

Church Multiplication — Guidelines and Dangers

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Published in Global Missiology, Contemporary Practice, Oct. 2003, www.globalmissiology.net

What constitutes an authentic church multiplication movement? How does it differ from the church planting work that we often see in the West?

Church multiplication — or a ‘church planting movement’ — happens when God prepares many people within a cultural group to embrace the Good News. They trust in Jesus Christ and pass on His promise of forgiveness and life to relatives and friends. It is *spontaneous*; requiring little or no help from outsiders to keep spreading once it is under way. The Holy Spirit moves new believers and churches to reproduce as in the parable in which the seed of the Kingdom potentially multiplies 100 times per harvest. Church history shows us that church multiplication is the *norm* for healthy churches. But we do not achieve it simply by spending money or consulting with professional missiologists. Nor do we get it from pricey, quick-start programs. Funds and good strategy help, but do not drive the movement. We seldom see churches multiply rapidly now in the English-speaking West where funds are most available and well-researched strategies abound. Most American Christians, for example, have few friends or relatives that live where there are no churches. Furthermore, few Westerners are aware that healthy, normal churches reproduce. God promises to every church gifted ‘sent ones’ (*apostles*, Ephesians 4:11) to carry its spiritual DNA to her daughter churches.

Awareness of church multiplication is growing, but some Westerners see it as unusual, even bizarre or dangerous. How should we perceive it?

Church history, Scripture and current field observations reveal that church multiplication is God’s *norm*. Objective researchers, like David Garrison in *Church Planting Movements*⁴, see it resulting from many new believers and young churches doing hard work in love for Christ. Sterile church bodies that fail to reproduce are the abnormal ones.

How can we build our strategy on sound principles and objective research?

Good researchers and planners differentiate between *cause* and *effect*. Strategists who simply search for a model to imitate invariably confuse cause and effect. They study the movements, analyze the elements that grow out of them, then write dissertations or enterprising programs. Seeking a model or sophisticated formulae for ensured success, they come up with structures and methods that are *results* of the movement, not its cause. They fail to discern between the underlying, universal guidelines that consistently agree with God’s Word, and the external forms that grow out of the movement and apply only to specific cultures and communities. Men seek neat rules whereas God seeks our loving, childlike obedience to Jesus.

David Garrison and others describe elements that make up church planting movements. What principles and practices give rise to them?

Sound research shows that God multiplies churches when we follow His *New Testament guidelines*. We find no sure-proof formula. But some guidelines almost universally ensure church reproduction if the people we evangelize are reasonably responsive. These include the following:

- **Participants intercede for the lost with persistent and fervent prayer.** The miracle of church reproduction depends on God. The apostle Paul sowed, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6). What does God do when we fail to pray? Nothing! We cannot expect our churches to multiply.
- **Pastors and new believers witness steadily for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.** The Good News flows freely among relatives and friends. They call people to heartfelt repentance — not merely to make decisions — and to loving obedience to Jesus.
- **Church planters introduce a style of worship and church life that fits the local culture and new, small congregations.** We gear worship and church activities to the people's values and background, and to the size of the group. Churches are usually tiny at first in pioneer fields but furnish the nuclei for growth and reproduction. To copy the worship style of a large church weakens the relational atmosphere that small congregations need. Small groups achieve a family atmosphere easier than large ones, and need it to nourish those who receive Christ as churches reproduce.
- **Participants consciously seek the Holy Spirit's power.** We constantly acknowledge our need for God's help to witness for Jesus and pray for healing. In Scripture, being filled with the Holy Spirit led to practical service for God. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Samson *killed the lion*, which led to the liberation of Israel from the Philistines. The persecuted believers in Jerusalem were filled with the Holy Spirit *and spoke the Word boldly* (Acts 4:31).
- **Churches take the responsibility for planting new churches.** New churches reproduce newer ones. A healthy church is a living body, the highest form of life that God made on Earth. Like all living organisms God endows it with its seed to reproduce after its kind. Jesus reveals in his parables about sowing how 'Kingdom' power reproduces. He promises His churches people with spiritual gifts for spreading the seed in Ephesians 4:11-12. *Evangelists* sow it locally and *apostles* ('sent ones' who work in other cultures) carry it to neglected fields.
- **Pastors make leadership training available to all that receive God's pastoral gifting.** To multiply churches we shepherding elders rapidly to mentor newer leaders. Institutional theological education serve well-established churches where mature students can afford it and have enough education to assimilate and apply the intensive input. But it can supply only a fraction of the pastors needed to sustain church reproduction in pioneer fields.
- **Local leaders who serve voluntarily or receive support from their people shepherd the new flocks.** Dominance by outsiders smothers the initiative of new or potential local leaders. Outside control, which often comes through unwise funding, consistently stifles church planting movements, especially when those in power are kept there with Western funds.

- **Church planters use methods and equipment that are common in the local culture.** We provide a ‘light baton,’ affordable and easy to imitate, and pass it on. Westerners often stifle the flow of the gospel by tying evangelism to technology from the West, as if the Holy Spirit’s power reached only to the end of their extension cord. We may use electronics but should avoid equipment that is not available to local workers, except for special events. Otherwise it replaces spontaneous, daily witnessing to friends and family members, the hallmark of church multiplication.

We hear about a "light baton" for pioneer fields. What essentials should we pass on to new workers?

Using the New Testament as a filter, wise church planters strain out methods, equipment and requirements that are not explicit in it. We embrace the essentials for church life, leadership and practice, allowing no non-biblical rules to become legalistic ‘leavening’ for new churches. Most church planters in pioneer fields are local volunteers, relatively poor, less educated and inexperienced with high tech equipment. Where churches multiply rapidly they mostly come from a nearby mother church and use the same methods and equipment that others used to start it.

We keep the baton light by avoiding imported equipment, technology or procedures. Methods must be affordable and easy to imitate and pass on to newer workers. We limit equipment to what is readily available to the new churches, except for occasional special events.

Where we apply the term ‘appropriate technology’ to agricultural development, we would not teach students to use a diesel tractor where they can afford only an ox. The same applies to musical instruments, buildings and visual aids where poverty prevails.

How can we move a sterile church to reproduce?

The lever is love. It sounds simplistic but works. The Holy Spirit uses our Lord’s Great Commission to move churches to make disciples *the way Jesus said*. In Matthew 28 He ordered us to make disciples of all nations by training them to *obey His commands*. The greatest command is love for God and our neighbor. No stronger motivation exists. "If you love me," Jesus said, "obey my commands" (John 14:15). Churches break loose and become reproductive by giving top priority again to doing as Jesus commands in childlike, loving obedience.

Specialized ministries and spiritual-sounding programs attract funds but often bear little resemblance to what Jesus said to do. We can prepare missionaries simply to go and do what Jesus said. Neglect of Christ’s commands leads to confused priorities, painful legalism and grasping, power-hungry leaders. Most missionaries base their career on Jesus’ Great Commission, in which He ordered us to make disciples by teaching them to obey His commands. Unfortunately many cannot tell you what these commands are.

What are the commands of Jesus that church planters should teach converts to obey?

Jesus commanded many things which we can summarize under *seven basic commands*. We see the first New Testament church obeying them in Acts 2:38-47 where the first 3,000 converts following Pentecost are doing in a basic form all that Jesus commands:

- They **repented** as they believed and received God's Spirit.
- They confirmed their conversion without delay by being added to the church through water **baptism**.
- They made **disciples**, dedicating themselves to the apostles' teaching and winning many new believers.
- They demonstrated their **love** in their remarkable fellowship and sharing. Love has many aspects, but, like the other commands, is seen here practiced in a beginning form as the new church took its baby steps.
- They celebrated **communion** as they broke bread in their homes.
- They **gave** sacrificially.
- They **prayed** fervently.

Those who embrace church multiplication emphasize prayer and evangelism. But don't all sincere Christians agree? Is there a difference in a church planting movement?

Prayerful witnessing for Christ is *spontaneous* in church reproduction. New believers, eager to obey and share Jesus, talk to others about Him frequently. They do not limit evangelism to 'special meetings.' They do it with or without training; they use no sophisticated schemes to manipulate people into making decisions. Westerners sometimes kill this flow of grace to a convert's circle of friends by insisting that faith is personal in the sense of 'private.' Scripture never views it as private. We should help believers to share their faith in a relaxed way, as they would pass on family news or gossip to relatives. It happens naturally, as in the book of Acts; God repeats many of the same things. Spontaneous witnessing, buttressed by intercession for the lost, often includes prayer for physical healing.

Wise church planters seek a worship style that fits local culture. How can we make sure it will touch hearts of believers in a pioneer field?

We can start by introducing worship forms that fit a small congregation and local customs. What would the people do if their prime minister, king or tribal chief entered a room? Would they stand, kneel, bow or lie prostrate? This may suggest postures for praise. Do they hold their hands in a certain way as they give or receive gifts? This suggests protocol for the Eucharist. Do they seek the older men to decide community issues? Do their leaders stand or sit to address a small group? Do they sit in a circle? How do they celebrate holidays and rites of passage? What musical instruments do they use? Do they value *total participation* more than *performance perfection* in music? Do they want more testimonies and words of encouragement — including those from new believers — and less detailed instruction than educated Westerners expect from professional clergy?

Church multiplication requires pastoral training that keeps up with the reproduction. How can we achieve that?

We mentioned that training must be readily available to all to whom God has given the pastoral gift. Where churches multiply rapidly, more experienced church leaders train the newer ones in the daughter churches. We will stifle that, if we add non-biblical requirements for naming and training pastors.

We developed the pastoral training curriculum *Train and Multiply*¹ primarily for pioneer fields to enable new churches to reproduce rapidly. Like Christ and the apostle Paul, it makes use of *mentoring* and *modeling* pastoral skills to train new leaders as shepherding elders, as fast as the churches multiply. New leaders and young churches, like newborn babies, need as much attention as Jesus gave to His disciples and Paul gave to Timothy, Titus and others while they took their baby steps as leaders. As those apprentices matured, Jesus had them train others; Paul left Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in Crete to train other elders.

Church reproduction raises the question of expenses. Does it not require a lot of money for churches to multiply?

It costs less to start reproductive churches than the traditional, sterile kind. We observe in many fields that money can be a negative factor. For the most part around the world, churches multiply spontaneously where substantial funds are *lacking*. Hastily used, finances stifle church reproduction. Overly generous missionaries set a precedent for expensive equipment and methods that few new churches can afford. The baton is too heavy to pass on. Many movements for Christ are slowed or paralyzed by 'easy money,' which breeds dependency and unhealthy control by outsiders. Funds help or hinder depending on how we use them. We can use money wisely by sending workers to truly neglected fields that would otherwise remain neglected. We can use it unwisely to keep the wrong people in power and create an elite clergy class that discourages other gifted pastors and evangelists from taking initiative.

Is there a danger that some will capitalize on church multiplication concepts?

The greatest potential danger is to let church reproduction become a fad. In the late 20th century, some North American Evangelicals abused the research-based insights that Donald MacGavran shared. They created consulting businesses, called themselves church growth "apostles" and purveyed books and courses on how to grow bigger, richer and more glamorous through the use of buildings, programs and dollars. Their universal formulas left church planters frustrated. If that bit of history repeats itself, we may encounter such Western hype as:

- Appointing inexperienced youth as "church multiplication missionaries" to raise funds.
- Making church multiplication a "stated objective" in publicity materials, to recruit wishful youth.
- Renaming formal educational courses as a "church multiplication program".
- Holding church multiplication courses and "how to" workshops that neglect apostolic principles.
- Raising money to "control the church multiplication factors" in mission.

- Calling any small group or house church ministry a "local church multiplication movement".
- Writing baseless articles on "church multiplication methods that work".
- Downplaying current church multiplication among the poor and uneducated as breeding grounds for heresy.

How can we avoid deception and pitfalls as we gain skills to aid church multiplication?

We help our trainees to follow New Testament guidelines vigorously rather than 'programs.' These guidelines include:

- Family-oriented evangelism,
- Small-group worship style,
- Training leaders by mentoring them behind the scenes,
- Helping those with apostolic gifting ("itchy feet") to raise up daughter churches.

Church planters must discern the kind of churches that will soon reproduce grand-daughters and great grand-daughters, in the spirit of 2 Timothy 2:2 and Titus 1:5. These passages take the chain reaction and 'light baton' for granted. To keep it light we can help our trainees to filter out those Western Evangelical traditions that hinder multiplication. These include:

- Requiring too much money or technology,
- Relying too much on institutional structures,
- Emphasizing specialized ministries that distract from New Testament discipling,
- Excessive individualism,
- Domination by outsiders,
- Depending on Western funds,
- Methods or worship styles that do not fit small, new churches or their culture.

Workers can learn to avoid such excesses by using *non-Western methods* that they see God blesses.

We encourage workers to make a task-oriented commitment to serve a neglected people.

Many make a limited commitment, defined by a specific number of months or years. Short-term stints are helpful to test one's gifts and to discern God's calling but seldom result in spontaneous, indigenous church multiplication. The only commitment that God can really bless for church multiplication is to plan not for two years, or five, or even for life, but simply to go and do what Jesus says to do. Disciple the people group. Stay until your task is done. Leave when healthy obedient churches are multiplying, and local leaders are able to train their own new shepherds.

First appeared in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, April 2003.

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New Testament discipling principles for training leaders that underlie the *Train and Multiply*TM curriculum¹ His *Church Multiplication Guide*² is used extensively in pioneer fields to help churches reproduce in daughter and granddaughter churches.

Galen Currah served as a church planter and development worker in Africa for 13 years and as an international consultant and *Train and Multiply* trainer since then. He teaches research methods and mentoring techniques and at Western Seminary. He and Patterson created the interactive electronic textbook *Come, Let Us Disciple the Nations*³ to apply biblical discipling principles under various field conditions. In this article they discuss frequently-asked questions about guidelines and dangers related to church reproduction.

Endnotes

¹ Part of the SEAN materials, newly upgraded and distributed by Project WorldReach. For information on *Train and Multiply*TM see <<http://www.trainandmultiply.com>>.

² *Church Multiplication Guide*, George Patterson and Richard Scoggins, 2nd edition (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002), (626) 798 0819. Orders@wclbooks.com, <<http://www.gospelcom.net/wclbooks/>>.

³ *Come, Let Us Disciple the Nations with George Patterson* A CD-ROM in the form of a fast-paced novel to train church planters and small group leaders, including for cross-cultural work. It is the reading equivalent of 300+ pages. The reader selects options voiced by characters in the story to work through increasingly advanced skill levels. Outcomes depend on one's selections. The adversary comes on the screen and laughs at you if he outscores you in a phase, which you must do over. See <<http://www.AcquireWisdom.com>>

⁴ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* (Richmond: IMB/SBC, n.d.). (800) 866-3621. Email: resource.center@imb.org. Web site: <<http://www.imb.org/resources>>.