

CHAPTER 11

INITIATING MULTICONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES

When the presiding leaders of local churches, whether they are called pastors, elders or priests, recapture supernatural ministry, network with other anointed and effective leaders, and utilize the principle of apprenticeship to develop leaders, they are like a four-cylinder engine firing on three: close to working as designed. They may be moving down the highway at a fairly good clip, but if they ever experienced what the car could do on all four, they would quickly realize their lack of power and waste of energy. They would get the car to a mechanic as soon as possible. Similarly, neither leaders nor their churches come close to their potential until they recognize and capitalize on the most important factors in people's decision to follow Christ.

Of course, the most critical factor in one's decision to follow Christ is spiritual. Jesus said that people could not come to him unless the Father drew them (John 6:44). There is a spiritual draw, a spiritual warming, an attracting grace that is more than human interaction. However, there is also a powerful sociological component. Donald McGavran observes:

People exist not as discrete individuals, but as interconnected members of some society.... Normal people are not isolated units but part of a whole that makes them what they are.... [S]ociety either determines or strongly influences every aspect of what they say, think, and do.¹

Because people embrace not only a personal identity but also a social identity, defining themselves by their work, their family, their friends, their hobbies, their location and so on, those relationships often prove pivotal in the decision to trust Christ. McGavran, for example, found that the greatest resistance to the gospel among Hindu people was not Hindu beliefs but the fear that becoming a Christian would separate them from their

¹ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 153.

people.² Similarly, in Africa McGavran discovered that the system of polygamy kept large numbers from confessing Christ. (It is important to recognize that polygamy is a web of relationships and not just a belief system.) He believes that the great growth of the church among Africans in the past few decades is due in part to an openness to polygamy on the part of the evangelizing churches.³ These effective churches do not affirm polygamy; instead, they focus on a relationship with Christ. They help polygamists come to Jesus and walk with Jesus in tending to their wives.

The fruit of this strategy and the fruitlessness without it reinforces an assertion of McGavran's and others:

Men and women, high and low, advanced and primitive, usually turn to Christian faith in numbers only when some way is found for them to become Christian without leaving their kith and kin.⁴

The purpose of the church is not to destroy family relationships or separate people from their clans. Instead, it is to share Christ and bring his redemptive love into those families and clans, indeed, to every *phyle*⁵ on the planet. Thus it is critical that we discern and remove, as much as possible, every sociological and cultural barrier, every non-spiritual hindrance, that would prevent someone from coming to Christ. The Apostle Paul made himself “a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible” (1 Cor. 9:19). “I have become all things to all men,” he wrote, “so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). St. Paul searched for commonality with non-Christian people, and local churches must engage in that same search and discernment. In view of that, to what extent should churches encourage new believers to remain in their non-Christian culture as Christian participants? To what extent can Christian disciples remain cultural Hindus, Moslems or Buddhists before such actions hinder them in their relationship with Jesus and foster syncretism? To what degree can we develop Christian congregations populated by people participating in the cultural aspects of another religious system? The evangelization of hundreds of thousands, maybe millions depends on answers to that question. Regardless of how those questions are answered, the church must increasingly become an array of cultural groups rather than a

² Ibid., 155.

³ Ibid., 159.

⁴ Ibid., 156.

⁵ *Phyle* is the Greek term for “tribe” or “clan.” See Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of its meaning and impact on our commission to evangelize.

blended monolith. Our unity as believers must be in our faith in Christ, our mission with Christ, our submission to Christ, but not in our location, language or lifestyle. We are not of one culture; our churches must not be.

Redefining the Church

When the local church sees itself as multicultural, multicongregational and multigeographical, it more closely mirrors the organization of the New Testament church⁶ and removes three important shackles that needlessly dwarf its potential. A local church will best advance the gospel when it cuts its tether to one culture, one congregation and one location.

An effective local church will not wed itself to one culture. A monocultural church normally has one worship service (or multiple services of similar style), meets at one location, and works through one leadership team. Its disciple-making potential is quite limited because it is not culturally hospitable to large portions of its mission field. The reason is that the average community contains many subcultures. No one worship service matches all the codes of conduct, dress, language, music, family and attitudes of every group in a city. Moreover, a single leadership team is not able to cultivate an array of communities (or communal life) that reflects all the subcultures of a city. More often, the culture within the church is quite dissimilar to those of the surrounding non-Christians. Timothy Ahlen and J.V. Thomas write:

People are influenced by the culture in which they are born, grow up, live, work, and play. The further a person is removed from his or her culture the more difficulty he or she experiences in coping, adapting, and feeling comfortable. The greater the change, the greater the stress, and the more difficult it is to become acclimated to the new culture. ...one begins to see the tension between a church established in one culture and an unchurched people living in a different culture. ...the cultural barriers must be lowered. The gospel message and the expressions of worship, discipleship, outreach, and organization must be contextualized to the target culture.⁷

Until a local church becomes culturally sensitive and appropriate for its non-Christian neighbors, it will be difficult to reach those neighbors in any numbers.

In the same way, a local church must transcend the identity of one congregation. By definition, a monocongregational church is monocultural. A church that worships all

⁶ See the descriptions of the early church in Chapter 2.

⁷ Ahlen and Thomas, *One Church, Many Congregations*, 33.

together at one time in one location must be monocultural even if its worshipers come from different races, nationalities and native languages. Even if there is a translator for different tongues, a signer for the deaf, and a blend of music, the church establishes with its diversity a distinct culture that may be akin to some college campuses and a few workplaces but to little else. McGavran writes:

If each [subculture from a community] is completely discipled, nothing can prevent God from merging them into one fellowship; but if, before two percent of each [subculture] has become Christian, churches and missions devote their energies to building upon Christian brotherhood, then most non-Christians (98%, to be exact) will be forced to leave their own folk and cross class and race barriers to become disciples of Christ. If this stumbling block is put in their way, the movement to Christian faith will usually falter and stop. Christian brotherhood is a *result* [italics his] of the operation of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians—not a prerequisite for baptism.⁸

The point is that a multicultural congregation never, in truth, exists. Each congregation cultivates its own distinct culture. Each leadership team develops its own unique culture with its own code of behavior. Any local church that feels a calling to reach people of multiple cultures must make a decision to develop multiple leadership teams and to birth multiple worshiping communities.

Lyle Schaller goes even further. He writes:

As recently as the 1980s, it was widely assumed that every Christian congregation included a worshiping community, one place where that community gathered, and one or more pastors. A growing number of churches today are organized as a congregation of worshiping communities that meet at different times and places for different kinds of worship experiences... The most obvious consequence is that “church” is being defined as people rather than real estate.⁹

Schaller observes that the most effective local churches do not simply build bigger buildings or hold more services. They multiply campuses or locations.¹⁰ Over 200 Baptist churches from Texas have recently employed the strategy of multiplying congregations and campuses. In one

⁸ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 77. For clarity, I substituted the term “subculture” for McGavran’s sociological term “homogeneous unit.”

⁹ Schaller, *Discontinuity and Hope*, 176-177.

¹⁰ Ahlen and Thomas, *One Church, Many Congregations*, 13.

year they started 262 new congregations and baptized over 6,600 converts. Their growth rate is astronomical.¹¹ Nevertheless, that is not the greatest argument for multiplying campuses.

Like it or not, buildings and their environs are both art and culture, and consequently they become barriers for certain groups within a community. A Texas study in 1974 revealed that 80 percent of “unchurched” Texans were poor or working class. More recent surveys revealed that 90 percent of the poor are “unchurched.” One of the reasons for this phenomenon, according to social participation studies, is that people on the lower economic scale join few associations and cultivate few relationships outside their web of work associates and families. Consequently, the buildings, campuses, and number of congregants in local churches all serve as uncomfortable hindrances to the poor. Instead, small groups, planted nearby and involving close neighbors, are far more inviting and effective in reaching people in this subculture.¹² A local church faces tremendous and needless difficulty reaching these people if it does not multiply its locations for fellowship, study, and worship.

Thus it apparent that we leaders must help our local churches redefine themselves as multicultural, multicongregational and multigeographical if they are to approach their potential in evangelizing their communities. The remainder of this discussion will offer help in that task.

Mobilizing Informed Intercession

The first step in reaching any people is to see them. Before we work a field, we must see a field. Before we reap a crop, we must recognize its identity and readiness. Prayer can help people see. It actually is the greatest vision-enhancing eye medicine that exists for both believers and non-believers.

Ted Haggard writes that his first step in helping his congregation become aware of outreach is to lead them in praying for their city. He claims that the most effective way his congregation touches the lost in Colorado Springs is prayer-walking the city’s streets.¹³ He writes:

Prayerwalking causes the people of our church to touch, see, smell and feel our community at large; it makes us want to serve others, not just our own little world.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., 63-64.

¹² Ibid., 87-88.

¹³ Haggard, *The Life-giving Church*, 148.

¹⁴ Ibid., 150.

There is something about prayer that opens our eyes to people. When we pray for people, they no longer exist in our minds as physical objects walking around. Instead, we begin to see them in full orb. We see their challenges. We see their gifts. As we pray for them individually, their hurts and dreams become our agenda. We begin to know their hearts. Something else happens to us when we pray for them. We bond with them. They become ours. They become our kin, our tribe. We begin to value them as our brothers and sisters on this planet. Our movement into their subculture becomes natural.

There is also a second effect. When we pray for non-Christian people, *their* eyes are opened as well. In his experience with church growth and conversions, Ed Silvano found that intercessory prayer is the most important tool we have in helping nonbelievers see the validity of the gospel. When we pray *for* non-believers in private and when we pray *with* nonbelievers as we have opportunity, many nonbelievers quickly find God relevant to their life.

When Clayton Berg and Paul Pretiz reported on the explosion of indigenous Christianity in Latin America, they warned church growth analysts not to focus so much on methods and strategies for reaching different subcultures or people groups. They emphasized that the primary principles behind the phenomenal growth are the mobilization of lay people in ministry and the spiritual power characterizing their ministry (which Berg and Pretiz describe in depth).¹⁵ This spiritual power is closely related (if not directly proportional) to the efforts and energy being expended in prayer.

In many places data that is gathered about the spiritual history of a community aids and informs the prayer efforts. When that information is combined with an understanding of those things in the community that currently hinder the advance of the gospel, praying people are equipped and empowered to make a tremendous difference in the community's receptivity to the gospel. Indeed, people involved in this kind of prayer often do startling things that lead to many conversions.

Prayer prepares us for ministering to our communities, and prayer prepares our communities to welcome our ministry. Consequently, mobilizing people to pray for a specific subculture within a community is a critical strategy before planting a congregation in that culture.

¹⁵ Berg and Pretiz, *Spontaneous Combustion*, 236.

Bob Logan urges any leader planting a congregation to form an Intercession Team. In his workbook on planting churches, he not only places this task in the same discussion as that of forming a leadership team,¹⁶ but he advises the church planter to mobilize intercession before determining what subculture the team will target for evangelization and a church plant.¹⁷

One United Methodist church planter enlisted 50 members from the mother church as intercessors for his new mission. They prayed for him, walked and prayed through the target community, and supported the mission with prayer beginning at least six months before he held his first service. Although most intercessors stayed with the mother church, the church plant resulted in a congregation that within two years averaged 600 in worship.¹⁸

Developing Church Planting Teams

When members of a congregation finally *see* a harvest, they then must be equipped, linked with other believers and sent to work the field based on their gifts and skills. Both the formation of lay teams and the planting of indigenous satellite congregations are integral to this task.

In researching thousands of new businesses, *Forbes Magazine* found that businesses started with partners were 4 times more likely to succeed than those started by solo entrepreneurs.¹⁹ A team best starts any new ministry. However, behind every team is a single leader who takes responsibility for forming and developing that team. If things fail, that leader takes responsibility. Even though the level of commitment, investment and ownership by other team members is a measure of the team's strength, one person carries the initial vision and passion. Peter Wagner observes this and writes:

New apostolic churches, at least in the United States, have established a prevailing, although not an exclusive, pattern: (1) The base for planting a new church is ordinarily an existing local congregation... (2) The church planter and the team surface within the congregation of the parent church... (3) The senior pastor recognizes and commissions the church planter... (4) They (the pastor and planter) agree on a target site (ordinarily through prophecy, God's call on the planter and sound principles of site selection)... (5) They relocate

¹⁶ Robert E. Logan and Steven L. Ogne, *The Church Planter's Toolkit: A self-study resource kit for church planters and those who supervise them*, (Alta Loma: ChurchSmart Resources, 1991), tape #2 and page #2-6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, tape #4 and page #4-1.

¹⁸ Jim Leggett, pastor of Grace Fellowship in Katy, Texas, from a personal interview at "The New Apostolic Reformation," (Colorado Springs: Fuller Theological Seminary, July 1998).

¹⁹ "Two For The Money," *Forbes Magazine* (Feb. 23, 1987), 166.

on the site. Sometimes this is just the church planter's family. Sometimes it involves a team. (6) They begin Bible studies in their home. As this grows, they move into rented facilities... (7) They continue relating to the parent church. In some cases it is a satellite relationship; in others the new church is totally autonomous... (8) They receive on-the-job training, which can take many different forms and which is expected to continue indefinitely.²⁰

In church planting, Logan recommends that before launching the new ministry this initial leader form a team of individuals around him or her who together embrace seven specific roles. One member of the team is the *Recruiter-evangelist*. This team member (often the leader) has a magnetic personality and networks people. He or she invites and attracts numerous people to the ministry and motivates others to do so as well. A second team role is the *Worship Leader*, an individual able to plan, lead and involve others in worship. A *Children's Ministry Leader* is able to plan, lead, recruit and train others in ministry to children. The *Shepherd* is a highly relational person who provides for the individual care of needy and new believers. Logan believes there is a great advantage if this person is experienced in starting support and recovery groups. The fifth team role is that of the *Organizer* or implementer. This person designs and launches systems to enable vision to become reality. The *Fellowship Recruiter* or "mobilizer" creates opportunities and encourages people to get involved in groups and ministries. The seventh role on the team is *Financial*. This business administrator designs and implements systems for financial, facility, and business management without blocking the flow of ministry.²¹ Fewer than seven people may fulfill these seven roles in the start of a new congregation. However, the development of that congregation will depend a great deal on how aggressively and competently those roles are fulfilled.

Ahlen and Thomas warns that these teams must take ownership of the ministry. To the pastor of these church planters, they advise:

Ask the new church leaders what they will lead the congregation to do, how they plan to do it, and how much will it cost. The use of open-ended questions is one way sponsoring church leaders can determine needs, plans, and direction from the new church's leadership... Some initiative needs to be taken by the sponsor church in order to make progress, but too much initiative

²⁰ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 192-193.

²¹ Logan and Ogne, Tape #2 and page #2-4.

from persons outside the congregation takes away ownership. When ownership is taken away, local initiative stops.²²

When a local church has a single small group teaming together with these roles, that church is ready to become multicultural, multicongregational and multigeographical. It actually becomes all of this when a single lay team plants an indigenous satellite congregation. Whether that congregation takes the form of a Bible study in a subsidized housing complex or a worship service in a community theatre, the satellite location and different leadership team can offer ministry that is culturally attractive or indigenous to an “unreached” subgroup within a community. The unique music, dress, setting, and language can all provide common links to people who otherwise would be uncomfortable and unlikely to participate in the existing congregation.

Tony Campolo prescribes something like this. He writes:

The best hope for mainline denominational growth and development is to create a vast network of house churches. This back-to-the-future approach to church planting, rooted in the New Testament, is ideally suited to thrive in the kind of society currently taking shape in America. In the midst of a massive, overpowering, impersonal social order, house churches offer alienated people precisely the kind of intimate religious and social experience they are looking for.²³

Lay teams can plant these house churches as satellite congregations of an existing local church or as the small group infrastructure of a larger satellite congregational unit. Either way, penetration of a community with the gospel increases with the multiplication of home groups and worshiping communities. Indeed, Ahlen and Thomas note that penetration into a community’s population and its subcultures with the gospel is the same no matter if many new autonomous churches are planted or if a similar number of satellites from a single church are started.²⁴

Lay teams can also replant churches. Many congregations languish near death without either the vision or ability to reach the population about them. Denominational leaders sometimes yoke them with other tiny congregations and then assign a preacher to speak, lead worship and offer chaplain services for each congregation. Often

²² Ahlen and Thomas, *One Church, Many Congregations*, 39.

²³ Campolo, *Can Mainline Denominations Make a Comeback?*, 150.

²⁴ Ahlen and Thomas, *One Church, Many Congregations*, 85.

denominational leaders seek to close these congregations because they are a draw on scarce resources. Schaller calls these congregations “wounded birds” and does not believe their termination is particularly beneficial.²⁵ He believes instead that they need three resources: (1) a vision of what could be, (2) hope, and (3) sensitivity and skill in identifying and meeting the needs of people who have never been a part of that worshiping community.²⁶ When the existing congregation is willing, a lay team can come alongside this body and rebirth it as a satellite of a multicongregational church. Schaller writes:

The typical prescription for a wounded bird calls for the congregation to merge with a strong congregation. The members of the wounded bird become members of this missionary church. Title to all real estate is transferred to the missionary church, with the stipulation that it cannot be sold or otherwise disposed of for at least five years, unless it is turned over to a new congregation. The missionary church usually brings six sets of resources... A minister of missions who oversees and directs the process... A cadre of trained, committed, future-oriented, and venturesome volunteers... A strategy for defining a new constituency to be identified and served... Skills in developing a ministry plan to reach and serve that new constituency. ...a conviction that the beginning point in implementing that strategy is to listen to and offer a sensitive and relevant response to the needs of the people who represent that new constituency. ...a strong evangelistic spirit... This strong evangelistic spirit is an essential resource that the sponsor church brings to this strategy.²⁷

Schaller’s strategy is not church renewal. It is church planting. It is people from a dying church becoming a part of a completely new church. Instead, of the denomination sending in a minister to raise the dead or to close the doors, the church becomes an entirely new entity with an entirely new identity.

Normalizing Church Planting

A critical focus for any church leader is to normalize the vision and process of church planting in a local church. Somehow church planting must become as visible and natural to parishioners as having a Sunday School or holding Sunday worship. There are at least five reasons why this must happen.

The first is *obedience to Jesus’ commands*. In his writing on the rapidly expanding new apostolic movement, Peter Wagner notes a conviction prevalent in those local churches.

²⁵ Schaller, *Innovations in Ministry*, 104-105.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

They believe that if they are biblical churches, they must reproduce and plant new churches.²⁸ Recent research confirms that conviction. Jesus was radically focused on and invested in lost people. He commanded his followers to go and make disciples of all nations. He compelled people to walk with him in his mission to lost people. Indeed, believers became disciples as they accompanied Christ in his ministry to the lost and hurting. However, long-established local churches have a problem. The development of believers as disciples becomes stunted and short-circuited because of the tendency of established churches to focus on other concerns. Lyle Schaller writes:

A growing body of evidence supports the contention that by the twentieth year of a new mission's existence, most of them have placed taking care of the current membership far higher on their list of priorities than reaching unchurched people.²⁹

Apparently, when local churches age, they allocate their resources and attention more to the maintenance of the organization and the care of their own membership. Consequently, they and their members do not emulate the lifestyle of Jesus Christ.

Since there is no reason to believe that Jesus or his commands regarding this focus have changed, and because disciples act like their masters, it is reasonable to expect Christian people to focus on the lost. However, the contrasting vision of established churches makes it difficult for them to produce people who are in compliance with the biblical teaching of Jesus on that matter and who thus behave like disciples of Jesus.

Accompanying the shift in focus that Schaller observes in churches as they age is an observation of Ahlen and Thomas. They note that most traditional churches begin to decrease in their growth rate, or stop growing altogether, when they are ten or more years old. They conclude, "New churches are needed in order to penetrate the population and reach more people for Christ."³⁰ Many are pessimistic about the ability of any existing church to evangelize its community. Aubrey Malphurs calls such a notion "unrealistic" without planting churches.³¹ Wagner, looking at the hindrances and vision of existing congregations, calls for the planting of new churches. He writes that we have few examples of how efforts to renew existing churches have markedly increased evangelistic effectiveness. He notes, "It

²⁸ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 192.

²⁹ Ahlen and Thomas, *One Church, Many Congregations*, 12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

³¹ Malphurs, *Vision America*, 130.

is easier to have babies than to raise the dead!”³² Statistically, church plants increase the number of persons from a community and the percentage of persons in church on the average Sunday. Ahlen and Thomas write:

Traditionally, a community is considered “churched” if numerous church buildings are located in the community—although only a small percentage of the population may attend church on any given Sunday! This view of assessing the need for new churches is the reason church growth has not kept pace with population growth. In communities where new churches have been started, there is not a negative impact on the attendance of the established churches. However, there has been a very positive impact on the total number of persons in church attendance on the average Sunday. The truth is that the more evangelistic churches in a community, the more people attend. Where there are fewer churches, fewer people attend church.³³

These observations reveal an important truth. Churches that spawn new congregations as a way of life will be far *more effective in evangelizing their communities*.

Another reason for making the process of church planting common in a local church is that church planting is by far the *most effective evangelistic methodology* available to a local church. More people come to faith in Jesus Christ through church planting than any other method. Bishop Wilkie points to the establishment of new churches as key to denominational growth.³⁴

Wagner believes that church planting is such a powerful growth principle partly because church plants, by nature, are younger and smaller than most churches and research reveals that young and small churches grow much faster than old and large ones.³⁵ Certainly as churches (or satellite congregations of a church) are multiplied they can each reflect a portion of the cultural diversity of a community and together present fewer social barriers to the faith for that community.³⁶ Regardless of the reason behind it, church planting is the most effective means of reaching Pre-Christian people today.

Additionally, local churches must focus on church planting if they want *to grow as a movement*. Lyle Schaller advises Protestant denominations within America to plant at least one new congregation each year for every 100 to 150 existing churches if they want to stay the

³² Wagner, *Churchquake*, 191.

³³ Ahlen and Thomas, *One Church, Many Congregations*, 84.

³⁴ Wilkie, *And Are We Yet Alive*, 23-24.

³⁵ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 190-191.

³⁶ Ahlen and Thomas, *One Church, Many Congregations*, 85.

same size. If they wish to grow, they must plant two per hundred. If they desire to reach substantial numbers of younger generations and new immigrants, he recommends planting three new congregations each year for every 100 that exist.³⁷

Most denominations will never approach those ratios unless church planting becomes both a compelling vision and a common process within their local churches. Indeed, the local church that spawns satellites with lay planting teams can contribute much toward that goal without the tremendous burden of resources and support required for the planting of independent churches.

Finally, *an existing church can be renewed* as some of its members form teams and plant satellite congregations. People learn from people, and faith is infectious. When people are networked with people who bring others to Christ, and when they see the changes in the new converts, they are challenged and stretched in their vision of the love and power of Christ.

In reality, a local church can reach an unlimited number of people when it redefines itself as multicultural, multicongregational, and multigeographical, when it mobilizes people in prayer for its community and subcultures, when it calls and develops laity in teams that plant satellites, and when it makes the vision and process of church planting common in its church life. Only such a church is positioned to realize its true potential and fulfill its purpose.

³⁷ Schaller, *Innovations in Ministry*, 39.