

Ed Stetzer: Who C. Peter Wagner Really Was

I was sad to hear Peter Wagner died (Friday). He was always a fascinating and brilliant man, and he loved the church.

Who Is Peter Wagner?

For those of you who don't know who he was, I first knew him as a professor at the School of World Missions at Fuller Seminary. His Wikipedia article has more.

I remember when I first met him. He was lecturing at the Billy Graham School at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. If I recall correctly, he said that Thom Rainer and the Billy Graham School now had the "mantle" of the Church Growth Movement. (Peter was a key leader, if not the key leader, in the Church Growth Movement before he moved on to other emphases.)

We started corresponding after that meeting. He once sent me a long email, walking through a book I wrote few years before his email, and being so encouraging. He contrasted my thoughts with his own (and others), always encouraging and making me think. And it came out of the blue on a book I published many years earlier.

The Lives of Peter Wagner

I mostly knew him as a missiologist and an academic. And yes, he (and Donald McGarvan) partly inspired me that a missiologist needs odd facial hair (true story).

Peter would later change his views and focus on things other than missiology and the Church Growth Movement and, yes, we disagreed. Interestingly, the book I co-wrote on spiritual warfare is, in some ways, a very different view than his and a response to some of the ideas he helped popularize.

But he was always a kind man and a friend.

For example, when I wrote a critique of some of his views, he reached out and said he was thankful for my interaction. Even when you disagreed (and we did), he was kind and open to different views.

Which Peter Wagner?

If you knew Peter Wagner, people would often ask, “Which Peter Wagner?”

They asked not because he was two-faced, but because he changed his views so much. If you showed up in the '80s, you met a very different (non-charismatic, for example), Peter Wagner who led the Church Growth Movement. In the new millennium, he largely is known for what would be called the New Apostolic Reformation.

For example, he wrote a book on leadership, *Leading Your Church to Growth*, which would be a great help to me as a young pastor.

Later, he wrote a book (and named a new movement) called *The Third Wave*, which I've written about extensively, explaining the term and sharing how it continues today.

Everyone quoted his church-planting book, in which he said, “Church planting is the most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven.” I heard it quoted a few weeks ago, ironically attributed (incorrectly) to me.

And later in his life, as I mentioned, he would launch the New Apostolic Reformation, to much enthusiasm and controversy.

A Friend

But what never changed was that he was a friend to many of us, even when we disagreed with *early* Peter and/or *later* Peter!

He was always a kind voice, looking for how God was at work,

and seeking to celebrate what he saw as the move of the Spirit. And he loved the church. Even his fascinating memoir, *Wrestling with Alligators, Prophets and Theologians: Lessons From a Lifetime in the Church*, includes the word "church."

I will miss his emails and pray that his family will experience the grace of Jesus in their time of grief.