

# HOW TO Adapt

## CHURCHES IN CHURCHED CULTURES FOR CHURCH-PLANTING MOVEMENTS:

THREE STORIES FROM NORTH CAROLINA

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The buried treasure of equipping existing churches with evangelism/discipleship tools, like *Training for Trainers* (T4T), is that we may wake the sleeping giant. Every community has an endowment of thousands of believers who, if they have read the New Testament, probably want their church to look more like the book of Acts. People given tools to share the gospel and make disciples for the first time are thrilled to go and do it. The common practice of attracting people to a building for a large meeting, rather than seeking people far from God *where they are*, impedes the Western church (and many others around the world) from becoming a Church-Planting Movement (CPM). But the North American church is a luxury liner making full steam on a course plotted with full financial backing and a wealth of tradition. Notwithstanding an iceberg-type crisis, why worry? Bill Bright said that only about 2% of American evangelicals regularly share their faith, and Alan Hirsch says that 60% of Americans say they would never go to any church, but these facts have not broken the hearts or changed the tactics of enough American Christians. We normally focus on growing the church, not primarily on reaching the lost or transforming communities. Somehow we believe that Sunday church attendance will make disciples and transform lives, and we are half-convinced that true loving community can be rooted in a one-hour meeting of 50 to 10,000 people. It seems that we have confidence in the ministries and gifts of our staff, but not

of those in our congregations. Even small-group discipleship meetings tend to funnel back towards the aims of the mother churches, which generally follow the expectations above.

We need to stop measuring our success by conversions, baptisms, and especially weekly attendance. Instead we should measure success by *tracking multiple generations of believers* whose lives are transformed by the gospel, and who are committed to change their communities in Jesus' name.

Can CPMs change the heading of the North American church? Read these stories of everyday church leaders taking a risk to do so . . .

### Element Church, Alexander Mills, NC: Neal Perry

Element is a progressive, informal church plant where it is common to see a man in a suit next to a guy with tattoos all the way up his arms. But Element has committed to start 100 simple church plants in homes of lost people. Since adopting T4T-based CPM methods, they have begun 17 groups in homes, and at least 5 of them have reproduced other groups. These groups have led 17 new believers to Christ, and baptized 14 of them in homes.

Rickey, whose story is like a highlight film of great plays from CPM discipleship in our area, came to Christ through the simple church ministry of Element. In the summer of 2011, Rickey was hooked on a drug marketed



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as “bath salts,” but which is actually some form of methamphetamine. One night, Rickey was in a speed-induced rage, throwing furniture and yelling at his wife, when his mother called the county sheriff. After a fist fight with three deputies, during which they attempted to shoot him, Rickey ended up in the county jail. The day he was bailed out, Rickey went to visit the grave side of his friend and mentor, Randy. He found himself crying out to Randy: “Are you in heaven? Is there another life? Answer me if



Shane baptizes Rickey after having led him to Christ as part of a CPM discipleship initiative by Element Church

there is!” As he stayed, tears streaming down his face, he felt himself pushed down to his knees, just asking God to show up. As he drove away from the grave, he saw Shane’s truck pass him, going home. Shane’s and Rickey’s daughters had become best friends, and Rickey wanted what Shane had: stability, happiness at home, faith in God. He followed Shane home and shared his heart. Shane didn’t want to take credit for what he had; he knew he was in a daily battle, and wasn’t fighting alone. What impressed Rickey was that Shane talked about struggles, failures, successes, and being committed to the long haul, with God, his wife, kids, job, and neighbors. Rickey committed himself that day to follow Jesus, repented of the way he had been living, and took a whole new life-course.

Shane did not ask Rickey to recite the sinner’s prayer and then leave him at the altar of the church in the care of others. Shane asked Rickey if he could come to *his home* once a week for the next few months to bring the teachings of Jesus and the community of God’s people to share with his whole family. This was the way of evangelism/discipleship that Shane’s pastor, Neal, had been leading in their church for a couple of years, inspired by *Training for Trainers* and the adaptations of it that Jeff Sundell had brought back from missions in Nepal and shared with Neal and a group of others. It was at least a year-long commitment for both of them and their families. Now Rickey is teaching that group,

along with Shane and some others, and their home group has bounded to over twenty. On the night of the Duke-UNC basketball face-off, Rickey’s and Shane’s daughters were piled together in a bean-bag chair, wearing dueling Duke and Carolina pajamas. They have a lot more to share now that both their dads are leading their families in the way God intended.

### **First Baptist Spindale, Spindale, NC: Andy Evans**

Only a few years ago, First Baptist would run 35-45 on Sundays. Now they regularly have 120 or more. 80% of those people came from home conversions and are still in T4T-based groups. One meeting in a trailer park baptized 26 people in September 2011, and 9 more in October.

First Baptist Spindale had a traditional background. Their strategy for reaching the lost was always attractational: “you need to come here, and we will teach you how to adapt to our culture.” It had been program-driven and maintenance-minded since the beginning. The methods that may have worked in the 1950’s now bear little, if any, fruit. In 2009, this church began to intentionally shift their approach, realizing that Jesus created a multiplicative, mentoring-based ministry. The first step towards change began in a seedy, run-down motel. Someone was willing to allow their room, #114, to be used as a meeting place once a week and thus began Church 114. For approximately 9 months, they saw genuine fruit among what was clearly an unreached crowd. The motel was transient; attendees came and went; but they saw real spiritual hunger expressed and satisfied. There was a real spirit of liberty present in the meetings and there were no traditions to battle.

One of the weaknesses of this method was the lack of continuity inherent in the lifestyles of the crowd. Many disappeared after a few weeks, never to be seen again. Obviously, this made long term discipleship difficult at best, though it still seemed more Jesus-focused than the average Sunday morning church service. Taking what they learned from 114, they began to train leaders in how to press deeper into their community. They taught them how to flexibly structure meetings in homes using the 1/3 – 1/3 – 1/3 concept in T4T (*Training for Trainers*). Now, they have groups meeting in trailer parks, homes, and backyards. One of the biggest challenges is to avoid letting success in drawing people through attractational appeal displace kingdom outreach. We might just be duplicating Sunday morning on Tuesday night in someone’s living room. Instilling accountability to the gospel without using heavy-handed control is crucial. We feel we can walk this out by keeping our eyes on what DNA is transmitted to new believers, but also trusting the work of the Holy Spirit in our leaders. That is a faith risk we continue to take daily.

## Desiring God Community Church (DGCC), Charlotte, NC: Coty Pinckney

Seven churches in the Charlotte area, including DGCC, are engaged in a T4T experiment since late November, 2011. So far, there are 9 training groups among believers, 22 outreach groups (houses of peace) among unbelievers, and 43 people that have come to Christ in homes.

Desiring God Community Church was planted in the University of North Carolina at Charlotte area nine years ago with an emphasis on going to the nations. They also made a concerted effort to reach out to international students. These values and practices paved the way for the introduction of T4T in 2011, paired with a vision for God to bring to salvation 100 people through their witness in 2012 (sermon link).

T4T is stretching DGCC in positive ways, and in particular, the calling for immediate application and obedience has been healthy. They have always emphasized that “walking in the light as He is in the light” requires a change of mind-set and not just a change in activity. However, the emphasis on immediate obedience has helped people to ask more regularly and quickly, “What does this teaching imply for me this week?”

Besides all the positive effects, there have also been some challenges in communicating and implementing T4T principles at DGCC:

- 1) Some hear T4T simply as another evangelism or outreach program. It must be reiterated that T4T is a process of exposing people to the Word in a simple format, encouraging all to commit to immediate obedience, and then holding them accountable for living it. T4T wraps up evangelism, discipleship, leadership development, and church planting in one continuous stream.
- 2) DGCC has to continually reinforce the fact that T4T is a kingdom-building approach, not a church growth strategy. The idea that they could see many people come to Christ who then would not necessarily come Sundays—or not even be involved in DGCC—needs regular repetition.
- 3) A third challenge relates to how the T4T vision meshes with DGCC’s emphasis on the command to “preach the Word . . . with great patience teaching all doctrine.” Under the T4T model, new disciples learn a handful of stories well enough to evangelize and disciple others, thereby living out obedience to the gospel. However, it follows that these new believers should also seek to know the God of the gospel better through a deepening understanding of His character. DGCC knows that this is important and has worked extra hard to confirm that is happening among the new disciples.

DGCC is excited about all these challenges and feels privileged to be part of this process. They don’t know what the gathering of new reproducing disciples into appropriate churches will look like, but they’re praying that God will give them the opportunity to meet those challenges.

Conclusion—So what are we all learning from this?

Good:

- It is effective and biblical to start churches with the lost, not believers. Churches that adopt CPM approaches outstrip conventional churches in conversions, baptisms, and new members.
- Adopting a CPM approach allows many new believers to share their stories and Jesus’ story in a powerful way, gathering more new believers from their social network.
- Some of this sharing results in multiple generations of disciple-making church-planting networks.
- People reaching out using T4T are excited how open unbelievers are to allow evangelistic/discipling meetings in their homes.
- New believers using CPM methods in the States and new believers trained by missionaries overseas are experiencing the same basic training.

Bad:

- Meetings started by traditional churches, even with new believers, tend to revert to the attractational mode, drawing people to one home or meeting rather than sending people out. It is a challenge for existing churches to stay the course towards a true CPM.
- Another challenge is that many existing believers are simply unwilling to commit the time to reach out to their friends and family with the gospel.
- Sometimes in the T4T process, new disciples are impacted negatively by media, friends and even family. Because of this, church planters and trainers must invest at least 1-3 years in discipling, and even more time with emerging leaders. T4T is not 6 lessons and then set people loose, but a mentoring process that requires commitment.

Ugly:

- Winning lost people with all their addictions, social problems, and moral quandaries results in messy situations for discipleship. Some traditional churches might not be accustomed to having to “deal with dirty sheep.” These kinds of churches can take comfort that the very same challenges were faced by the believers as recorded in the Gospels and Epistles.<sup>f</sup>