

Are There

Church Planting MOVEMENTS:



in North America?

Neil Cole

I have given my entire adult life to trying to discover the secret to starting spontaneous church multiplication movements. It has been an obsessive curiosity that has become a life calling. Unhappy with anything less, I have abandoned much in its pursuit. One of the things I figured out through many failures along the way is that the potent DNA of a movement is not found in books, seminars or with elite scholars or specially gifted personalities. The true ingredient necessary for a movement is not just in China, India and certain third world countries. No, the potent mix necessary to release a real spontaneous multiplication movement of God's Kingdom is found in the most obvious but least expected place of all. All along, the secret has been under our nose! The ingredient most necessary to start a spontaneous movement of God's expanding Kingdom is found in the heart of every follower of Christ. It is inside of you. It is inside of me. It has been in us all along, every one of us who follows Christ and is indwelt by His Spirit. The "mystery" is "Christ in you," which is the true "hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). We have refused to see the potent seed within us and have actually prevented it from spreading without even realizing it. That's an amazing thought when you let it sink in.

Inherent in the kingdom of God itself is the impulse of a movement. God Himself is missional and has

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been in pursuit of lost people since Genesis chapter 3. Missional impulse does not need to be manipulated or added to for a movement to happen, but simply released to be what it was made to be. We must get our confidence back in the Kingdom itself rather than in our strategies and mechanisms. How many times did Jesus shake His head and comment with a sigh of disappointment, "Oh ye of little strategy?" It is not more strategy, but more faith in the King and His reign that we need.

If indeed this is true, I am convinced that a true movement of God's transformative kingdom can be released in any nation on the planet, including the US. I not only believe it is possible; I am convinced it is happening at this very moment.

There is definitely a movement in North America, but is there a Church Planting Movement (CPM)? I'm hearing a lot about the organic church movement lately because it has become very noticeable. Recently Newsweek, Associated Press and Time mentioned it. Christianity Today also mentioned it. Even Brit Hume mentioned that he is part of a home church last year. ABC News sent a correspondent to one of our organic churches in New York just last night doing a piece on the phenomenon. According to one of the above articles 7 percent of Americans are in a house church. Anyone reading this article knows that this was not the case just a few years ago. Some are saying that organic house churches outnumber traditional churches in many countries (that's actually not news), and would be considered in the top three of the US church groups, alongside Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists...now that is news.

I am part of Church Multiplication Associates. We have grown from a handful of Christians in 2000 to having trained 40,000 people in how to make disciples from the soil of broken lives to form churches in these past ten years. We

conduct more than one weekend training event every week somewhere in the world using a growing pool of 50+ experienced organic church trainers. With our trainings, and the multiple generations of churches started from them, we estimate the start of 2-4 churches every day, and that number is increasing annually. This is not counting the thousands who access our training anonymously through our many books or web content (www.cmaresources.org).

I've heard some experts say that we are not a CPM... yet. David Garrison, author of Church Planting Movements has consistently said so, though he is always careful to mention that if there is one we are it. Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird in their book *Viral Churches* that says that there is not a movement in the US, but that if there is one that is closest it would be us. Bob Roberts said in a blog post that we are not a movement.

So what do I think? The term movement can mean all sorts of things. We are definitely moving and, so far as I can tell, we are going in the right direction. We are out of control. No one can point to the person in charge, though there is a short list of the most influential leaders of the movement. No one can accurately count the number of churches within the movement. There is not a single organizational label that can be applied to this "movement;" it runs across denominational lines.

I believe there are a few reasons why people do not want to put the label movement on what is happening, and I will share these below with some of my own thoughts to why I think we are indeed a CPM.

Why Not in the US?

When one simply looks at the characteristics mentioned in Garrison's work *Church Planting Movements* all the characteristics of a CPM are found in our current work in North America, so one has to investigate further to find the reasons for excluding the US from having an identifiable CPM. In my experience the best reasons given for these statements are usually summed up in three categories: 1. We have a much smaller percentage of growth through evangelism/conversion. 2. We lack multiple generations of churches beyond the third generation. 3. The lack of transformation of culture and society. If all three of these observations are true than I believe we are not a CPM. The question is: are these observations valid?

1. We are not seeing the conversion growth rate that Church Planting Movements are seeing in other parts of the world. This is true, but I question if

that is cause to disqualify what is happening as a CPM. While I would wish that we would see more conversions, we are in a country where the predominant faith of the people is Christian. That has to change the way we view CPMs in the US when compared to nations where the gospel is a new idea introduced to a people with centuries of bondage to false ideas. While I am not really wanting a renewal movement as much as a true spiritual awakening of lost people, I for one, am not going to tell Christians that they cannot join us. To see the conversion growth rate found in China or India we would have to exclude Christians from joining the movement, and that is not healthy or realistic. That said this could easily derail the birth of a true movement if we spend all our time, resources and affection on the Christians that come in.

Church Multiplication Associates is seeing more than 25 percent conversion growth rate in the North American context that has a residual Christian understanding, which is pretty high in a Western context. A recent study of urban organic church movements rates the conversion growth higher, closer to 50 percent. Can we do better? Yes. Should we do better? I suppose, but "how do we do better?" is the real question. I am not going to tell Christians that they cannot be part of our movement, especially given that much of the transformation of lives we are seeing is from people who claim to have been Christians. I am also not going to start pushing evangelism with external drives that produce guilt-ridden evangelists and false conversions. I will just continue listening to the Holy Spirit and trusting Him as the only true evangelist to usher in the new life. Deepening the spiritual life of the disciples so that they are unable to keep quiet about their love of Jesus is probably the best way to mobilize evangelists.

2. Reproduction of churches must be beyond the third generation. Those who know me know that I myself say the same thing. It is not until we see fourth generation disciples, leaders and churches that we are truly a movement in my opinion. This is really an absolute mathematical equation, to see real multiplication each unit must be reproducing. If we are not multiplying we are not the movement we want to be. That said if we are multiplying, counting the churches and getting accurate information will be impossible, always leaving us vulnerable to pundits who sit on the sideline criticizing us.



What we have found out from an independent survey conducted by Ed Stetzer's group is that we have a very high rate of reproduction (near 100 percent as 52 out of 53 churches surveyed in one account had daughter churches in that same year). 30 percent of the churches that have started churches in our movement have started 6 or more churches! 30 percent have also seen granddaughter churches started, so I would say that we are indeed seeing reproduction to the third generation and beyond.

In 2004, only five years into starting the first Awakening Chapel in Long Beach, CA I was able to track the growth of only this one church. After five years we found 75 churches started. There were five networks of churches that trace their roots to the first Awakening Chapel, which we began in 1999. We were able at that time to track the growth down to five generations of churches. I am still part of one of these churches that started in 2000 in the home of a drug dealer who began to follow Christ. This church is a granddaughter of the original Awakening Chapel. This one church has sent 40 people out to start churches all over the world. In the past year we have seen about 7 or 8 churches started and are easily spotting third and fourth generation churches in just the past year. This sort of growth is not typical in the house church movement in the US today, but it is also not rare. Within CMA we can spot several networks that have the same type of reproduction occurring.

3. Transformation of society is the true mark of a movement. This I agree with whole-heartedly. As I have said to many who question our legitimacy as a

movement, it will not be our contemporary critics and experts who will give us our validity, but future historians. I often think of the future historian and what their perspective will be when I look at things, it helps to gain a bigger and broader perspective.

David Watson has mentioned that it takes longer in contexts with traditional church presence for CPMs to get started. He also states that it takes about four years in developing nations for a CPM to go from initial missionary contact to a rapid movement, so perhaps in the US we are looking at a decade or longer to see the same type of exponential growth and transformation of society. Well, we are a decade in and all the major news outlets are beginning to notice something, so perhaps we are indeed at the beginning of a North American CPM.

If we truly saturate our society with vital followers of Christ capable of making disciples, the world will change. But of course, this will not be evident for a little while. I am willing to wait for it. There are ways to have a more noticeable impact immediately such as large social programs, political lobbying by a few motivated individuals, aggressive and vocal assertion of our values in society. We could do that, as others are, but I believe that simply connecting God's children to their spiritual Father in such a way that they listen to His voice and courageously follow His lead will transform society in much broader, holistic and longer lasting ways.

I guess I am willing to say, we are a movement, but our best days lie ahead. ☿