
The Omnivore's Dilemma And Growth For Growth's Sake

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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I must admit that I like large churches. I like the suggestion that their sheer size represents something of the grandeur of God. I like all the programs and mission opportunities they provide. I like the enormously talented staffs that they are usually able to afford. Many people have deep needs met in large churches, and the better large churches really do proclaim the gospel in effective ways.

I grew up, however, in a small church. There I learned much about the idiosyncrasies of community. I learned the values of diversity (when folks got upset, no one could up and leave for another church; we were the only Episcopal church around!) For many years, however, that church remained quite small. Our parish and mission life developed a cycle of boom and bust, up to various renewal movements then down to depressed clergy, then back up to mission trips, then back down to tedious music and dry liturgy. Lately, that parish has flourished with fine and healthy leadership among both its clergy and its people.

By "flourished," I mean that the parish has grown in numbers of people and in numbers of dollars. I realize, of course, that growth can occur in other ways; but, again, I like physical flourishing and growth. My own parish is quite large, and I know that unless we are growing in people and in dollars, we might just be standing still.

But what if there are limits to growth? Several books on natural economy proclaim that very reality in the natural worlds of farming and energy production. I have eagerly enjoyed those books in the interest of earth stewardship and sustainability. Some scientists claim that the world's production of oil has actually reached its peak, and we do not realize it yet.

Michel Pollan makes the same sort of point regarding the commoditization of agriculture in his book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. Once we determine everything's value primarily in terms of its financial cost and reward, in dollar figures, and in "yield per acre," we actually begin to cultivate crops that are less nutritious and less healthy for us. Finding it cheaper to grow huge supplies of beef and corn with synthetic fertilizers, antibiotics, and hormones (mostly made with petroleum products), we feed ourselves with items that are missing key ingredients.

At one point, Pollan contrasts industrial production with artisanal production. "Industrial farmers are in the business of selling commodities," he says, ever more cheaply so that the enterprise can grow profits (page 250). On the other hand, artisanal production, "is based on selling something special rather than being the least-cost producer of a commodity" (page 250). Having read that, I considered our own communities of growth and health. Is there a size-limit to the community where Christians can know authentic community and be challenged to mission?

If we get too large, do we lose the sense of "something special?" I believe that point occurs when we begin to relate to religion as a commodity, as if church is only a delivery system for something sterile and industrial. Some of the biggest mega churches today realize the principle of "artisanal production." They arrange members in smaller cell groups of study and accountability. These churches are successful both because some larger structure and larger set of resources has enabled them, but also because they remember the uniqueness of small communities of diverse faith.

Small groups, like small parishes, are where different seeds meet with different soils and wonderful fruits sprout. Small communities are where we learn to be fascinated with individual searches and discoveries, those journeys of people who become our true friends. A church, of any size, becomes sterile and lifeless when it begins to speak simplistically and to make faith into a "commodity," like any big industrial producer. A church which can change the world, however, knows the values of natural systems; "the efficiencies of natural systems flow from complexity and interdependence-by definition the very opposite of simplification" (page 214).

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