
Enthusiasts in the Church Growth Models

John Hayward



www.churchmodel.org.uk

Definition

An enthusiast in the church growth model is a believer who not only has an enthusiasm for the faith, but whose enthusiasm drives them into contact with unbelievers, seeing some of them converted. The number of converts an enthusiast makes is their conversion potential. If some of those converts become enthusiasts also, then the enthusiasts have reproduced themselves. In simple terms the number of new enthusiasts one enthusiast makes is their reproduction potential¹.

Church Growth Through Enthusiasts

The church growth models have the central thesis that such churches grow through such enthusiasts making converts and new enthusiasts². That is church growth primarily comes through personal contact between believers and unbelievers, rather than through advertising, media broadcasts, or directly from God. There are a number of ways this may happen:

1. The enthusiast may “lead someone to Christ”, perhaps through a personal friendship, or an evangelistic visit. This may start with an explanation of the gospel and ends when the unbeliever makes a commitment to demonstrate that they now believe, often doing so through prayer with the enthusiast.
2. The enthusiasts may be the one who invites the unbeliever to church, even though the subsequent conversion happens at the hands of others.

¹ Strictly speaking, to calculate the conversion and reproduction potentials it should be assumed that all the rest of society are unbelievers. The actual number of converts made, or enthusiasts made will be proportionally less as the church grows and there are fewer unbelievers to contact.

² Conversion is a work of God. No person can truly convert another to Christ as this requires regeneration, a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. However God usually works through human means, speaking the Gospel, etc., because such works of the Holy Spirit come through God working through the unbeliever’s mind, convincing them of truth. It is in this sense that this article means one person “converting” another: God using human means to open the heart of another through the Holy Spirit.

3. The enthusiasts may be someone who has an impressive Christian lifestyle, different enough to encourage others to seek the same. However there still has to be some communication to the unbeliever that the person is a Christian so that the subsequently come into contact with a Christian church.
4. A person may hear the Christian message through a media broadcast, or seeing an Alpha course advertised, or because of troubles in their life and seek out a church without human help. However often there will be people in church who will befriend and nurture such seekers until they come to faith. Again such believing friends are enthusiasts.
5. An enthusiasts is not only making converts but other enthusiasts. They are not just passing on beliefs but spiritual life that becomes outwardly manifested. Such a reception of the outward manifestations of spiritual life is called in the Bible “receiving the Spirit”, and is often passed on through the laying on of hands, most definitely personal contact!

Not All Believers are Enthusiasts

Even in fast growing cell churches over 35% of believers play no part in the conversion process. There are many congregations where there are no such enthusiasts, because no conversions take place for a long period of times. Data fitting to the limited enthusiasm model indicate that less than 10% of the church are involved in the conversion of others at any time. A quick poll of church members, asking them how many converts they have responsible for over a two year period will quickly give some indication of how few enthusiasts there are!

New Converts are the Primary Source of Enthusiasts

An enthusiast not only requires an enthusiasm for the faith and an outwardly manifested spiritual life but a network of unbelieving friends and relatives to witness to. Thus although such enthusiasm is not confined to new converts, they will be the best source, as they will have more potential to see converts, and thus produce more enthusiasts. The limited enthusiasm model assumes that only new converts are enthusiasts. The renewal models, in the process of development, extend the idea to the re-enthusing of existing believers.

The Enthusiastic Period is Limited

The other central thesis of the church growth models is that the enthusiastic period of the enthusiasts is limited in duration. That is, there comes a point where they cease to be enthusiasts and become inactive believers. They may play a full part in the life of the church, but not in converting unbelievers. There are a number of reasons why this may be true:

1. The active believers have been recruiting through their network of friends and relatives, which is now exhausted. There are three scenarios:

- a) The people in this network have become believers themselves;
 - b) People in this network have become immune to any further pressure to join the church;
 - c) The active believers have ceased to have meaningful contact with unbelievers. Many new converts find after a year or so that they have a new set of friends in the church and their old unbelieving set have drifted away. Often the new convert does this subconsciously because being part of the church means taking on a new set of values leaving them uncomfortable with the values of their old friends. In strict churches they may even be encouraged to distance themselves from the world, inadvertently losing their conversion potential.
2. Churches do not just evangelise. After a while new converts find other work to do within the church and spend less time on conversion activities.
 3. In periods of intense growth the pastoral demands of dealing with new converts prevent ministers from spending as much time on evangelism as they might like and thus their conversion potential drops.
 4. Often believers run out of enthusiasm for conversion and settle into a more subdued version of belief where the zeal to see new converts has declined to the point of inactivity. Again there are a number of scenarios behind this:
 - a) The believer has forgotten why they converted from unbelief to belief. They now have no desire to see others converted;
 - b) Often the believers gain status within the church and lose the real reasons why they joined in the first place. Any enthusiasm they now have is centred on their own advancement within the church;
 - c) In non-strict churches the lifestyle is so close to the world that the new convert quickly sees little point in attempting to win people to the church. Believers are so similar to unbelievers that they have little to offer and so stop seeking converts;
 - d) The believers may find the church so enjoyable that their enthusiasm is for their own experience of it, or of God, rather than to see others converted;
 - e) It may be that the church has not lived up to expectation and the believer has lost enthusiasm for anything to do with its beliefs. Instead they have settled into a nominal church life.

Many of these reasons are summed up in what has been nicknamed Wesley's Law of the decline of pure religion: "Taking up the religion has produced benefits which makes missionary zeal too costly to engage in" (Kelley: *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*). Witnessing is dangerous business. People with a lot to lose, be it status, friends, respect, etc. will be more reluctant to engage in such personal evangelism. Many of John Wesley's converts were poor. Once converted, they were

zealous for the faith, as they had virtually nothing to lose. However their conversion produced such an improvement in lifestyle that they became materially richer and more comfortable. Too comfortable to take the risks they did when young in the faith.

Not All Converts May become Enthusiasts

Not every new convert is necessarily an enthusiast when it comes to the conversion of others. Some, when converted, immediately become inactive believers, playing no part in the evangelistic mission of the church. Again there are various scenarios:

1. They may be naturally shy and unwilling to engage in any form of recruitment;
2. They may be a social isolate and have virtually no network of friends to influence;
3. They may be a secondary convert, the spouse or child of a primary convert, who has “converted” for social reasons. It was common practice in the early church for the pagan husbands of Christian women to “convert” to the church. Often such secondary converts have little real enthusiasm for the actual faith;
4. It is possible for people to be converted to the ethos of the church - its services, customs, and morality - without ever being converted to the truth of the faith. As such they may have little desire to see others converted. Their “conversion” has been a purely social phenomena rather than one of deep religious conviction. Nevertheless they are part of the church, albeit an inactive believer³.

Renewal is the Key To Church Growth

If the thesis is true that church growth is primarily through evangelism, then the presence of a small number of effective enthusiasts within the church is needed to make the church grow. Often churches have few enthusiasts, whose effectiveness is too small to sustain themselves by reproduction in new converts. Means need to be taken to increase their effectiveness – that is to renew the existing believers, effectively increasing their reproduction potential. This often happens in times of revival, which usually starts with *existing* believers being revived. This is what happened in the Acts of the Apostles with existing believers being baptised with the Spirit, and subsequently passing the both the faith, and the work of the Spirit, onto new converts.

In practise the renewal of existing believers, and the reproduction of enthusiasts through new converts will continue side-by-side. This is the subject of ongoing modelling in the renewal models.

³ There is a phenomenon of social conversion, where people adopt Christianity but without a spiritual conversion to Christ. Social conversion also occurs if a person converts to another religion, political view, or lifestyle etc. Social conversion and spiritual conversion are both largely spread by personal contact thus the church growth models can apply to both phenomena.