

the bare essentials of helping groups become churches:

four helps in church planting movements

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This article is the first of a two part series. Please look for Part 2 in the Nov.-Dec. 2012 issue under the title, *Generational Mapping*.

I was training a group of missionaries in Southeast Asia when we came to the subject of helping small groups (e.g. Bible study groups) actually become churches. The missionaries in this context were struggling to get churches started, not to mention the larger goal of a Church-Planting Movement (CPM). I took them through a set of four helps in the church-planting process—really a rather simple, but purposeful exercise in birthing authentic communities of faith.

Help #4 was an exercise to diagram a group using a process called church health mapping, or “church circles,” for short. To illustrate this diagnostic process, I called one of the longer-tenured missionaries to the white board. I asked him to describe one small group of believers to the class. As he described this Bible study group, I represented it with a dotted-line circle on the board. Going through Acts 2:37–47, I asked him to assess which of the elements of the early Acts church were happening regularly in this small group. If an element was in practice, we drew a symbol representing it inside the circle. If it was missing, we drew it outside the circle.

As we all stepped back to assess the status of this group becoming church, the diagram showed a couple of clear deficiencies. The group was not practicing the Lord’s Supper nor were they giving to meet needs. The symbols for these two elements were drawn outside the dotted-line circle. I drew an arrow from Lord’s Supper to the inside of the circle and asked my colleague: “What would it take for this group to start practicing the Lord’s Supper?” The missionary thought for a moment and then explained that when he returned to his place of service, he could easily coach the group leader how to implement the Lord’s Supper the following week. As the colleague gave his answers, I summarized them along the arrow as action plans.

I did the same with giving, drawing an arrow to the inside of the circle. Once we had brainstormed on action plans to put that into practice, I wrote these action plans on the arrow also.

Finally, I got to the core question: “Does this small group see itself as a church?” After some thought, the colleague decided that they did not. I suggested that if the group could commit to being church, they would have an identity as church and truly become a church. If that happened, then we would color in the dotted circle as a solid-line circle. I asked the missionary what it would take to help the group take that step. He felt that taking them through a study of Acts 2:37–47 and helping them make a firm covenant to God and each other would finalize their transition from an outreach group to a genuine church. I wrote this action plan on the dotted-line circle representing the group.

With excitement the missionary and the group eyed the three major action plans on the white board. All were thoroughly achievable. In fact, the missionary planned to implement these the next week with two virtually identical small groups. This missionary, working in a remote location, trembled with anticipation. For over seven long years, he and his family had toiled to share the gospel widely, train national partners, and disciple new believers into groups. All the while they had been longing for the first churches ever to be started among this people group. Now through a simple, yet focused and purposeful step they were going to witness the birth of the first churches!

I saw this missionary again last week, just over a year after that training event. Not only have these groups become churches, but they are now helping other new groups they have started walk through the same process of becoming churches.

GOING FROM GROUP TO CHURCH

In Church-Planting Movements, we devote much time to finding persons of peace, winning them and their household, grouping them and discipling them. The most common method many of us use is the Training for Trainers process (T4T).¹

ANY CPM APPROACH SHOULD PURPOSEFULLY FORM GROUPS INTO CHURCHES AT A KEY STAGE IN THE EARLY DISCIPLESHIP PROCESS. GETTING TO CHURCH IS A CRITICAL MILESTONE IN THE CHURCH-PLANTING MOVEMENT PROCESS.

But where do churches fit into this mix? When do these groups become churches, if ever?

New believers must be gathered into churches. This is God's design from the beginning of history. Living in community as church is the King's way to equip His people to be what they were designed to be and do what they were called to do.

Any CPM approach should purposefully form groups into churches at a key stage in the early discipleship process. Getting to church is a critical milestone in the Church-Planting Movement process.

Not all groups (even T4T groups) become churches. Sometimes they become home-based cells of a larger church but still carry out the functions

of the Body of Christ. The essential point is to help the new believers become a part of the Body of Christ in a reproducible form that is adapted to their community.

There are two guidelines that govern CPM churches:

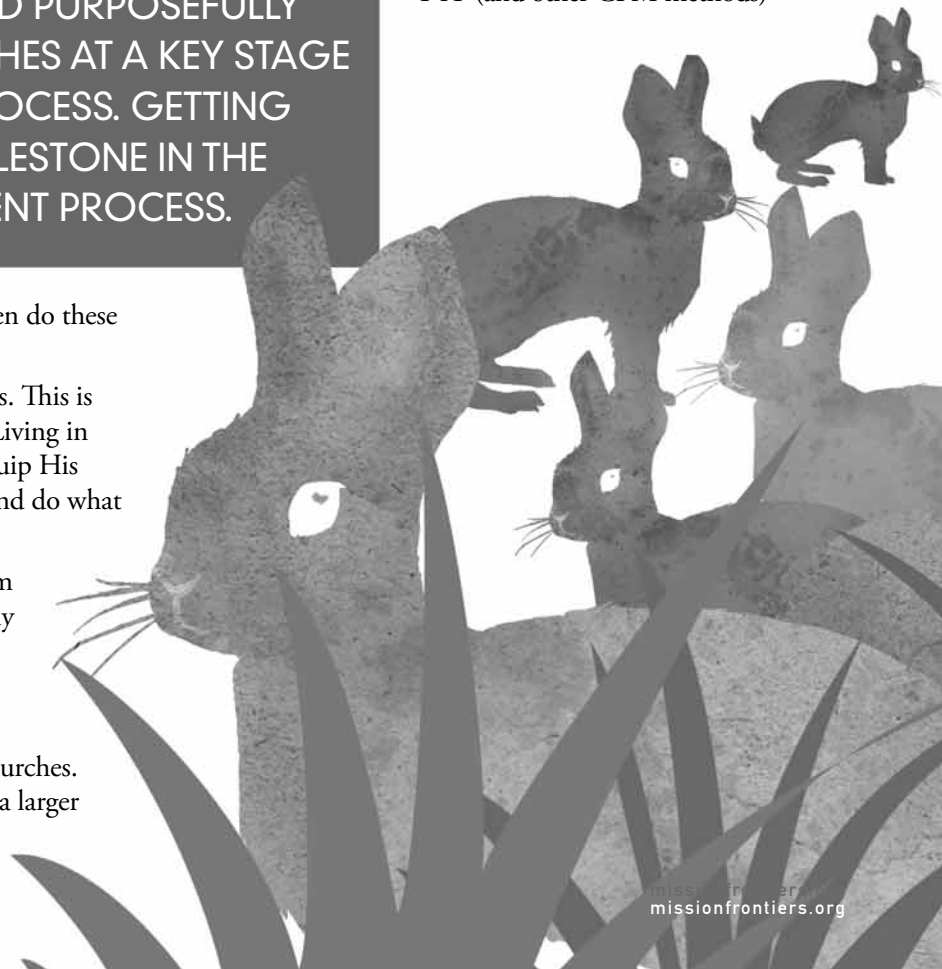
- **BIBLICAL: Is this model and/or each aspect of church consistent with the Scripture?**

There is no uniform biblical model of what a church must be. We see numerous examples of culturally-adapted models in the Scripture. In CPMs we do not propose only one model of church as THE biblical model. Many models of church can be biblical. So the question is: "Is this model (and its elements) consistent with scriptural teaching?"

- **CULTURALLY REPRODUCIBLE: Is this model of church something an average new believer can start and organize?**

Since many models of church can faithfully serve the scriptural teaching, the secondary question becomes: "Which one is most culturally appropriate and reproducible in our community?" The general guideline is this: "Could an average young believer start and organize such a church?" Otherwise, church planting will be relegated to a few highly trained individuals.

With these two guidelines in mind, T4T (and other CPM methods)



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helps believers start simple types of churches that enable disciples to faithfully follow Jesus as the body of Christ. When initiating CPMs, for the sake of reaching all of the lost, we advocate CPM churches that are relevant and reproducible. That type of church will need to emphasize smaller church meetings in locations that are easy to find such as homes, offices, coffee shops and parks rather than in locations that are costly to purchase or build.

THE EASIEST WAY TO TRANSITION A NEW SMALL GROUP INTO A CHURCH IS TO START LIVING AS CHURCH AND MODELING CHURCH FROM THE VERY FIRST MEETING.

FOUR HELPS IN GETTING TO CHURCH

It is not difficult to start reproducible churches if you have a clear process in your evangelism and discipleship to help groups become churches. Purposefulness is critical. You must have a clear lesson(s) in your early discipleship at which you help a group of believers consciously become a church. To establish churches that will start new churches, there are four practices that we have found especially helpful.

1. **Know what you are trying to achieve: a CLEAR DEFINITION of when a group becomes a church.**

It is difficult to start a church if you do not have a clear idea in mind of when a group moves from being a cell group or Bible study to a church.

Scenario: A group has been meeting independent of any church for three months. They have great worship times and deeply moving Bible studies. They listen to the Word and try to obey whatever it says. They are making plans to visit a nursing home to minister to the needs of people there. Are they a church?

There's probably not enough information there for you to make a call. Is it a church or a great Bible study group? If your definition of when a group becomes church is not clear, you might be tempted to call this group a church. The first step in starting churches is establishing a clear definition of what a church is—the basic essentials of a church. *We start small training groups that have the intention to become church from the beginning.*

Acts provides a concrete example that can be helpful here:

Activity: Read Acts 2:36-47. Try not to make things too complicated. Boiled down, what made this group a church? Write down your answer.

Here is an example of a definition of church created from the Acts 2 passage. It emphasizes the ten elements of the 3 Cs of church: Covenant, Characteristics, and Caring leaders.

- **Covenant(1):** a group of **baptized (2)** believers [Mt.18:20; Acts 2:41] who recognize themselves as Christ's body and are committed to meeting together regularly [Acts 2:46]
- **Characteristics:** they regularly **abide** in Christ through the characteristics of church:
- **Word (3):** Studying and obeying the Scripture as authoritative
- **The Lord's Supper or Communion (4)**
- **Fellowship (5):** loving care for one another
 - **Including giving offerings (6)** to meet needs and **minister** to others
- **Prayer (7)**
- **Praise (8):** whether spoken or sung
- They live out a commitment to **share the gospel (evangelism) (9)**
- **Caring Leaders (10):** As the church develops, leaders are appointed according to biblical standards (Titus 1:5-9) and exercise mutual accountability, including church discipline.

For the sake of church planting, the 3Cs are in order of priority. The most important C is "*Covenant.*" The group sees itself as church (identity) and has made a commitment (covenant) to follow Jesus together. Do not read into this that they must have a written covenant. They have simply made a conscious step to become church. Many times a church will give itself a name to signify this step.

The second part of the definition is "*Characteristics.*" A group may call itself a church, but if it repeatedly lacks the basic characteristics of a church, it is not really a church. If an animal barks, wags its tail and walks on all fours, you may call it a duck, but it is really a dog.

Finally, a healthy church will quickly develop indigenous "*Caring Leaders.*" It is possible to have a church before these leaders develop. A good example of this is at the end of Paul's first journey. In Acts 14:21-23, Paul and Barnabas visited the churches they had just planted in the previous weeks and months and appointed elders for them at this point. For the sake of the long-term health of the churches, caring leaders should be raised up from within.

The first step in starting churches is: *Know what you are trying to achieve and have a clear definition of when a group becomes a church.*

2. From the beginning when you start a training group, MODEL the parts of church life mentioned above.

A church planter was having a hard time helping the groups he was training to become churches. As he described to me his training groups, the process sounded like a sterile classroom experience. As the group worked through the lessons, it was very cerebral but not very warm. In this classroom environment he was teaching them to start something *different* in their homes. There was a disconnect between what he was modeling and what he was teaching them to do. By changing his training meetings into a format similar to what he would want the churches to look like, it would be much easier to help these groups actually become churches.

The easiest way to transition a new small group into a church is to start living as church and modeling church from the very first meeting. That way, when you get to the discipleship lesson on church, it is what you have already been living out together. For example, in each meeting starting the first week, T4T employs a three-thirds discipleship process of looking back to evaluate the previous week, looking up to receive more from God, and looking ahead in order to obey and serve Him faithfully. These three-thirds incorporate the basic elements of church such as worship, prayer, Word, fellowship, evangelism, ministry, etc.

Do your best from the first small group meeting to model what you will eventually want this new church to look like. The lesson on church should come as no surprise. You don't want to spend 4-5 weeks together as a "class" and then announce: "Today we will have the lesson on church and become a church" and completely change your manner of meeting. *Becoming a church should be a natural next step in the progression of meeting together.*

3. Make sure you have a SPECIFIC LESSON (OR LESSONS) ON CHURCH and its ordinances in your early discipleship.

If you have a clear biblical definition of church and are modeling church-like meetings each small group meeting, then it is easy to help the group become a church when you go through the "church" lesson in your short-term discipleship. If you want groups that become churches and plant churches, then include one or two lessons on becoming a church by about session four or five that group members can obey and pass on to groups they start.

Have a specific goal in mind when you go through the

church lesson: *This week we will commit to becoming a church and will add in any missing characteristics of a church.*

For example, when a T4T group goes through the lesson(s) on church, one of two things usually happens:

1 Step: A group recognizes that it is a church and is practicing the characteristics of church. At this point it takes the final step by committing to being a church together (gains identity and covenant).

2 Steps: More often, a group recognizes that it is deficient in some of the characteristics of church. It takes two conscious steps forward to 1) add in those characteristics (e.g. Lord's Supper, offerings) and then 2) commit to becoming church together (covenant).

4. Use CHURCH HEALTH MAPPING to help a group evaluate if they have all the elements of church life.

A great diagnostic tool called Church Health Mapping (or Church Circles) can be used with a group, or the leaders of a group or network of groups, to help them determine

THINK ABOUT HOW EXHILARATING IT IS WHEN SUCCESSIVE GENERATIONS OF BELIEVERS ARE FORMING THEIR GROUPS OF NEW BELIEVERS IN THEIR CIRCLES OF RELATIONSHIPS INTO CHURCHES AT ABOUT THE FOURTH OR FIFTH MEETING!

if the group is a church. (For a fuller discussion of this, see Part Two of this article, Generational Mapping by Nathan Shank, in the upcoming Nov.-Dec. 2012 issue of *MF*.) The tool helps them spot deficiencies and correct these. It also helps them see which groups may not be church yet.

A common way this is implemented in CPMs is to make church circles the lesson on church. After a small group identifies the basic elements of a church from Acts 2 (they usually come up with around ten), they draw icons for them and diagnose whether or not their group is practicing them.²

The church lesson makes the following application:

As a group, on a blank paper, draw a dotted line circle representing your own group. Above it, list 3 numbers: the number regularly attending (stick figure), the number believing in Jesus (cross) and the number baptized after believing (water).

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If your group has committed to being a church, make the dotted line circle solid³. Then put an icon representing each of the remaining elements inside or outside the circle. If the group is regularly practicing the element itself, put it inside. If the group is not, or waits for an outsider to come do it, put it outside the circle.

ICONS:

1. Covenant – solid line instead of dotted line
2. Baptism – water
3. Word – book
4. Lord's Supper or Communion – a cup
5. Fellowship – heart
6. Giving & Ministry – money sign
7. Prayer – praying hands
8. Praise – upraised hands
9. Evangelism – one friend holding hands with a friend he led to faith
10. Leaders – two smiley faces

Finally, you can give your church a name. This helps you establish an identity as a church in your community. Remember that your goal is to develop a multi-generational Church-Planting Movement to the 4th generation and beyond so including the generation number helps you see where you are in seeing God start a movement in your community.

At this point, it is relatively easy to see what is blocking the group from really becoming a church. Though they may be deficient, you now see a way to transform this group into a church, and they see it too! It is a wonderfully empowering, practical process to let the group prayerfully brainstorm about how to add each of the elements into the circle. These become clear action plans for the group.

GENERATIONS OF CHURCHES


You must train the disciples you are training to purposefully help groups become churches at a key stage in the short-term discipleship process by having a specific lesson(s) on becoming church. Church health mapping can also help you in that process. Then getting to church will be a natural step in the progression of discipleship.

And you will have passed a major milestone toward a Church-Planting Movement. Think about how exhilarating it is when successive generations of believers are forming their groups of new believers in their circles of relationships into churches at about the fourth or fifth meeting! When this happens over four generations of new churches, Church-Planting Movements emerge!

If you have no church lesson or purposeful reproducible process of transforming a group into church, then expect very few new churches!

If you include a simple church-planting process with a church lesson early on, then you can expect new generations of churches!

This may not be a process you are familiar with yet. It may challenge your ministry paradigms, but let's not be afraid to sacrifice our paradigms for the sake of seeing God's kingdom come! It is a helpful process to help us return to the original discipleship revolution of the Book of Acts. It is a helpful process to help us return to some of the more explosive movements in history. It is a process to help us more fully cooperate with the Spirit of God.

The very simplicity and purposefulness of this process means that any believer, empowered by the Spirit, can become a church planter. Churches are not meant to multiply only across the landscape of the mission field. They should be and are multiplying in homes, community centers, schools, parks and coffee shops across North America. May His kingdom come! 

1. See *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution* by Steve Smith with Ying Kai, WIGTake Resources, 2011. Part of this article is adapted from chapter 16 of that book. It is available at www.ChurchPlantingMovements.com and on Amazon's Kindle.
2. Keeping the icons simple and crude (not polished) keeps this process reproducible for all non-artists! The icons are easy to adapt for your context.
3. We make this line solid even if they don't have all of the characteristics yet because it connotes intent.