

FACING THE BRUTAL FACTS OF CHURCH-PLANTING

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Many people misunderstand why some missionaries pursue Church-Planting Movements and models such as house churches. If we discuss some issues that are often forgotten, you may understand better why Church-Planting Movements are not just about the movements that God may provide, but are founded upon solid missiological principles when pursued wisely under God's Holy Spirit.

If you have read the books *Good to Great* (Jim Collins, William Collins Publishing, 2001), or *Breakthrough Churches* (Thomas Rainer, Zondervan Publishing, 2005), they propose a similar framework to see progress in the mission of any organization. I find these principles also fit well as we seek to plant churches around the world.

The authors say that before we implement a meaningful plan, we often fail because we do not "Face the Brutal Facts" or the difficult realities about what we are trying to do. Only after considering what may hinder us from our goal are we best prepared to make and pursue the best action plans.

To introduce just a few of the brutal facts of church planting, I often ask the following questions to face the hard realities that are often neglected.

First, what do you think is the average attendance of churches in America? I enjoy hearing many Asians respond, "500", "800", "2,000." But actually as we consider "averages" and especially if we take out the largest super churches which make the average higher, that number is closer to about 75 persons. The Southern Baptist average has been about 80 for years. Are these numbers surprising? Why? If you consider the average attendance in a

number of "mission" countries, the averages are much smaller. For example, in Cambodia, after about 22 years of active church planting, church and mission leaders acknowledge most churches in the country (the vast majority use a *traditional* model) have average attendance somewhere between 15-20. Only a handful of churches have grown larger than 50 in attendance.

A second question: What size do most pastors want their church to be? Usually of course we hear numbers of at least 150—200. Many dream of being a "Willow Creek" or "Saddleback" with thousands of members. But do the numbers above mean most pastors are "failures?" Most of us will quickly shake our head or say "NO!"

Third: How many people in a church does it take to support one full-time pastor/minister? The first answer I almost always get for this question is, "Ten"! Of course they are thinking about ten tithing members. But they forget that not all members of a church have incomes or choose to tithe. In most countries/cultures the average it takes is about 70-80. Is this surprising? Why?

A final question for this exercise: Based on average church size being about 75 in the USA, but the number of members needed to support a full-time pastor being about 70-80, how many American pastors do you think are "bi-vocational" or "lay-leaders?" Though it is difficult to get this data for many denominations, Southern Baptists have about 50% lay leaders. That doesn't mean that the church does not help those pastors with some expenses or salary, but that these pastors have another full-time or significant part-time job to meet most of their expenses. And remember that the Southern Baptist average church size is about 80, not the usual 75. This brutal fact really amazes most Asian Christian leaders because they just assume that all American churches are "big" and that all have full-time, well-supported pastors, and they wonder why they struggle so much to make a living.

So... if we take just a few of the above brutal facts into consideration we might draw quite a few working conclusions about our model and methods for church planting. Here are some that come to mind as we train in several countries:



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- The church at large will always need to have a large number of bi-vocational leaders leading local churches.
- If you pursue traditional models of church planting it will be very expensive and very difficult to grow even a few churches larger than 50-80 persons.
- Many difficulties and cultural issues prevent most churches from growing larger than “average” size. Among those are a leader’s spiritual gifts, personality, work ethic and interpersonal skills.
- Average people do seem to be able to start and lead churches that average 10-40 people. This seems to be the average size God grows most churches to.
- Let’s face it—the brutal facts of God’s kingdom are that the gifting of many church leaders and the situations they face make it difficult to grow a church beyond 70 people.

If we face the “brutal fact” that most churches in the world are small, and that this is how God usually works in His churches, then we know that the normal pattern is to have small churches—thousands and thousands of them!

So... why pursue Church-Planting Movements? We are starting normal-sized churches, with God’s normal people. Almost every church starts small... so why should leadership or missionaries bear the burden to raise large amounts of money for each church plant to try to become large or support a full-time pastor when many will not? If the church is to grow large and have a facility with full-time staff, that should largely be a factor of whether the church members can do that from within in a self-supporting and self-sustaining manner.

Which will bring God more glory: To work to start many small churches, or to start and grow only one or two large churches? It is churches planting churches by average believers that seems truly amazing! When that happens rapidly in a number of venues, we call that a Church-Planting Movement.

What would happen if every church started a church or two every year? Pray about this for your church! In many places around the world, this is the norm.

Our Strength is Our Weakness

Church-Planting Movements are invariably lay-led movements. What we see in the West is the predominance of professional-led churches. While there’s nothing wrong with wanting leaders to be as well-equipped and competent as possible, the brutal fact is that in the West there is a growing chasm between the leadership and the laity. In many respects, our strength has become our weakness.

A new church start on the booming west-end of a city in America offers a case in point. The association of Baptists located a strategic property in the midst of an

under-churched yet bustling suburb filled with newly-arrived, unchurched prospective church members. To get the new church up and going, the association invited staff members from a local Christian mission organization to voluntarily participate in the new church. Almost immediately the church was up and running with seminary trained, highly competent musicians, Bible teachers, worship leaders, outreach coordinators, and children’s workers.

Two years later, the church closed its doors. What happened? Visitors to the church found it easy to sit and enjoy the many services this church offered, but found little need for their own services. Prospective new members felt welcomed, but not needed. There was no position in the church that they could fill better than one of the mission agency staff members who typically had seminary training, overseas ministry experience and a high motivation to minister.

In a similar way, the professionalization of the ministry has produced high quality teaching, worship and ministry, but has often left the laity behind as passive listeners. In Church-Planting Movements, the laity is mobilized and unleashed to be the *avant garde*, the cutting edge, of kingdom advance.

The same was true of our own evangelical heritage in America. Reading Rodney Stark and Roger Finke’s *The Churching of America*, it is clear that the more educated and professional denominations at the time of America’s early decades ridiculed the fervor and folly of those populist denominations with their brush arbor revivals and circuit-riding preachers. While the professionals at Harvard, Yale and Princeton complained, the lay-led populists won the West.

The same is true today. The future will be won, not by the most educated and erudite, but by the masses of believers who are summoned and equipped to take up the mantle of kingdom advance. This is the key to world evangelization. If we are to see Church-Planting Movements again in America, it will only happen when we learn how to equip the masses of believers, who make up the body of Christ, to be disciple-makers and church planters. Most of this untapped group are currently at rest, watching the paid professionals carry out the work of ministry.

Centrifugal vs Centripetal

You know how centrifugal force works, right? The very term has its origins in two Latin words meaning “center” and “flee.” Centrifugal forces push objects outward away from the center. Centrifugal forces are at work in Church-Planting Movements (CPMs). Rather than joining a central, mother church, CPM churches spin out to form new bodies of believers within the communities of lost persons that they eventually reach for Christ.

Contrast this with centripetal forces, which characterize our Western church model. In the West, there is little incentive for a pastor to spin off his church members into multiplying new (yet small) congregations of believers. The very life and health of the Western church model depends upon attracting and keeping as many new, or old, believers as possible. The salaries of the pastoral staff and the financing of programs and buildings depend upon it. This centripetal or attractional model is not without merit and has a definite role, but it is usually antithetical to the CPM paradigm.

Ecclesionomics or Follow the Money

A colleague who had spent many years successfully launching Church-Planting Movements in South Asia recently found himself back for an extended stay in America. He immediately began doing what he knew best: he used the *Training for Trainers* (T4T) model to launch multiplying churches. Very quickly, though, he ran into the kind of obstacles that abort many CPM efforts in the West:

1) We have enough churches already. Living in the Bible belt, my friend found churches everywhere. They were two-thirds empty, but they were there. Each one had a pastor who was struggling to keep his flock in the fold and his head above water. When my friend cast a vision for multiplying new churches, their response was unanimous: We have enough churches already.

Lesson one: Many people believe we just need to grow existing churches and that new churches may be in competition with existing ones. To suggest new church plants in America, you're swimming against a powerful current of those who want to keep growing their existing churches.

Undaunted, my friend vowed to the pastors not to plant new churches, but rather to start new discipleship groups. Within a couple of years, he had more than 70 discipleship groups meeting throughout his area.

2) How do I feed my family?

About a year later, my friend telephoned me:

"How's the work going?" I asked.

"Great!" he said, "but there's just one problem."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I've got to figure out how to feed my family."

Though the movement was doing well, it offered no funding option for a full-time professional CPM catalyst (i.e. missionary). It also explained why there are so few CPM catalysts at work in America.

Church-Planting Movements are a noble ideal, but there's no money in them. Don't misunderstand what I'm saying here. Pastors don't become pastors to become

wealthy. But neither do they become pastors with expectations that their family will starve. The traditional Western church paradigm has many strengths and weaknesses, but as an economic model, it generally works. The more parishioners one attracts, the more fiscally viable the institution becomes.

Lesson two: Pursuing a model that needs money to exist often leaves out potential members who have little or no money.

Such possible members could include immigrants, inner city unemployed or underemployed, college students and youth. If our church model depends upon funding from our members then it will always be at a loss in reaching the poor, the student, and the disenfranchised.

The Church-Planting Movement model has flourished among the poor and disenfranchised because it has overcome the money obstacle. For this to happen, though, three things had to occur:

1) *Removal of overhead.* CPMs become affordable when removing the funding demands of full-time professional church leadership and buildings. While all of these things are good, they create a centripetal force within a church that invariably works against multiplying new communities of faith.

2) *Parsing the task.* Just as you would parse a sentence to find its nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, so too you can parse the task of being a church to find its underlying responsibilities of worship, fellowship, ministry, discipleship and mission. Roughly these tasks can all be rolled up into the job description of a full-time pastor (as in the traditional church model) or they can be rolled out into the hands of the laity (as in the CPM model). As the work of the church gets disseminated throughout the church, so too does the sense of ownership of the church's life and mission become widely held throughout the church body.

3) *Providing for a few full-time catalysts.* There is a need for full-time workers, but in the CPM paradigm, these full-timers are not the house church or small church pastors and ministry-staff members. Rather, they are the overseers and catalysts, those who oversee multiple house churches—teaching, training, and developing leaders while catalyzing new streams of house church multiplication.

What will it take to see CPMs in America? It will take a return to the pioneering spirit of our predecessors who saw an entire continent in need of Christ rather than a single church or denomination in need of expansion. Several denominations in the USA grew because "circuit riders" (sometimes lay leaders themselves), would plant several churches at a time, raise up young men to be their pastors, and continue to plant. A current change begins with a recognition of the brutal facts of our current condition that impedes our progress forward.^f