

Hasten, O Dawn: Teaching Church Reproduction Practices through Popular Narrative

George Patterson

*Adjunct Instructor in Church Planting and Multiplication,
Western Seminary, Portland, Oregon*

A novel. The author of *Church Multiplication Guide* and the much-translated “Train & Multiply” pastoral mentoring program, has brought together, in the form of an action-packed, fictional novel, much of his considerable insight into leadership training for church multiplication. *Hasten, O Dawn*, compiles hundreds of true events and characters into a fast-moving narrative that illustrates internationally-proven practices and hindrances to church planting, as he and his Honduran co-workers experienced them during two decades in Central America.

A textbook. Each of twenty chapters depicts graphically, sometimes tragically, reproductive church planting practices and mistakes learned in the field through error, repentance, persistence, Scripture and sound advice. Helpful summaries accompany each chapter, and an appendix provides a “menu” of practices that church planting mentors can consult while training “others, also”. Thus, despite its story format, *Hasten, O Dawn* remains a serious textbook for students and trainees.

An experience. Diverse events in the story shed light on leaders’ tasks in a way that makes them easy to grasp and practice. The best way to learn effective leadership is to work in the field with an able, experienced mentor. This story simulates such field experience as closely as possible by depicting situations that often arise in God’s work. Even experienced, mature leaders will discover blind spots that they will want to correct.

A simulation. A powerful way to engage trainees in the Lord’s work is for them to accompany a mentor on a trip to another culture, near or far away, where God is working. They often return committed to serve the Lord in a way similar to that which they had observed. Believers normally associate God’s work with what is familiar to them inside of their own “box,” which entails a type of blindness. Stepping out of their familiar world with its distractions and commonness to experience things into an unfamiliar setting helps them understand God’s work from a new perspective.

The following excerpt is from chapter two, in which local church planters explain their practices using diagrams and symbols learned from their peers. Let’s listen in...

Chapter 2

Adjust your Church Body's Bent Spine—Ouch!

A wise pastoral leader keeps seven vital church activities
in proper balance.

A handful of believers met to discuss how they would go about renewing their small church which for years had been in decline. They had no positive plan of action and kept complaining about past failures, blaming each other. Pastor Arturo Gomez wanted to see a widespread movement for Christ in the area, but others did not share his vision. Quarreling grew bitter. Then they heard someone at the door. A short, bent, elderly man, sporting white hair and a wide smile, entered toting a bag. He was a stranger to all except the pastor, who introduced him.

“Folks, meet my mentor, Carlos Mendez, who’s been adjusting my spiritual spine, which has been cruelly painful! He pastors a thriving church, and holds extension classes in our area to train pastors. I begged him to come to this meeting.”

Carlos greeted the group with a winsome smile, adding, “I’m here only to observe.”

Pastor Arturo continued, “Carlos’ church is winning many to Christ by multiplying cell groups and new churches. I asked him to direct our efforts, too, but he wants us to launch our own movement.”

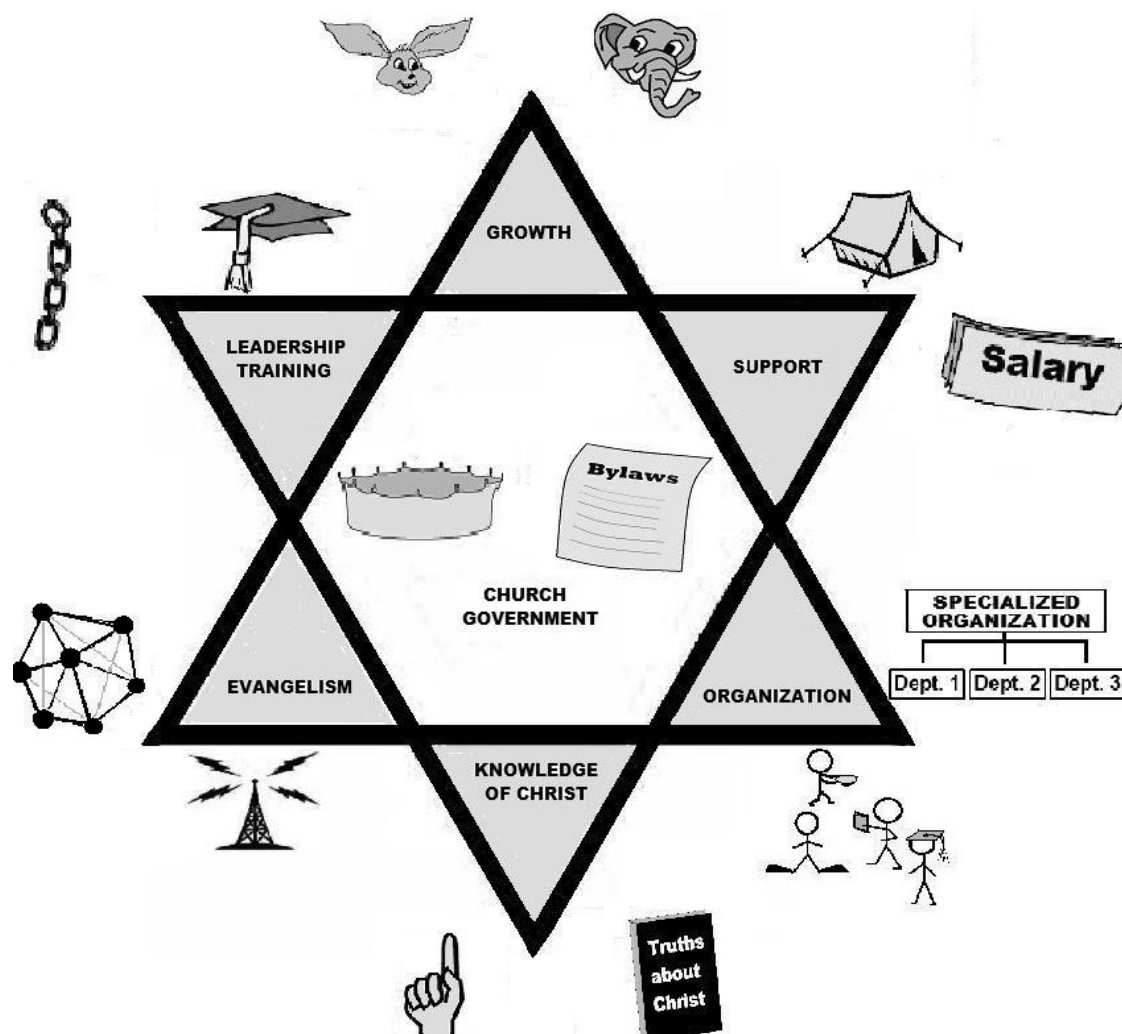
“Amen,” responded the elderly mentor as he sat down out of sight in back.

“I’ve been going too fast,” confessed Arturo. “In my zeal to reform our church, I’ve pushed you all to take part in different ministries. Pastor Carlos told me to explain the key ministries first, and then let you think them over and pray about your part.”

This was greeted with sighs of relief. Arturo then asked his young wife, “Olga, please draw the star that Pastor Carlos taught us. This diagram depicts what we need to do in a way that helps believers see what they can do as active workers in the Body of Christ.”

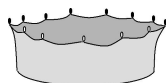
Olga drew a star and little icons, then had the small children who were present copy each icon with crayons, starting with a crown in the center and drawing each picture while Pastor Arturo explained it.

Arturo began, “Pastor’s Carlos’ star forced me to assess seven vital arenas of church activity; and now it’s clear to me why we’ve been failing. The star encloses these seven ministry arenas, each of which has two diverse aspects that we need to keep in balance. To develop an area of ministry we first have to decide on a wise ratio between its two opposite contrasting aspects. This ratio varies from church to church, according to local conditions.”



Arturo asked Carlos to explain the seven pairs of ministry activities, but the elder mentor replied, “It is you who should introduce this, Arturo, not an outsider. You are the shepherd here. But I will say this: I warn all of you not to study this star unless you’re willing to let your spiritual integrity be tested to the core. It exposes with painful clarity some common weaknesses of churches, of their leaders and ministries that need drastic realignment.”

Pointing at the star, Arturo said, “Notice that it encloses seven interlocking arenas of activity. Churches should practice them all, not as separate programs but in harmony, integrated in the local body. Each activity stems from the other six and leads back to them — the normal, corporate life of the body of Christ.”



Arturo had the children hold up their pictures of the crown and said, “This crown in the center of the star means that we obey our King. We don’t use a cross here, because Jesus said about that, ‘It is finished.’ We look to our risen King who reigns among us now and we obey him. All the activities in the star stem from loving obedience to Jesus. Obeying him comes before obeying human leaders and rules. Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:24 said

that a believer's part in laying the foundation for Christian life is to *obey his words*. We must build disciples by starting on the foundation which is our obedience to Jesus.

"I thought the foundation was the whole Word of God, Arturo," objected Placido Diaz. He was the town's only barber, a devout believer—but prone to resist innovation.

"I thought the same, too," replied Arturo, "until I considered what Jesus said is our foundation. The wise man who built his house on rock is the one who obeys Jesus' words. Learning the Word of God is one of the many pursuits that we build on this foundation; for all eternity the redeemed will be learning more about God."

Pastor Arturo was the town's only attorney, and pastored the church part time. He often reasoned with the believers like he did as a lawyer in a courtroom. "Our job in this meeting is to consider a proper ratio for our church between two divergent aspects of each of the star's seven activity arenas."



Olga drew an arrow pointing two ways between a crown and "Bylaws." Arturo had the children hold up their drawings of Bylaws and said, "Each activity has two valid but different aspects. Our churches' by-laws and our God-given leaders' orders should be aligned with Jesus' commands. Hebrews 13:17 says to obey our leaders; but when a man's rule conflicts with God's, we obey God first, as Acts 5:29 and 1 John 5:2 say.

We must keep each of the star's seven pairs of opposites in proper proportion, which varies according to current, local conditions."

"You lost me," growled Placido. "What do you mean by two aspects of an activity? Doesn't this just complicate things? You've given us enough details to consider already."

Arturo begged his elderly mentor, "Please explain the ratio that we should practice between the two sides of each activity. I'm afraid I'm going too fast again."

Carlos opened his bag and held up a sandwich. "See this?" He then took a small bite and put the sandwich back. "Delicious! My wife baked this bread. You ladies know the right amounts of salt, flour and yeast to make bread. I tried once and guessed at the amounts. It came out of the oven like a brick and not even our dog would eat it! Key church activities are like bread: they have ingredients that we must mix in proper proportions. Otherwise, a ministry becomes lopsided. Worship, for example, has two aspects. One is serious; worshippers fear the most holy One and approach him with repentance and tears. Its other aspect is joyful and spontaneous, worshipping with peace and laughter. My church once had lopsided worship. We over-emphasized the serious side. We were judgmental and negative — one-sided like the tribe of Ephraim that God called an 'untuned pancake' in Hosea 7:8. Do you understand this ratio now between two aspects of the same activity, Placido?"

"Yes, I do, Pastor Carlos," replied Placido. "You present truths like the Old Testament prophets did: visually. I like that! It's a welcome departure from the dry, abstract analyses that some teachers inflict upon us!" He cast an accusing glance at Pastor Arturo.



Olga drew an arrow between a rabbit and elephant, and Arturo continued. “The rabbit reminds us that the Holy Spirit enables churches and cell groups to multiply. When the Holy Spirit is working powerfully in a church, it will carry out all of the ministries that the New Testament requires. These include starting new flocks; some will be churches and others will be cells. Some such flocks will be near and others far-away in neglected fields. A growing church body easily becomes lopsided—half-baked as Hosea said—so we’ll form rabbit-like cells in a proper ratio to larger elephantine assemblies. Where about a third of the world’s people live, hostile, violent authorities ban big public gatherings, and rabbit churches are the only option to sustain a widespread movement for Christ.”

“What do you mean by ‘cells,’ Pastor Arturo?” asked Placido.

“Cells are tiny churches within a larger church. Urbanization all over the world requires that growing city churches provide active cell groups to preserve the family atmosphere and interaction that Scripture requires. Some churches call cells ‘small groups,’ ‘home groups,’ ‘life groups,’ ‘house churches,’ ‘simple churches’ and so forth.”

“But if we have such groups,” worried Placido, “will that not cause disunity?”

“Quite the opposite. If a church keeps people from using their God-given shepherding gift with a small group, then they will grow frustrated, which can lead to the division that a misguided leader fears.” Also, apart from cells, our region needs dozens of village churches, Placido.”

“But to start so many churches in the villages will cost more than our budget allows!”

“No, Placido. Resources will multiply right along with the new congregations.”

“But if congregations multiply like rabbits, we’ll lose control. False doctrine will surely run rampant among them, Arturo!”

“Whoa, Brother Placido! I feared that, too, but that has never happened in Pastor Carlos’ new churches. False doctrine does not come from new churches on the cutting edge of a Spirit-empowered, church-planting movement. The diabolical ‘isms’ that have decimated churches around the world have come from old, sterile, ingrown churches and apostate seminaries that are in unholy alliance with them. Our greater fear should be of disobeying our King. Our task right now is simply to discern prayerfully what a practical and biblical ratio will be between large meetings and small cell groups in our church, and our future daughter churches.”



Olga then drew another arrow labeled “Training Leaders” between a chain and a graduation cap.

“The chain means training new leaders the way Jesus and Paul did,” Arturo explained. “A pastor mentors newer pastors who mentor others, who train still other leaders on the job, in a ‘chain reaction.’ We must discern the right ratio between mentoring and classroom training. Our

church has been unbalanced and therefore unhealthy; and I'm to blame. I plan to start balancing my monologues with mentoring and group discussion, to train new leaders like Paul trained Timothy."

"It sounds like you plan to do away with the pulpit!" worried Placido.

"Some folks would be happier if I did."

A chorus of "Amen's" came from a few young voices. "Wait now!" responded Arturo. "Both ways of teaching are biblical. It's the proper ratio that we need."

"So many changes!" whined the barber. "This all seems a bit drastic, Arturo."

"We'll take one step at a time, Placido, praying always. And you'll help me."

Suddenly the "popopopop" of a helicopter sounded so loudly that we could not hear one another. Folks rushed outside and watched it hover above for a moment, and then cruise away over a mountainous slope to the north.

"Hey! Come back!" Arturo herded his small flock back inside and complained, "Satan's just trying to interrupt what we're planning, because he knows how strategic it is."

"Or maybe God gave us a break," Placido countered. "We're dealing with too much to digest at one sitting."

"Perhaps you're right," Arturo said. "God doesn't want us to miss any of the important points of this star. So now that we've had our moment of entertainment, are you ready to make a fresh start, Placido?"



Placido nodded; and Olga sketched another arrow labeled "Stewardship" between a tent and "Salary."

"The tent recalls self-supported 'tentmakers,' like Paul," explained Arturo, "A church planting movement born of God's Spirit normally has many more shepherds who are self-supported than those who are paid to work full-time. To move toward the right ratio in our area, I'll set an example like Paul did in Thessalonica to encourage a larger proportion of volunteer workers. Therefore, I have decided no longer accept a salary from the church."

Exclamations followed this, and Placido grumbled, "But having so many lay pastors could lower standards for the clergy. Have you considered this, Pastor?"

"Yes. We'll provide high-quality training for all new leaders, all who have God's pastoral gift, not just those who can meet a seminary's matriculation requirements and afford the tuition. Actually, it's a pastor's duty to train new shepherding elders, as Paul told Timothy. You'll help me, Placido, to discern the ratio between tentmakers and salaried pastors that will sustain a movement for Christ in our area."



Olga sketched another arrow labeled “Evangelism” between a group of connected dots and a transmitting tower. Arturo explained, “The network of dots means believers staying in a loving relationship with friends to whom they witness for Christ. The tower signifies evangelizing by mass media and large meetings. A Spirit-filled congregation reaches out to the lost like churches did in the book of Acts, locally and in neglected communities both near and far, in either or both of these two ways. We’ll do so in both ways. Our ratio has been poor; I’ve been lazy, but now I plan to witness more and help new believers maintain edifying relationships with their friends.”

“A new believer’s circle of friends and relatives can drag him back into the world,” worried Placido, “if we don’t separate him from them.”

“Relax, Brother,” said Carlos. The Holy Spirit in a new believer is more powerful than the spirit of the world in his unsaved friends. When relatives and friends come to Jesus together, they remain more faithful than individuals who come separately. We must not extract new believers from their social network. Folks who have no close friends in a church soon stop attending it.”

“What if one of his friends is supplying a new believer drugs?” asked Placido.

“We’ll do our best to separate addicts from any false friend who supplies such poison. For now, our task is to discern a wise ratio between witnessing to friends for Jesus and evangelizing through media and campaigns. Placido, please think this through and talk it over with others, and then let me know the ratio that we should aim for.”



Olga drew an arrow labeled “Organization” between a small group of persons with different features, and an organizational chart depicting separate programs.

“The small group,” explained Arturo, “represents bringing together folk with different spiritual gifts to serve one another in a variety of ways. We’ll keep such integrated groupings in proper ratio to specialized programs that gather people who all have the same gift. We’ll all employ our spiritual gifts to serve one another in small groups. Each group will do all the ministries that the New Testament requires of a church. To do some ministries, a small group will have to cooperate closely with other groups.”

“But we’re not ready for serious ministry yet,” worried Placido. “You know the Bible better than we do, Arturo. Why can’t we just listen to you?”

“You’ll never be ready for serious ministry until you take the first step, Placido.”

“What do you mean, Pastor, by grouping people with different gifts?”

Arturo begged his elderly mentor to explain this; and Carlos pointed to Olga’s drawing of the group of persons with different characteristics.

“God has given each of you one or more gifts to use in harmony with other believers’ gifts. Spiritual gifts vary from person to person. Paul compared a church to the human body with diverse organs that work in harmony. If we exalt our own ministry above that of others, we destroy the harmony. Let’s illustrate.”

He asked the young people to stand and told one to walk as though he were blind. “Watch him grope his way around,” said Carlos. “This happens when a church body neglects the spiritual gift of prophecy that corresponds to seeing.” He told another youth to walk as though his feet were crippled, representing a church’s failure to mobilize the “beautiful feet” of those who run with the gospel. He then had a girl pretend to try to serve others with her hands tied to her sides.

“What did you just learn?” Carlos asked the young people.

“To keep our church body alive and strong,” replied one, “we need freedom to use our God-given gifts. We cannot do so if a leader does everything for us.”

“Right!” replied the aged mentor. “The gift that we pastors abuse most is that of teaching. The better a teacher is, the greater the temptation to let his teaching eclipse other vital ministries and so weaken the body. A pastor’s main job is to equip all the believers to use their gifts to build up the body, as Ephesians 4:11-16 says. Many pastors fail to do this because it takes a special kind of love to put other people’s ministries on par with our own.”

“I don’t understand how good teaching can weaken a church,” Placido griped.

“The problem is not with good teaching, Placido,” answered Carlos, “but with failing to integrate it properly with the other gift-based ministries. Let’s illustrate this also.” He produced a pocketknife and told the barber to hold his Bible open with both hands. He then lifted a page and angled the blade as though he would cut the page out.

“Hey!” Placido jerked his Bible away. “Don’t mutilate the Word of God!”

“Well, that’s what happened centuries ago when some monk divided the Bible into chapters. He severed the love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, from the exhortation in chapter 12 to harmonize gift-based ministries in the Body. We must keep both chapters together, joining the gifts of chapter 12 with the love that chapter 13 describes. Without such love, we cannot balance our ministries; it takes *a special kind of love* to put other people’s ministries on a par with one’s own. For example, we preachers usurp the most prominent position in the body, exalting our teaching ministry above our brothers’ vital ministries.”

“Ouch!” yelled Arturo. “Wow! Okay, we’ll discern prayerfully a wiser ratio of integrated cell groups to specialized programs that isolate ministries.”



Olga drew another arrow labeled “Knowing Christ” between a hand pointing up and “Truths about Christ” and Arturo explained it. “The hand pointing up means experiencing the Presence of the risen, living Christ. Let us balance this experience with learning truths about him. I have failed to do this. I thought the best way to lead people to Christ was to help them understand his atonement, but...”

“Well, isn’t it?” interrupted Placido. “The way to present Christ to an unbeliever is to explain how his sacrifice saved us.”

“Not normally, Placido. The apostles never witnessed that way to folks who did not yet know Christ. They simply recounted the historical facts of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, including what he had done in their own lives. Also, we are saved by faith, not by understanding. The Holy Spirit convicts sinners and they repent of their sins and put their trust in Jesus. Our testimony for Jesus can easily get out of proportion, too heavily weighted on the side of simply teaching facts about him. I’ve had an unbalanced emphasis on understanding the Gospel and neglected experiencing Jesus’ power in our lives in healing, transformation and other signs of his presence. With everyone’s help, our church will balance this better.”

“You may be onto the heart of our problem,” replied Placido. “But I’m not grasping this ‘hand pointing up.’ Help me!”

Again Arturo pleaded with his aged mentor to help; and Carlos asked, “Okay, which lady here most resembles Mona Lisa in Leonardo da Vinci’s famous painting?”

“Olga!” a young man pointed at Arturo’s wife. “Her dad was Italian.”

Carlos asked the blushing lady to stand. “Olga — I mean Mona — why do you suppose the original Mona had that enigmatic half-smile when Leonardo painted her?”

“Well, let’s see. Mona Lisa — that would be Ramona Elizabeth — was probably thinking in her Italian way, ‘Hurry upa, Lenny! Keepa painting. Stopa staring anda finish thisa stupid portrait. I’ma getting tireda sitting still in this hota sun all day!’”

When they quit laughing Carlos continued. “I’m an art critic now, examining the Mona Lisa in Paris so I can tell my friends back home about the painting. I use a tape to measure its dimensions.” He pretended to measure Olga, and then to peer at her through a magnifying glass. “I analyze the chemical composition of the paint’s pigments.” He pretended to record his findings in a notebook.

“Eyes?” He looked at Olga’s eyes and then pretended to write. “Two!”

“Hair?” He looked at the top of her head, and then pretended to write. “Yes!”

He then asked Placido, “Can that art critic really present Mona Lisa in this way, simply stating objective facts about the portrait?”

Placido, stood, shook the old man’s hand and said, “Well, I see it now. That’s how I’ve been trying to present Jesus. No wonder it hasn’t worked!” He turned toward the group and begged, “Let’s introduce folks to the living, dynamic Christ who dwells in our midst and not merely clarify theological truths about him.”

“Pastor Carlos,” said one of the young men, “your comparison breaks down on one point. Olga’s much more alluring than the dame in that painting.” Olga blushed again.