

Planting Disciple-Making Multiplying Churches

Edited and posted by Bob Young

Note: In this article, I primarily evaluate the situation of the church in the US culture, but I also seek to address the dynamics that must be understood to plant disciple-making multiplying churches in the mission field.

What does it take to grow healthy congregations in a hostile environment such as we face in many societies and cultures today?

The statisticians paint a bleak picture in the US. In many places, church membership, average weekly worship attendance, and baptisms are down. Many of our churches are failing in the basics. Many churches get smaller every year; many churches are not healthy. Some churches are holding their own or growing slightly in number but lack evangelistic fervor, are not evangelizing, are not investing in mission works that grow the kingdom, and maintain increasingly irrelevant programs.

The bad news should cause us to question. Is the church doomed? Are there no opportunities? To the contrary! The church has before it wonderful opportunities and great potential, but energy and resources must be redirected. Healthy, multiplying churches must be planted to replace ingrown, stagnant, and dying congregations. Churches must learn to put first things first. Churches must not be satisfied with the status quo or simply doing a little more than in the past. Jesus touched multitudes, he prayed about the multitudes. He died to save everyone. The first century church touched multitudes with the gospel. The contemporary church must not be satisfied with meager results.

The contemporary church must learn how to encourage and support people who are on the front lines of church planting—planting healthy, multiplying churches that continually expand the network of churches, churches that bring people to a saving relationship with Jesus, churches and missionaries that are not satisfied with doing a few good works in Jesus' name.

In my "tribe" we have about 13000 local congregations in the US. Churches close every year. More churches close than are begun. Churches close for a number of reasons, but the basic reason they close is that they quit being what a church should be. They quit getting the gospel to unreached people. They became ingrown, self-serving, and focused their outreach ministries and contact with non-Christians in activities that do not bring people to Jesus. They touched a lot of people and helped a lot of people but the help given did not change the eternity of those they helped.

We must learn how to plant healthy, gospel-centered, disciple-making, multiplying churches. We have to plant churches that plant churches that plant churches. What is needed is not more dollars; what is needed is more Christians who are serious about relationships. What is needed is discipleship.

At the core of discipleship is one life touching another life. The megachurch model is not working and it will become more and more ineffective. The megachurch model does not encourage spiritual growth, and its usefulness in church growth is in question. It is true that some megachurches are increasing in number, but that is mostly occurring through swelling (attracting those who are already Christians) more than through evangelism of unchurched souls. The megachurch by its very nature cannot touch everybody. Touching everyone requires that the church get down to the core level of relationships. The church must discard the megaphone in favor of personal conversations; the church must develop multiple opportunities for face-to-face personal communication. The personal touch speaks to hearts.

What are some of the challenges of planting healthy, disciple-making, multiplying churches?

One of the great challenges is that we must reinvent the model of church we have become accustomed to. This is especially true in mission work and church planting. Many new churches cannot afford to pay a full-time minister. We have to develop models for every-member evangelism and ministry, shared leadership, and bi-vocational ministry. When the decision is made to pay a missionary or an evangelist to work in a certain church or region, we have to reignite the expectation that evangelists will evangelize, that missionaries are charged with spreading the gospel effectively and rapidly.

Reinventing the church model will cause us to think differently about real estate. Real estate is expensive. If the church effectively answers God's call and becomes what God wishes it to be, whatever is purchased will soon become inadequate. Purchasing real estate often leads to a faulty model of church. It also leads to faulty goals—we will have succeeded when the building is full. The need for money to pay the

loan leads to efforts to attract more people. People are attracted by a better “show,” better sermons, better classes, better ministries, better buildings, better programs, etc. So, the church begins to focus on all of these things to attract people, but the people who are attracted are mostly church transfers and genuine evangelism that makes new disciples and reaches the unchurched occurs less and less frequently. Ministry is put in the hands of “experts” because of the need to attract people; the result is less involvement of the members. (I have heard it said that owning one’s building gives a sense of stability. The sense of stability that comes with property ownership is mostly in the minds of the members, not in the minds of the visitors, most of whom will never know the difference between an owned building and a rented building!)

The need to reinvent the model of church planting and development should drive us to Scripture. Paul arrived in a city and made disciples; people began to assemble as church and indigenous leaders would then be selected. Most contemporary models are backwards. We start with importing leaders, who establish an empty organization, obtain a building, set up a “church” in which no one assembles (think about that one a moment!), then go out to find people.

These points show us where and how we have to shift the conversation if we want to establish healthy, disciple-making, multiplying churches.

What steps are necessary to encourage an existing church toward disciple-making and multiplication church planting? Why are so many healthy congregations not planting churches?

Not every church can reinvent itself and recommit to the New Testament model. Smaller churches change more easily than larger churches. The gifts of the members must be identified, affirmed, and developed.

I question whether a church that is not fulfilling God’s purpose for the church is really a healthy church. The church must learn to manage problems. Churches that plant other churches in their own context often send some of their best members to the new church plant. The status quo is ruined. Church multiplication takes us out of our comfort zones. Church planting requires the development of more people who are capable of helping. Church planting demands the creation of a leadership development pipeline.

Churches get frustrated with the consumer mentality of members and attendees, but the greatest way to solve that problem is to send off some of the leaders and create a ministry and leadership vacuum that must be filled. When people do not see a need, they do not feel the need to get involved. When there is a vacuum and a clear need, people step up.

It is frightening—sending out one-third or one-half of the church to begin another church. We see the empty seats. We sense the difference. But the message that must be shared with those who remain is this: “Thank the Lord that we now have empty seats; those empty seats are for your neighbors and coworkers, your acquaintances and family members.” The church is actually in a better position to see the vision, to dream, and to do ministry in the context where we live life. New churches find it easier to plant more new churches.

If a church is on mission, stability is never a possibility. Being on God’s mission brings instability. The tension between a church community staying together and the call to obey God’s mission has always been there. It will always be there.

Advice for those who are serious about helping make the church a disciple-making multiplying church

Jesus is the one who builds the church. It is his church; it is not ours. His church will remain forever. If the local church operates out of self-preservation, self-edification, or any other selfish factor, it is going to miss the blessings God wants to give us in the kingdom. We have opportunities to help the kingdom grow, but many of us have never seen the opportunity or experienced the blessing.

Every local church should be involved in church planting, even if they are not the “mother” church. One way to be involved is to pray. A second thing is to become more aware of the great needs that exist in the cities of our world. A third thing is to begin to see the needs of unbelievers immediately around you. You can begin to think personally about your neighbors, seeking to reach them for Christ. A fourth thing is to insist that the mission work of the church return to the New Testament focus on evangelism and church multiplication. Make it your goal to connect with those who are actively involved in disciple-making, multiplying churches.

Every local church is the result of a church plant. That’s why we should commit ourselves to church planting.