

What DNA Are We (Really) Reproducing?

Fran Patt



For the past 25 years I have ministered within church and mission in North America. I have served as a staff person of a church, as an elder, and (with my wife) as part of church-planting teams. Most everything we have attempted for many years has been connected to recruiting, training and fielding the most effective missionaries possible. We have specialized in providing exposure to ethnic communities, cross-cultural training, and missionary care. Our hope has been that as believers are immersed in redemptive relationships with unreached people groups and as they understand the cultures of these peoples, the Holy

Spirit will call them into lifelong commitments to bring the hope and blessing of Jesus Christ to these peoples.

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We were launched into a new phase of ministry about 15 years ago when we received a shocking letter from a close friend, whom we had helped to

recruit, train and deploy to an Asian field among Muslims. This missionary family had been in place for two terms of service. They were fluent in the indigenous language, had found their niche in social structures as well as the economic system, and were making a significant contribution to the indigenous community. Yet our friend's letter said this about his team:

1. We are a successful team.
2. We are seeing people become followers of Christ.
3. We come from large, upper-middle-class churches with multiple staff, large budgets, and large buildings.
4. None of us was ever involved in a church plant prior to coming to this Asian field.

5. None of the churches we come from has ever planted a church (intentionally).
6. To be effective in the next phase of ministry, we will need to understand how to establish the Church in home-sized fellowships.
7. We have no experience or training that prepared us for this, and our home church culture is of no help.
8. Our primary mission here is to establish the Body of Christ in a way that will be culturally relevant and able to survive and thrive after we leave, but we are really not certain we know how to do this, given the limitations we have communicated.

Soon after we received this letter, we debriefed with a highly-trusted veteran missionary with over 35 years of service. His analysis included another shock to us: in his estimation, two-thirds of all the missionaries he had worked with (though, fortunately, not our friends in Asia) should have been sent home because they were ineffective and largely a detriment rather than a help. Part of his analysis was that these missionaries had very few ministry skills, no professional skills, and virtually no clue on how to work effectively with nationals.

Three Major Conclusions

In the aftermath of this letter and debriefing we arrived at three conclusions. First, we needed to change our emphasis in training, adding components we had never imagined would be necessary. Specifically, this set of new training modules needed to be about what "church" is and isn't,



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helping mission candidates and other Christian workers learn how to unpack or deconstruct their understanding of “church.” Without this, anything we did would inevitably be more about our culture and making people “Christians” instead of followers of Jesus.

Second, as a routine part of preparation, we needed to begin to evaluate the ecclesiological and cultural DNA in which our candidates developed. It seemed clear that DNA is an accurate analogy for the issues we were facing. If the missionary candidate had come from a large church, we would have no empirical data to suggest that this person would be able to conceive of church beyond the limits of his or her experience. Fig trees produce figs, and olive trees produce olives. If a person’s sole experience has been in a social, cultural, and economic system that produces mega-churches, we should not expect him or her to be adequately prepared to go to any other part of the world or culture and establish a system of Church that needs to thrive in something the size of a garage.

Third, we realized we needed to find a way to involve our candidates in the process of actually planting a church and observing them as they worked. Since virtually all the missionary candidates we had worked with were from churches that had never planted a church, there was no way to make church-planting a natural pre-field part of their learning experience unless we added it.

So we embarked on what we expected would be a wild and intense learning experience. We worked with a church-planting team made up of some of our missionary candidates and other committed Christians. We sought to learn each other’s giftedness and to honor these gifts. We catalogued what we were trying to change about the DNA of this new church plant (as distinguished from the older church culture we were coming from).

Because we were primarily entering into church-planting from a missiological perspective, we began to more thoroughly evaluate our own culture and assess which of its components were helpful and which a detriment to missionaries trying to make cross-cultural church-planting their primary ministry. The next few years brought some significant surprises, prompting us to change our entire ministry schematic, for again we found ourselves facing unexpected problems.

Three Critical Issues

Our most significant education came not in the process of working with our missionary candidates,

but in the issues that surfaced in every church-plant relating to the essential fabric of the “Christian.” It may be that this is specific to the Evangelical Christian of North America, but it has been so pervasive that it has completely changed our training objectives. We confronted three critical issues.

The first issue is related to evangelical expectations of “church”. We discovered that even when there are mutually agreed-upon outward goals for the “church plant,” evangelicals have such a dominant consumer orientation to “church” that they quickly default to a focus on their needs and their family’s needs before the church does anything else. So, through three successive church plants, where the stated intentions were to focus on reaching the non-Christian community, all three were hijacked to meet the needs of the Christians involved, while very little was invested in reaching the non-believing community in the first two years of these plants.

The second issue is related to the first. It is all about spiritual DNA: who does the American evangelical look like? Does he or she resemble Jesus in his focus, values, and mission? Our analysis has concluded that Jesus is not the spiritual father of our Evangelical culture. Our Evangelical world is more about our peculiar cultural values and what we like and dislike rather than a reflection of Jesus. If we take a hard, objective look at the Gospels, we will see a great deal of similarity between our Evangelical values and the values of the Pharisees rather than the values of Jesus.

The third issue is the logical outcome of the first two: we have a very bad case of culture blindness. I don’t mean that we cannot distinguish cultural differences, but that we are blind to the differences between what we are as cultural Christians and what the Bible clearly articulates we should be. Our blindness will make it very easy for us to go from culture to culture in our world, planting churches that we think are representative of Paul’s apostolic ministry in the New Testament, when in reality our church-planting principles are a manifestation of our own culture and are not gospel to anyone but us.

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Dealing With Problems at Their Root

Fifteen years ago, when we responded to our missionary friend’s letter from Asia, we had no idea where this process would lead us. As we began to address the problems, we naively believed the

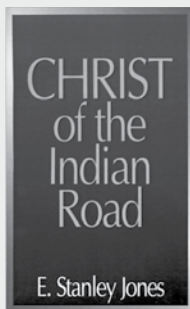
answer was better training. We had no idea that the process of following the leading of the Holy Spirit would take us to the very root of who we are as a Christian people. *Let me be clear: the problem is not the institution of the church, but instead who we have become as American Evangelical Christians.* Yes, another problem is that some churches foster or permit sub-biblical and un-Christlike behavior, but our experience has been that most churches and church plants with the best of intentions will end up wrecked on the rocks of our self-centered cultural expectations and inclinations.

It is obvious that missiological problems of church and culture need to be addressed to adequately prepare men and women for cross-cultural service, but it seems even more important to address and

correct the sources of these problems here in North America. We will never be free of the problems that cultural Christianity breeds unless we deal with these problems at their root. *If we are content to maintain and promote a mission strategy that accepts the status quo in North American Christian culture, we can assume the strong likelihood of either failure or recidivism in our training of missionaries.* It is likely that North American Evangelicalism will need to reinvest or reinvent itself as a new people and a new culture for these problems to be completely eradicated. Until that glorious day, you will find us looking for a few teachable men and women willing to walk along side very fallible but increasingly wiser teachers as we invest our lives in bringing a supra-cultural Jesus to the nations. 🌐

recommended reading

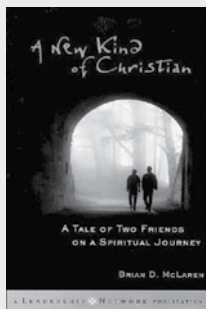
Recommended Reading on Church and Culture



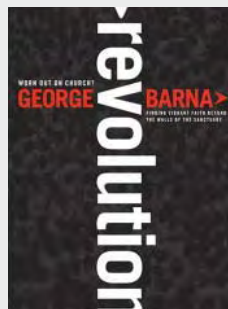
E. Stanley Jones,
The Christ of the Indian Road



Robert Banks,
The Church Comes Home



Brian McLaren,
A New Kind of Christian



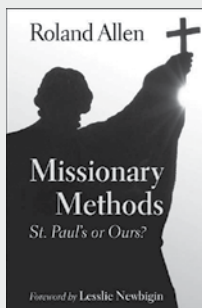
George Barna,
Revolution



Neil Coles,
Organic Church



Sherwood Lingenfelter,
Transforming Culture: A Challenge For Christian Mission



Roland Allen,
Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?



Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch,
The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church



Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger,
Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures