The pioneer of the Church Growth Movement was Donald McGavran. His championing of the ‘homogenous unit principle’ (i.e., like attracts like) for church numerical growth – popularised in the post-war era, and promoted strongly by some missionaries – has been adopted by numerous pragmatic brands of evangelicalism throughout the world. In McGavran’s thinking, the less ‘cultural’ differences people had to overcome in order to become ‘members’ of a church or association, the more likely it was to grow numerically. Critics of McGavran’s ‘homogenous unit principle’ have always been fierce. A church for working class Hispanics in a tough urban neighbourhood of America – intentionally tribal, as it were – may do well numerically. But is it a church? Or, is a congregation that seeks to be focussed solely on elite aspirational wealthy middle class Caucasians in the suburbs a church – or a kind of ‘members-only religious club’?

McGavran’s success drew – indirectly – on the likes of Dale Carnegie (How to Win Friends and Influence People, 1936). It is no surprise, therefore, to see the USA leading the way with health, wealth and prosperity commandeered into the gospel, and universally prescribed for all, with guaranteed annual growth for all successful, well-run churches. In America, it is always hard to say where business and ends and religion begins. The two are not so much joined at the hip as genetically spliced together. McGavran’s legacy was a ‘homogenous unit principle’ that was unquestionably successful, pragmatically, if numbers were indeed the criteria for judging success. But if judged in ecclesial terms, the ‘homogenous unit principle’ is heterodox at best, and perhaps worse – turning numerical growth into a fetish or apotheosis – at the expense of the deeper political and cultural demands of the Kingdom of God. Let us not forget that the Church of Jesus Christ – like the ministry of Jesus – was radically inclusive, and supra-tribal from the outset. Faithfulness was always championed before indices of numerical success.

Talk of ‘membership’ in British churches, however, prompts another question. As Grace Davie’s work on religion in Europe has argued (Europe: the Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002), religion in Europe is treated by its citizens like a utility, not a commodity. As the oft-witty trope has it, many people in England are inclined to treat the Church of England like a kind of ‘Spiritual National Health Service’. So, it is there when you need it, and universally available; as well as (mostly) free at the point of delivery. You can ‘go private’
if you want to, but the Church of England is there for everyone, irrespective of faith or fealty. The Church of England is not a commodity for opting in; it is a public utility from which it is almost, by definition, hard to opt out of. Many national churches and ‘established’ denominations in Europe function like this.

This is why the Church Growth Movement, and missiologists more generally, may need to do some work on maths. In the secular world, one plus one equals two. But counting and adding whole numbers in European churches is a kind of fuzzy logic. Is the newly baptised infant ‘one unit’ in terms of believers? Does the person who comes every week, but has more doubt than faith, count as ‘one’ or a ‘half’? Is the regular, but not frequent churchgoer ‘one’ – or less? Is the person who comes to everything in church, but has a heart of stone count as one – or less? Indeed, what does ‘membership’ even mean to denominations that have very attenuated ideas on the insider-outsider dynamics of congregational belonging? It is into this context that David Goodhew’s remarkable book speaks. His work is arguably the first decent attempt at a theology of church growth, and that has paid attention to the dynamics of the European situation. The essays cover a considerable range, and unusually for an edited multi-author collection, there is not a weak note to be found in the symphony. Critics may complain that that agenda is, itself, the wrong end from which to tackle ecclesiology. But with contributors such as Alister McGrath, Benedicta Ward, Miranda Threlfall-Holmes and Martin Warner, the penumbra of contributions is varied and rich.

Goodhew knows that concern about church growth is widespread and contentious, yet he has offered a thoughtful and ground-breaking book that narrates a very rich assortment of perspectives that articulate a theology for the movement, and for parishes and congregations more generally. Central to Goodhew’s concern is a critique of (what he terms) ‘a theology of decline’ – that somehow, secularisation has inevitable consequences for church attendance. Like Goodhew, I do not share this pessimism. Yet there is plenty of it in the church – almost as though the churches themselves, sometimes, acted as acolytes for the secularisation thesis to explain their (perceived) decline. In fact, the truer diagnosis for religion in the developed world, and especially Europe, is that patterns of belonging are changing (witness political parties, trade unions, etc.), such that broad ‘support’ may not translate into concrete ‘membership’ any more. The shift from utility to commodity is a general cultural transformation, not confined to religion. Why does this matter? As Goodhew suggests, better to light a match than curse the darkness. There can be growth, even in challenging times – in liberal, broad, catholic and evangelical churches. The question should not be ‘if’, but ‘how’?