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*Growing and Flourishing. The Ecology of Church Growth*

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Revd Canon Dr Stephen Spencer leads the theological education initiative for the Anglican Communion and is based at the Anglican Communion Office (since 2018). He was previously vice principal at St Hild College in Yorkshire. He also has experience as a parish priest and has written several theological books. During his time in the Diocese of Leeds he was Link Officer for the diocesan Companion Link with the Dioceses of Mara, Rorya and Tarime in Tanzania.

Stephen Spencer presents an inspiring study that discusses church growth in an international environment. The purpose of this book is to encourage and inform church growth (94). He does indeed achieve his goal.

It is a work of popular theology, but it is food for thought for theologians addressing questions of how to speak rightly of growth in the Christian life. It seeks an answer from outside the West. Spencer enables us to hear the Anglican diocese of Mara in Tanzania. In doing so, he applies the lessons learned about church growth in the Diocese of Mara, Rorya and Tarime in Tanzania to the British context and compares them to a fairly typical medium-sized church in a provincial town.

His initial understanding of church growth is based on the Anglican definition of growth as spiritual and numerical growth including its capacity to serve the whole community (Church of England, GS 995). Thus he develops the image of an ecology of church growth, meaning the interconnectedness of the church and its growth with its environment.

A distinctive feature of the book is the narrative form of the accounts, such as the vivid description of church growth in the Mara region (16-19) or the extensive quotes from leaders in the Mara region. The Mara region has seen substantial growth over the last 30 years – growing from a dozen parishes in 1985 to 150 parishes in 2010 (3, 15-16). In interviewing a cross-section of people at the heart of this church growth, both lay and ordained, he gathers their insights into the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of church growth.

Stephen Spencer discovers six factors for church growth in the Mara region. Alongside numerical growth there has been growth of congregational relationships, growth of interactive evangelism, an increasing dynamism of sacramental life, a strengthening of community service, and a nurturing of personal discipleship (42). Spencer conceptualizes them in six dimensions that can be developed in up to three stages: institutional growth, congregational relationships, evangelistic communication, sacramental expression, community service and discipleship (53-93; see the summary as a graph on page 93).

The ‘numerical growth’ factor is interesting. It was not measured in the number of individual conversions but in the number of new congregations. This shows a communal approach to evangelism (39).

In a theoretical classification, he interprets the results through the lens of Avery Dulles’ survey of ecclesiology in his *Models of the Church*. This multiple correspondence with Dulles’ highly regarded survey of ecclesiology shows that what has been happening in Mara region is not an oddity with little relevance to the wider church but rather an example of the wider multi-faceted nature of the Catholic Church (48). In particular, the role of evangelism rooted in the community life of the congregation and its relationships with its surrounding community is important.

For Spencer, what church growth means becomes clear here. It cannot just be an increase in the size of the gathered church – viewed as a self-contained institution. Instead it is an “increase of interaction with its surrounding community in which neither side loses itself but in which both build up purposeful and life-giving relationships” (51).

In the carry-over of his findings, Spencer discusses studies of the Anglican church growth scene and brings up comparables and differences. For example, Spencer argues that the evangelistic and sacramental dimensions are missing in Michael Moynagh’s reflection on fresh expression of church (98-101).

In the final part of his study, “Bringing Mara growth home”, he discusses the church growth initiative of a British congregation that took several intentional steps to address the growth of their church. From after-school clubs, to messy church, to godly play, new attempts were made again and again. These attempts are discussed and recognized by Spencer with his framework of six dimensions.

An outstanding effect of the ecology analog is that the author does not describe the six dimensions as steps, but organically. This means that growth is not manufactured through an instrumental process but must be cultivated in an interactive and response way, like nurturing crops in a vegetable garden (112).

Critically, the comparability of the two contexts (Tanzania, Britain) is not discussed in depth (4-5) and so does not defuse the criticism of a carry-over. At times, the description of transferable insights (such as numerical growth) felt as if a more critical edge would help. Finally, the theological normativity of his notion of growth requires a critical theological counterweight, which Spencer does not provide here enough. For this, I am happy to recommend Martyn Percy’s book in the following review by Kristine Stache.