

Kingdom Movement Strategies in a Small/Medium-Sized Church Led by the Pastor

An Interview
by **DOUG LUCAS**
with **TIM AHLEN**
and **BRYAN KING**

Tim Ahlen currently serves as the Senior Pastor of Forest Meadow Baptist Church, a multi-congregational and multi-ethnic church in Dallas, TX, as the Evangelism and Unreached People Groups Consultant for Dallas Baptist Association and as a regional coordinator/coach for the Zúme Project.

Bryan King serves as Mobilization Minister with Cedar Ridge Christian Church in Broken Arrow, OK. He is a graduate of Ozark Christian College and Columbia International University and served cross culturally in Mexico City from 2001-2008.

Doug Lucas founded Team Expansion in 1978 and, over 40 years later, still serves as the organization's president. Doug's new book, *More Disciples*, is designed to help believers discover how they can be more effective at multiplying disciples and churches. www.teamexpansion.org

Churches of 30, 100, or 700 all share some of the same challenges, despite appearances. They can experience tremendous growth spurts, which can in turn, create stress for staff and facilities. In addition, they are often still led by entrepreneurs who wield a lot of influence with church leadership. This creates some unique opportunities in relation to implementing Kingdom Movement (CPM/DMM) strategies in a new context. In this article, we interview two CPM/DMM practitioners who have innovated, each in unique ways, in the context of small and medium-sized church congregations.

Our first exchange is with Tim Ahlen, the Pastor and Church Consultant with Forest Meadow Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas.

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DL: Tim, I've heard you describe your church community as, "One church, multiple congregations." Please tell us briefly why you use that phrase.

Tim: The Lake Highlands neighborhood of Dallas Texas is one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the DFW metroplex. We are a mixture of upper middle income second-generation-plus people whose primary language is "Texan English," and middle to lower income immigrants and refugees—"New Americans"—who speak one of 75 other languages in their homes. What we have found, and firmly believe, is that every person deserves to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ in their heart language. Eighteen years ago we embarked on a church-planting strategy that would utilize our church facility to house multiple ethnic congregations. Each one maintains their autonomy, yet we partner together to accomplish what we cannot accomplish individually. As of 2020, we have six congregations—Oromo, Sudanese, Arabic, Kenyan, Burmese, Messianic Jewish, and English—partnering together in our facility at 9150 Church Rd. In addition to the churches that meet locally in our facility, we also have at least seven generations—over 165 congregations—whose spiritual roots come back to FMBC.

DL: It sounds like Forest Meadow had experienced several upheavals, including at least one church split and multiple personnel changes before you arrived in 2003. You spent the first year getting to know the church and the community, which seems pivotal, by the way. Then you prayerfully

concluded that you wanted to challenge them to focus on church-planting rather than on church growth. Help us understand why you came up with that preference.

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Tim: In my experience, church-planting is much more effective than church revitalization. New organizations grow more quickly and have much more flexibility than older ones. It's easier and more fun having babies than resurrecting the dead. The rationale comes down to stewardship of resources. God gives us only so many resources with which to work. Our task is to figure out how best to utilize the resources God gives us to maximize our kingdom impact. The goal is to maximize the number of persons who spend eternity in Heaven. What I frequently say is that if I had put all of our energy and resources into church growth, I'll bet I could have grown the one church to 150 in attendance. By focusing our resources on church-planting, we wound up with over 10,000 people worshipping in 165+ congregations scattered around the world. And that was in 2014. Who knows what it is in 2020?

DL: Well it sounds like it was a smart idea, looking back, because, since that time, you are able to count at least 165 different congregations across 7 generations of church growth in 8 different streams. We're looking at a generational diagram (which reminds us of a mind map). Can you tell us approximately how many total participants might be involved today and give us some idea of the spread of cases in North America (recognizing you've had numerous churches planted overseas but this issue of *Mission Frontiers* is largely focused on North America)? Give us some examples of churches or groups in rural areas and maybe some which are in urban areas. Any idea how many states the movement has touched?

Tim: One of the realities we discovered is that the geographical paradigm we used to follow is not as important as it once was. To be sure whatever outreach we do has to begin in a place among people. But in today's world, with technology and communication being what it is, geography is no longer a significant barrier. Evangelistic outreach now occurs in an affinity paradigm. In other words, while it must start someplace, once it starts, it moves according to relationships. This means that FMBC evangelized Sudanese refugees living in Dallas, who when evangelized other Sudanese refugees they knew who were living in other parts of the metroplex, who then evangelized Sudanese living in Sudan. Today there are churches in Brazil, Sudan, Ethiopia, Nepal, Cincinnati, Bulgaria, Dubai, Jordan, China, California, Houston, Buffalo, Queens and who knows where else, that are connected relationally to FMBC.

DL: This is just outstanding growth. Do these groups/churches mostly meet on Sunday or are some of them, for example, Tuesday night groups and the members attend another church on Sunday?

Tim: The house churches meet at various times. Many of those churches eventually become more traditional, and meet on Sundays. At the FMBC building, we have Bible study and worship services pretty much every day of the week.

DL: On the whole, what can you extract from the last 18 years and how did most of this growth happen? Was it mostly spontaneous or was it very intentionally planned? Were there 152 appointed pastors, or did some of these groups emerge from home Bible studies?

Tim: Of course God gets all the glory. I am not a super saint. I am not a charismatic, compelling personality. I am 67 years of age and need notes to get through a teaching/sermon with coherence so it is not a personality cult. Truth be told, very few people beyond our first generation of churches even know that I or FMBC exists. Having said that, we were very intentional in what we did. Our intentions were to make our plans but then submit them to the Lord who orders our steps.

Since we at FMBC were all culturally Westernized and linguistically limited, we knew we needed Persons of Peace from the culture we were reaching to lead our efforts. And God provided them. We also knew that we did not have financial resources to support our efforts. So we employed strategies that did not require lots of outside resources (with the exception of TEAM Church—that's another story).

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DL: We're excited about the record-keeping you've done. How have you managed to keep track of all this growth over the years?

Tim: We have not researched our impact since 2014. If what we have done follows a typical CPM/DMM, then the impact has probably doubled at least. But we would much rather start new works and reach Unreached People Groups than simply to develop bragging points. If anyone in your audience would like to volunteer to do the research, we would welcome them!

DL: If you were to share any lessons learned for other North American pastors or churches, what would you share? In other words, how are you doing this? How are you getting this to work so effectively?

Tim:

1. Learn to listen to God. Pray!
2. Do what God says. Do!
3. Minimize the distinction between evangelism and discipleship.
4. Develop your own model. Don't copy someone else's!
5. Your principles should come from three Bible passages:
 - a. Great Commission—make disciples of all nations.
 - b. Great Commandment—Love God. Love others as yourself.
 - c. 2 Tim. 2:2—Make disciples who make disciples.
6. Sacrifice whatever is not mandated biblically to get the job done. Travel light.
7. If you are not hearing from God, go back to the last thing you heard Him say, and do that!

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At the Cedar Ridge Christian Church in Broken Arrow, OK, Bryan King is the “Mobilization Pastor.” Bryan has been both patient and intentional in his quest to implement CPM/DMM strategies at Cedar Ridge, a church with an average weekend worship attendance of roughly 700 people on three campuses. Bryan told us that his church at first gave him latitude, but finally fell in love with Kingdom Movement (CPM/DMM) strategies. They’ve now made it their “core strategy of disciple-making.” Bryan has utilized the familiar discovery Bible study model. But he’s also utilizing “residencies” as well (learn more about these in this issue, *Kingdom Movement Strategies in Non-Traditional Contexts*).

DL: Bryan, you have a lot going on there in Broken Arrow and, in fact, all around greater Tulsa. How have you seen God work in relation to Kingdom Movement strategies?

Bryan: It really has energized our church and others in our context. We are now running six discovery-Bible study (DBS) groups among members at Cedar Ridge with roughly 75 people participating in all. We are also using DBS in some of our youth small groups as well though I don’t have the exact number on that.

DL: I’ve noticed you’ve also “spilled over” to help influence others in your town and city as well.

Bryan: Well, God does have a way of doing that. As He works in our context, word gets around. Outside our walls, we would need to count at least seven other groups across the city who are also using DBS with around 80 additional people participating in those. These numbers include three residencies.

DL: To me, this really shows that an “emerging megachurch” like Cedar Ridge could truly complement its vision to reach an entire range of communities that it might now have attracted to come to a building in one neighborhood and maybe might not have afforded to start multi-site campuses in all those locations, either.

Bryan: For sure. CPM/DMM approaches are *perfect* for those situations, Doug. Because they are so focused on people—and not as reliant on buildings, budgets, programs and staff—they are actually *very* easy to utilize as an expansion of a central site celebration service.

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DL: And it doesn’t worry you that some of those people might never darken the door of your building?

Bryan: Not in the least. If we were only in this to build our own personal kingdom here, it might be a different story. But our leaders truly understand that it’s not about us as a church or about us as individual celebrities. It never was. It’s always been about Jesus. Once we get that squared away, starting a new group and turning it loose to multiply across town -- or across the world -- is equally as big of a win for kingdom growth as it is if we added another pew full of people under our roof here at the central site. CPM/DMM strategies are, in many ways, perfect companions for churches with a vision to multiply themselves many times over! 