

PLANTING RAPIDLY REPRODUCING CHURCHES

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Introduction

The principles in this article are ones gleaned from experience in planting rapidly reproducing churches in China. They were then tested through training, coaching and mentoring church planters serving in over one hundred nations, mostly working among unreached people groups. Over the years I have concluded it is difficult to make generalizations about evangelism, but it is more appropriate to make generalizations about discipleship and church planting. Evangelism is quite context-specific because half of the process is determined by what an individual believes and understands truth to be. Once someone has given themselves fully to the Lord, the discipleship and church planting processes become almost entirely about what God is calling us to. That deals with the culture of the Kingdom of God rather than the cultures from which we come.

All Disciples Are Involved

The main purpose of life is to glorify the Lord. We can do this best when we know Him most intimately and serve Him most fervently. It is God's intention is for every disciple to be engaged in ministry. Those who are gifted with the five leadership gifts in Ephesians 4:11-12 are to equip those with other gifts to do the work of the ministry, which results in the building up of the Body of Christ. Though each believer has a different gifting and a unique calling, everyone is to be engaged in living out the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:37-40) and carrying out the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20).

If we are living out the Great Commandment then we will be making reproducing disciples because part of the disciple-making process is "teaching them to obey everything I [Christ] have commanded" and the Commission itself is one of those commands. Hence, every believer should by definition be involved in making reproducing disciples. It is a short step from this toward starting reproducing spiritual communities (churches) because several of the other commands demand a spiritual community to carry out. Reproducing disciples will result in reproducing churches as a matter of obedience.

God is concerned both with what He accomplishes in us in conforming us to the image of Christ, as well as what He accomplishes through us in bringing glory to His name by being a blessing to everyone. We are to bless unbelievers by being a testimony of his grace and mercy – and to bless fellow believers as an encourager, partner, and equipper.

Be Worth Reproducing

Our constant aspiration should be to grow in our character, faith, fruit of the Spirit, and obedience. Such growth in discipleship transforms us into something that is desirable to reproduce. God is not interested in multiplying mediocrity. Hence, one of the first considerations for every disciple to consider as he/she begins such ministry is to spend time in introspection and if necessary, repentance. We must never become complacent or satisfied with the level of maturity and love and faith to which the Lord has already brought us. We must continually aspire to more fully and completely love the Lord our God with all of our hearts, minds, souls and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. One way we can pursue this is to structure our spiritual communities to provide what I like to call dual accountability. That is, accountability to obey the Lord, and accountability to pass on to others what we have received.

The spiritual economy differs from the earthly economy in that the spiritual economy is based on giving away what one has. God reveals more of Himself to us when we are faithful in sharing with others what we already know of Him. He gives more insight and revelation to those who are faithful in sharing with others what they already understand. He speaks to us more clearly when we obey what he has already spoken to us.

This means the most loving thing we can do for one another is to hold one another accountable for obeying what we learn from the Lord and to share it with others. This is not a matter of legalism but of love. This is what we must do if we truly want the best for one another, the greatest spiritual blessing and insight, the deepest intimacy with our Father.

From a practical standpoint, this can be carried out in many ways, but the simplest is my favorite. At the end of each time of Bible discussion and prayer, in small groups each disciple spends time expressing to others in the group what the Lord is specifically speaking to him/her about and with whom they plan to have a spiritual discussion about the topic. The person(s) with whom they share might be unbelievers, in which case the conversation might be more pre-evangelistic or evangelistic in nature, or they might be believers in which case the conversation might be more for encouragement or equipping. The next time the group gathers together, each person shares how they did in obeying what the Lord had spoken to them and in sharing it with others. In such a setting, the entire group can remain on the same passage or topic until everyone in the group has proven faithful in incorporating specific applications into their own lives and faithful in passing on to others the insights they are gleaning. This keeps every disciple constantly involved in either evangelizing the lost or helping to disciple fellow believers or both.

Rethinking Leadership

Therefore, since ministry is not only for the “mature” but for all of us who follow Christ, all of us are “leaders” in some sense of the word. In the church we tend to think of leaders as those who serve in a role of one or more of the five-fold gifts in Ephesians 4:11-12, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers; or else in terms of the officers of the church, bishops/pastors, elders, or deacons. We tend to have an attitude that leaders in the church must be mature believers. This view is fine as long as we remember that is one type of leadership. In another sense, God has given each individual a sphere of influence. A poor, illiterate housewife in the developing world can be a “leader” for her children and neighbors. This type of “leadership” needs greater emphasis in the Kingdom of God today.

I like to think of this type of leadership in terms of the metaphor of a mother duck leading her ducklings. As they walk or swim single file, only the first duckling is following the mother duck. Each of the other ducklings is following the one preceding them in line. In order to lead a duckling like this, one does not have to be a mature duck, just one step ahead of another duckling. In this metaphor, it is important to realize there is only one Leader of leaders – Jesus. All the rest of us are simply ducklings. None of us is totally mature (to the fullness of the measure of the stature of Christ). We are all “in process”. This does not excuse us from the responsibility to lead those whom we can, however. We still have the responsibility to steward whatever leadership opportunities God has given us.

Helping Shape New Converts

The process of establishing a pattern of dual accountability and involving each disciple in leadership begins with immediately guiding new converts to evangelize their own friends and family. As soon as someone decides to repent and follow Jesus, I like to tell them, “It is a great blessing to bring others into a relationship with Jesus. It is a greater blessing to start a new spiritual community. It is the greatest blessing to equip others to start new spiritual communities. Right now I want to help you have blessing, greater blessing, and the greatest blessing.”

At that point I ask them to make a list of one hundred people with whom they need to share the good news about Jesus. I ask them to select five to share with immediately. I then teach them some contextually appropriate way to share the gospel and have them practice five times, each time envisioning they are sharing with one of the five people on their list. I do the same thing in helping them prepare to share their testimony and practicing it. This process takes at least two hours, but is well worth the time invested. When I finish, I set a time to meet back with me and send them out to share their faith. I instruct them to follow the same process I followed with them should any of the five people they share with decide to follow the Lord. Frequently one or more people come to the Lord as a result and sometimes a new spiritual community (church) is born very quickly.

When I meet back with them, I model the dual accountability model and if they have not shared with five people and followed up with any who responded positively, then we go over the same material again and make sure they have all the preparation they need. This sets up a pattern for their spiritual lives. More responsibility and leadership are given to those who have been faithful in the small elements of responsibility they have already practiced. Small increments are important in this respect. This approach is most easily practiced in a small group setting so if you are part of a larger church then you should offer such accountability structures as a subset of the large group meetings.

Self-Feeding

Every new disciple must also be equipped to be spiritually self-feeding in at least four aspects: Scripture, prayer, church life, and persecution and suffering. These are some of the primary ways God grows us to maturity.

In terms of being able to interpret and apply Scripture, this can most easily be done by teaching a series of questions that can be applied in any Scripture study. Generally, this will include questions of observation, interpretation and application. There are a number of sets of questions that can be used in this way, depending on the age or education level and the level of spiritual sophistication of the believers. The point is that after reading or hearing a passage of Scripture every believer should be able to tell what it says, what it means, and the implications it has for his/her life. Clearly someone's ability to do this and the depth at which they do it will increase over time, but the point is to establish a pattern for how they view and respond to Scripture.

Prayer is another key tool God uses to grow us into the likeness of Christ. Through prayer we speak to the Lord, hear from His heart and mind, minister to both believers and unbelievers, and more. Prayer is a teaching tool. It is an evangelism tool. In fact, praying for unbelievers in their presence can be one of the most powerful evangelistic tools that exists. It is often under-utilized. The best way to teach prayer to a new convert is by example reinforced by studying what the Bible says about prayer.

The church is not only a spiritual community but also serves as the Body of Christ. In Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12 and 1 Peter 4 the Bible expresses how we as members of the Body of Christ have differing gifts and abilities that are to function together in a coordinated fashion in order to build up the Body and bring it to maturity. Thus, for both individual and corporate growth and maturity we must understand how this works and participate in it. This idea is supplemented by numerous "one another" passages in the New Testament. More than fifty times we are told in Scripture to do something for one another in the Body. We need each other in order to grow.

Persecution and suffering are also venues for our spiritual growth and development. The Bible tells us that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12). We know that we have an enemy who will also oppose us in many ways as we follow the Lord. New believers need to understand how God works to perfect our character, prove our faith, equip us for ministry, and provide a testimony for him through persecution and suffering. Being aware of this before it happens can help fend off discouragement and help us to be intentional about taking advantage of these opportunities rather than wasting them or responding to them inappropriately.

If a believer understands and can apply these basic opportunities for growth along with the pattern of dual accountability we implement, then they can initiate an entire movement of new churches if for some reason they are separated from their spiritual community. They have the power of the Holy Spirit and access to Scripture along with these basic skills to move them toward maturity and equip them to bring others along. There is no way to stop such a movement.

Training Cycle

As believers increase in their competence in these areas it is important to help them understand the phases of the training cycle so they know when and how to transition from modeling, to assisting, to watching, to leaving as they initiate work with new believers or new churches. This is a natural process by which they can help others grow into maturity as well both individually and corporately.

I like to compare this process to teaching a child to ride a bicycle. Though we rarely think about it, the first step in a child learning to ride a bicycle is seeing someone else ride one. This only takes a moment. The purpose is to create awareness. In making disciples or planting churches this can be an extremely quick process as well. It does not matter how good the model is, simply modeling will never train someone else to ride a bicycle. The learner must get on the seat and begin to pedal for themselves. This brings us to the second stage.

We need to begin to assist the beginner right away. This means the learner is on the seat and we are holding them up. They cannot do it without us, but from the first moments we are trying to reduce their dependence on us. As soon as we believe they have a chance of maintaining their own balance and momentum, we release them. We must be willing to let them fall as in learning it will happen repeatedly. We must not let our fear of them falling prevent us from letting go, however. That is part of the learning process. This stage of learning lasts a bit longer than the modeling stage but it should still be kept as short as possible. I like to think in terms of getting through this stage in about three months in a church planting setting. During that time I “shadow mentor,” modeling with the natural leaders (alone) in the new church what they should do when the entire group meets together. During this period I am covering the self-feeding skills mentioned earlier.

After assisting, it is time to enter the observation stage. This is a much longer phase, often taking many years. It is carried out at arm's length, however, and is much more occasional in nature. One person can be observing multiple churches at the same time. When someone learns to ride a bicycle they must be able to mount, dismount, steer, brake, understand the rules of the road and know when and where it is safe to ride. These skills take some time to learn. It is not safe to let a child ride on his/her own until these skills are mastered. In the New Testament we see the apostle Paul use this cycle. He would model and assist with new churches on his missionary journeys. This was a very brief process in all the churches except for Corinth (eighteen months) and Ephesus (three years). The observation stage, however, lasted for many years. He would come for repeat visits, send coworkers to check on things, write letters, etc. He needed to be sure the churches were practicing and passing on what they had received.

Once the basic skills are learned, it is time for the mentor to exit. It is not only embarrassing but also inconvenient and impractical for a teacher to always be present in order for someone to ride a bicycle. The same is true spiritually. As soon as possible, new believers and new churches should be at the point of being producers rather than merely consumers. Spiritual reproduction should be happening and, in fact, is one good indicator that it is time to consider moving to the next phase. Model for the first generation, assist while they model for the second generation, watch for the third generation and if the other indicators look good, then it is time to leave. We see Paul formally leave the Ephesian church in Acts 20:17-38. It is a touching scene that demonstrates when leaving becomes appropriate and not irresponsible.

Entering New Communities

New disciples and new churches also need to grow in their ability to “see where the church is not.” This is where they can begin to understand how to cross cultures and other boundaries in order to “make disciples of all nations (peoples)”. I like to use maps with known churches indicated with pushpins. This can begin to sensitize people to geographic gaps. Very soon I also begin to introduce concepts of gaps in terms of language, socioeconomic levels, education levels, ethnicity, and so on. This helps new believers begin to look for opportunities to reach out to the people and places in the greatest spiritual darkness.

It is important to model biblical approaches in ministry as well as to teach them. For example, people need to understand how to look for and identify a “man of peace” as they enter new communities. This term comes from Matthew 10 and Luke 10 when Jesus is giving instructions to His disciples. Essentially, a man of peace is someone who is responsive and has a circle of influence and will open the door to that circle. Of course, a person of peace can sometimes be a woman! Going in a needy state can often uncover a person of peace as they offer assistance. One of my favorite ways of locating such a person is to begin a spiritual conversation. If someone indicates interest, rather than simply continuing to talk with them I will inquire as to whether or not they know of

others who might be interested in discussing such matters. If they do, I ask if they would be willing to gather them. If they are willing, the chances are quite strong I have found a person of peace.

There are practical advantages to finding a person of peace. First, it is more effective to group unbelievers and win them rather than win individual converts and then group them.

The new spiritual communities which are formed tend to be more durable and resilient, tend to function more smoothly and have higher trust levels, and tend to mature more quickly. If we are not sure whether we have found a person of peace, we should still see if we can assist a new convert or seeker to establish a new church from among their own network of relationships rather than automatically adding them to an existing church. This can be done naturally when we have them begin sharing their new faith with their list of one hundred people who need to know the Lord. The pattern which was used in Acts and still works well today is that new converts are gathered into new spiritual communities with new leaders raised up from among them. Our natural tendency is to add new converts to existing churches, which results in a hindrance with regards to multiplication of disciples and churches.

Conclusion

When basic elements such as those mentioned in this article are combined, God frequently moves in remarkable ways and the resulting disciples and churches seem to be especially fruitful and more resistant to false teaching. Also, you will often see a supernatural impetus to take the gospel where it has not gone, and therefore unengaged people groups around the new churches quickly gain access to the gospel. The pattern of involving every disciple to live out and share their faith, be involved in leading others is key. We can do this with new converts through helping them learn to feed themselves spiritually in a developmental way through using the training cycle. This can be done in such a way that the disciples do this beyond their own community and relationships. These simple and biblical principles can go a long way towards helping you equip new believers to become catalysts in planting rapidly reproducing new churches.

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