the mother and father. We have to love our neighbors and the nation that is connected..." We note the personal ministries of Sun-jin Moon, visiting members in their houses in Japan, sharing meals with them, sleeping in their spare bedrooms.

Churches grow by placing responsibility in the hands of local families and small groups. They are responsible to initiate viable ministries, attract new people, assimilate them, raise them, and liberate and release them as blessed central families. The Witnessing Summit's[\[16\]](#) terms for the "membership process" are "meet, member, mentor and ministry." With this responsibility we have the freedom to figure out the best way of using our own resources. Church growth theory and practice tells us that there is nothing more effective than this.

Why does decentralization energize a church? One reason is that it enables a local church to cross cultural barriers. But there is another reason. Decentralization is effective because it places responsibility in the hands of people who are on the frontline. This puts church leadership and decision-making with the people actually in touch with the market. It is there that the churches will figure out what really works in bringing their neighbors into communion with God through True Parents. Through a new generation of leadership we see that now coming into place.

[\[1\]](#) Thus, the term "populist" in this article is not to be confused with the term as utilized in discussions of the Freedom Society.

[\[2\]](#) Exposition of the Divine Principle (1996 English translation) page 186

[\[3\]](#) In line with the Microsoft Corporation's Encarta World English Dictionary definition, "emphasizing or promoting ordinary people, their lives, or their interests."

[\[4\]](#) Rodney Stark, *Discovering God: The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief* (2007), Ch. 3: "Rome: An Ancient Religious Marketplace."

[\[5\]](#) Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (1989), page 6

[\[6\]](#) Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (1999), page 109

[\[7\]](#) Hatch (as above) page 9

[\[8\]](#) Paul Johnson, (as above), page 116

[\[9\]](#) See Donald G. Mathews, "The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780 - 1830," in John M. Mulder and John F. Wilson, *Religion in American History: Interpretive Essays* (1978), 199 - 218. First published in the *American Quarterly*, XXI (1969), 23 - 43

[\[10\]](#) "The True Owners in Establishing the Kingdom of Peace and Unity in Heaven and on Earth," April 10, 2006, Seoul

[\[11\]](#) Page 341

[\[12\]](#) Pages 356 - 57

[\[13\]](#) A Peace-Loving Global Citizen, page 124

[\[14\]](#) Cheon Seong Gyeong, page 200; from a talk on 1978.10.04

[\[15\]](#) From Father's speech, "Our Responsibilities to Establish Cheon Il Guk," in *The Vision and Mission of Cheon Il Guk*, an IIFWP publication.

[\[16\]](#) A series of large round table discussions on outreach that occurred in various cities throughout the United States beginning in 2007