

Church Planting Observations on the State of North American Mission Strategies

In 2004, the Church Planting Group of the North American Mission Board asked me to undertake a study of the state of church planting in North America. When I led the Church Planting Institute, part of our responsibility entailed contacting every major church planting ministry with a web presence and asking them some key questions about church planting. We identified and contacted 124 organizations, denominations, churches, or agencies. They were asked several key questions including, but not limited to, the following:

- Has interest in church planting increased or decreased in your sphere of influence in the last 10 years?
- Describe your church planting systems including recruitment, training, and multiplication.
- How do you recruit and involve sponsor churches?

One noteworthy response was that not one respondent indicated a decreased interest in church planting. In fact, all but two of the groups indicated an increased interest and none indicated a decline in such. Moreover, many indicated their interest in planting churches was increasing dramatically.

This increased interest may also be reflected in the number of books published on the subject of church planting. From 1996 to 2002, there were only two mainstream books published on the subject. As a seminary professor teaching church planting in 1998, I struggled to find adequate textbooks on the subject. However, from 2003 through 2005, at least eight mainstream books have been published on the subject, and many others are forthcoming. The evangelical church has rediscovered church planting.

Within the Southern Baptist context, church planting continued to increase in prominence. In 2004, Southern Baptists planted a record number of churches. Richard Harris, Vice President of the Church Planting Group at the North American Mission Board, reports:

The increase in church plants must ultimately be attributed to a significant work of the Holy Spirit in Christ's church. More and more of our churches are beginning to adopt a multiplication mindset. Pastors are looking to the Bible for a definition of success. It is not just how many show up for worship on Sunday but how many are mobilized with an Acts 1:8 perspective of their world in obedience to the Great Commission of the Lord. These pastors are passionately committed to building THE KINGDOM not just their Kingdom! They get energized seeing spiritual babies, new Christians and new churches, being birthed out of their churches and ministries.¹

The study also highlighted three areas that might be helpful as we observe the emerging landscape of church planting in North America. Overall, the study evidenced an increasing similarity in, and use of, church planting systems. First, almost all organizations reported that church planters participated in some sort of “system” that included a behavioral assessment interview before starting a church, training before or soon after arriving on the field, and ongoing coaching relationships. Second, more local churches and networks of churches are intentionally engaging in the task of church planting. Finally, new models and methods of church planting are emerging—and many groups are experimenting with churches that meet in homes for more efficient and rapid multiplication.

Church Planter Support Systems

Before the 1990's, most church planting groups had little strategy related to the church planter as a person—identifying the planter's abilities,

¹ Richard Harris, e-mail, April 19, 2005.

providing training, creating support networks, etc. None of the church planting books written before 1990 addressed these types of personhood issues. Instead, those books focused more on the need for church planting and provided ideas regarding how to plant a church. When North American church planting is examined now, it is easy to observe the shift in emphasis toward nurturing and supporting church planters.

The influence of Bob Logan and Steve Ogne upon the early development of a more comprehensive church planting process is significant. In 1991, Peter Wagner wrote that Logan was “America’s foremost authority in the field of church planting.”² Kevin Mannoia described Logan in 1994 as “the leading resource on church planting in America.”³ Ogne’s early materials, which focused on coaching, were transformative for the church planting community.

From Logan’s early work, most groups and denominations have developed a system specific to their context. Of the dozen or so groups with whom I have consulted, all of them either have such a system or are in the process of developing one. Today, I serve at the North American Mission Board. The North American Mission Board’s Church Planting Process is, in large measure, an adapted version of Bob Logan’s system.

Bob Logan and his CoachNet team have continued to update his resources through their own learning journey. Today, their system looks different than the one I will describe below. However, it is important to understand that

² Robert E. Logan and Steven L. Ogne, *Church Planter's Toolkit* (Pasadena: Charles E. Fuller Institute for Evangelism and Church Growth, 1991) back cover.

³ Kevin W. Mannoia, *Church Planting, The Next Generation: Introducing the Century 21 Church Planting System* (Indianapolis: Light and Life Press, 1994), 7.

most of the denominations, agencies, and groups that have developed their own system have done so by assimilating Logan's (and Ogne's) early ideas as represented below. Thus, today those systems still look similar. For example, Bob Logan recently compared the Evangelical Free Church's seven church planting systems with the ten principles found in his C²M² system (C²M² stands for Cultivating Church Multiplication Movements). Moreover, the system described below identifies the components of most



contemporary church planting systems. Therefore, in many ways Bob Logan remains the most significant church planting thinker in North America today.

Few records describe Logan's complete system. Rather, the system is often represented as a series of programs. One book provided some description of the system, *as it existed in 1994*. The Logan system is described in Kevin Mannoia's book, *Church Planting: The Next Generation*.⁴

The 21st Century Church Planting System, as Mannoia described it, is the planting strategy of the Free Methodist Church.⁵ Though it specifically deals with the Free Methodist denominational structure (and often reads like an internal denominational document), the application is much broader. Logan's system is

⁴ Here and following: Edward J. Stetzer, book review, 2000.

⁵ Ibid,

described in a way that Logan did not express at that time. Due to the pervasive influence of Bob Logan, most denominationally-based North American church planting has morphed into a similar structure. Included in the system is a recruiting and assessing component, a deployment strategy, and a coaching and supervising strategy. Mannoia describes the process in great detail. I will summarize below.

The bulk of Mannoia's book deals with the church planting system itself. He divides the system into the following categories: Parent Church Network, Profile Assessment System, New Church Incubator, Recruitment Network, Pastor Factory, Church Planter's Summit, Maturing Church Cluster, Strategic Planning Network, Harvest 1000, and the Meta-Church Network. Each component will be examined below.

The *Parent Church Network* (PCN) involved the development of a church planting vision in a group of local or regional congregations. Mannoia included this first because it required no large commitment of staff or resources, just a commitment to explore the possibilities of planting.⁶ The PCN generally developed into a cluster of three to five churches interested in planting and multiplication.⁷

The *Profile Assessment System* is designed to measure objectively "skills, performance, and personality profile in prospective planters."⁸ Mannoia believed that the assessment system is the most important aspect for short-term impact and that proper assessment leads to a ninety percent success rate for

⁶ Mannoia, *Church Planting: The Next Generation*, 61.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

planters.⁹ Although I believe his success rates are phenomenally high, the assessment process has been received enthusiastically by most users. Some groups have moved beyond the Ridley Assessment to a more thorough and intense multi-day experience coupled with additional testing and interviews.

The *New Church Incubator* is a resource rooted in fellowship. Planters are provided an empowering environment to assist them in the development of new churches. The *Incubator* generally meets once a month and is generally run by a trained facilitator. A coach meets with each planter between these monthly meetings. This provides necessary emotional support for the church planter and family.¹⁰

The *Pastor Factory* is a resource to train lay people to become founding pastors. In general, this process is intended to be utilized by the cell-based church, but any congregation with a leadership structure can use this system.¹¹ The *Pastor Factory* is divided into two categories: a leadership training system and a pastor factory "network."¹² The categories are divided by a sense of ministry call and the behavioral assessment mentioned earlier. Those called and assessed move from the leadership system to the factory network.

The *Church Planter's Summit* is a regular event, perhaps two or three days in length, to initiate new planter candidates. Candidates are generally

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 80-81.

¹¹ Ibid., 91.

¹² Ibid., 94.

invited to the event after they have completed the behavioral assessment and received a recommendation.¹³

The *Maturing Church Cluster* is intended to provide support for new churches after the first year. The shift from a year-old church to a maturing church is challenging and the needs are different in the latter. As the role of the planter changes, the people must be included in the process of church growth in a more significant way.¹⁴

The *Strategic Planning Network* is a network of pastors and lay leaders intent on avoiding the pitfalls of institutionalization and focusing on the planting of new congregations.¹⁵ The intent is not to focus on new church planting exclusively, but to also focus on the development of stronger established churches.

The *Harvest 1000* component is focused on the financial resources necessary for the creation of a church planting movement. The intent is to raise funds specifically designated toward new church plants. This task is one of the most difficult since there is no visible need—only a vision.¹⁶

The *Meta-Church Network* is a cluster of churches committed to implementing the ideas of the "meta" church. The term, coined by Carl George, refers to a church that changes the heart through small group ministries.¹⁷

This system, in its nascent form, was what most denominations began to adapt for their own contexts. A simple Google search of “church planting”

¹³ Ibid., 99.

¹⁴ Ibid., 102.

¹⁵ Ibid., 106.

¹⁶ Ibid., 115.

¹⁷ Ibid., 123.

while adding “assessment” and “coaching” produces innumerable web pages, many from denominations and agencies influenced by Logan. Simply put, church planting has emerged into a systems-based enterprise focused on finding, assessing, coaching, and supporting church planters. As a church planter who started several churches without the benefit of such mentoring, this is good and welcome news.

Church Planting Networks

One new development in the last five years is the proliferation of church planting associations or networks. Groups like Acts 29, GlocalNet, Xpansion, Stadia, Redeemer’s Church Multiplication Alliance, Fellowship Associates (and many others)¹⁸ were unknown or non-existent five to ten years ago. Now, other groups that formally provided conferences are now beginning to form coaching and other forms of networks (i.e. Purpose Driven, Fellowship Connection, etc.). Networks have become major contributors within the church planting arena. Denominations are still struggling to relate to such networks, but clearly churches are not.

Leadership Network recently sponsored a major gathering on church planting. All the presenters were part of church networks or networks of churches (see <http://www.leadnet.org/churchteachingbriefing.asp>). This may indicate a growing prominence of such networks. Their presence on the internet and in publications would certainly be an indicator of such.

¹⁸ There are many others. I have only listed a few representative networks with which I have connections or friendships.

Certain networks specifically plant churches for a certain group or denomination. For example, Stadia and The Orchard Group both plant independent Christian churches (and would object to me calling them a denomination!). However, most are trans-denominational.¹⁹ Acts 29, a movement of which I am a part, states, “Acts 29 is a trans-denominational peer-to-peer network of missional church planting churches... Acts 29 churches assist called and qualified pastors as they pursue their church planting dreams through assessment, coaching, training, funding, and friendship by connecting them with like minded people.”²⁰

Another example is GlocalNet. They explain,

GlocalNet is a network of churches worldwide who [sic] have the vision of being a part of one of the first global church-planting movements in history! Our purpose is to form clusters of churches in cities around the globe that will transform the world. GlocalNet churches/clusters are committed to 3 strategic objectives:

- Starting multiplying churches
- Transforming local communities
- Impacting the world through nation building.²¹

I believe that these early networks will open a floodgate of church planting alliances. Churches will begin to pool resources to plant and support churches based on affinity. I am aware of fourteen networks that are forming right now... with some ministries specifically existing to help form such networks (see Global Church Advancement at www.churchplantingcenter.com).

¹⁹ The transdenominational nature of some networks have often led them to deemphasize theological distinctives, but in many cases networks are having to reconsider an a-theological approach because their success has attracted churches from outside of the theological mainstream. It has been my observation that wiser, stable networks have strong theological statements as part of their system.

²⁰ Mark Driscoll, Acts 29 Strategic Plan, March 15, 2005.

²¹ Glenn Smith, GlocalNet Update, e-mail, November 25, 2003.

The affinity based church planting networks are not without drawbacks. Although it is exciting to see churches engaged in mission at a higher level, their typical affiliation is by affinity, removing them from fellowship with groups different than themselves. (For example, having been at meetings for most of these networks, ethnic diversity is sorely lacking.) Thus, denominational structures, which tended to unite persons of different backgrounds, are being (in some cases) abandoned for networks where all planters are planting the same style and paradigm of church. Furthermore, the kingdom of God is bigger than church planting—but most of these networks lack the structures to support orphanages, care for the poor, and engage in international missions (in some way other than the “we will send you money because you know how to impress visiting pastors” approach).

Also, these networks now face the reality of their success. In the recent Acts 29 strategic plan, organizational development issues have surfaced— “Until this point, Acts 29 has functioned as a loosely connected network with informal systems. But... to grow Acts 29 to a movement of 1000 churches... we must make the transition from informal to formal systems, and from leaders who function as generalists to a team of specialists.”²² As they adopt church planter support systems (see above), these networks will quickly begin to look like other denominational structures. That is neither troubling nor a guarantee that they will become denominations (though that is always possible). Instead, it is a recognition that like needs produce like structures.

²² Mark Driscoll, Acts 29 Strategic Plan, March 15, 2005.

Finally, although this article is primarily focused on North American church planting, the new model being created by Saddleback Church may eventually have great implications for the North American scene. The P.E.A.C.E. plan has been broadly discussed but, at the time of this writing, intentionally absent from their web site (and, at a recent meeting for pilot pastors, postponed another year). This plan will be a major paradigm shift with regard to networking for missions—one that will eventually be mirrored in the North American churches. Curtis Sergent, director of the initiative, explained to me, “We are still developing the process, and any reference out there is probably wrong. But it will change the way we do missions.”²³ Warren explains (in one of the few references on his web site), “This is a simple strategy that every church can use to **P**lant churches, **E**quip leaders, **A**ssist the poor, **C**are for the sick, and **E**ducate the next generation. It is a *local church-based paradigm for missions* in the 21st century, and we believe God will use it to bring worldwide revival.”²⁴

The lengthy quote below, preached by Rick Warren at Saddleback in 2003, reflects the views of many persons involved in these new church planting partnerships, both internationally and in North America:

The bottom line is that we intend to reinvent mission strategy in the 21st century... In the first century, mission strategy was always congregationally based... There were no mission societies, mission boards, or parachurch organizations... Today, most local churches are sidelined and uninvolved when it comes to missions. The message from most mission and parachurch organizations to the local church is essentially “Pray, pay, and get out of the way.” But in the 21st century, Kay and I intend to help thousands of other local churches to move back to the frontline in missions, in compassion, and in providing the social services that historically the church provided. I believe the proper role for all the great parachurch and

²³ Curtis Sergent, personal conversation, December 8, 2004.

²⁴ <http://www.pastors.com/RWMT/?artid=8139&id=200>, italics added.

relief organizations is to serve local churches in a supportive role, offering their expertise and knowledge, but allowing the local churches around the world to be central focus and the distribution centers.²⁵

As these networks grow and gain influence, denominations are trying to discern how best to relate to trans-denominational networks. For many, these alliances are seen as a threat. However, it is hard to dismiss networks through which more and more churches find a meaningful outlet for mission involvement. These churches are more involved in mission than before—just not in a traditional manner and not through the pre-existing system, whether international or North American.

As these networks emerge and mature, denominations and mission agencies will have to navigate new waters of partnership and cooperation. If these networks are willing to move beyond affinity and model specific strategies, and denominations and agencies are able to find innovative ways to support and under gird local church missions emphases, the potential for kingdom growth is strong.

House Churches

In several instances, agencies and denominations have described an increased interest in churches that meet (intentionally and permanently) in homes. Some of the higher profile church planting networks only plant house churches. Mike Steele, North American director of DAWN Ministry, a prominent

²⁵ http://www.saddlebackfamily.com/peace/Services/110203_high.aspx. In this message, Warren explains that God is using the 40 Days of Purpose campaigns to prepare the platform for this new agenda.

mission ministry, told me that he can identify 150 networks of house churches across North America.²⁶

Two Australian missiologists, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, wrote an obscure missiology book with strong house church leanings (*The Shaping of Things to Come*). There is such interest that they are, at the time of this writing, on a one month U.S. book tour and the book was “shortlisted” for Christianity Today’s book of the year.²⁷ Clearly, interest is growing in this model though it is not without controversy and concern (see below).

In recent years, much has been written regarding the subject of churches that function without buildings. Since the most recent emphasis on house churches began in the late 1990’s, much of the literature appears on the Internet. Because of the growing interest in house churches, it might be helpful to answer the question, “What is a house church?”

First, a home cell is a part of a larger church and supports the ministry of that church. Most churches planted in the last few years have a large celebration service for worship accompanied by meeting in homes for small group care. On the other hand, a house church is different in that it is not a part of a larger church; *it* is a church. When functioning biblically the house church exercises all of the functions of the church—worship, evangelism, ministry, baptism, Lord’s Supper, study, giving, etc.

Second, house churches do not start in a home and then move to a larger rented or permanent facility. The vast majority of new churches start as

²⁶ Mike Steele, personal conversation, April 6 2005.

²⁷ Alan Hirsch, personal conversation, April 19, 2005.

churches meeting in a home and then move to a larger facility as they grow. The house church is different. As it grows, it will *multiply* not *enlarge*. The home is their permanent facility; it will remain a *House Church*.

It is difficult to define the House Church because it has so many expressions (and many are aberrant). Frank Viola wrote an article that described the “streams” of the House Church movement. Here is an excerpt:

Stream 1. Those influenced by Gene Edwards. This stream is often referred to as the "radical wing" of the House Church movement. These groups tend to be anti-formalist to the extent that they claim no leadership, no order, no structure, no organization, etc.

Stream 2. Those influenced by Watchman Nee and/or Stephen Kaung. These groups are typically centered around Christ, His eternal purpose, and the Scriptures. Most follow the teaching (some loosely, others strictly) outlined in Watchman Nee's "The Normal Christian Church Life..." Deeper life themes are often stressed.

Stream 3. Those influenced by T. Austin-Sparks. These groups tend to be virtually identical to the above, but are inclined to stress the heavenly and spiritual nature of the church more than the practical and earthly side.

Stream 4. Those influenced by Witness Lee (Living Stream Ministry). This camp is ardent in its belief that Lee now has the "Divine baton" and is the vessel that God is presently using to recover His purpose and the truth about "the local church." These groups were more militant in the 1970's (often "taking over" other weaker home fellowships) than they are now; yet many still regard them as exclusive and divisive.

Stream 5. Those who are fundamentalist in their orientation. This strand of House Church tends to rigidly stress a specific pattern for meeting, regarding it as the pattern to follow. Most hold to Reformation theology right down the line and/or party-line fundamentalist themes.

Stream 6. Those who are neo-evangelical (or post-evangelical) in their orientation. These House Churches tend to color their interpretation of Scripture with modern Biblical scholarship and often contribute fresh insights to old questions. They are highly relational...

Stream 7. Those associated with Word-faith teaching. Although few in number, these House Churches (as well as a network directed by C. Alan

Martin) are built around the prosperity-faith teachings of Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Fred Price, Charles Capps, et. al.

Stream 8. Those influenced by the Sonship teachings of the Latter Rain. Sam Fife and/or George Warnock are often regarded as the fathers of this camp. Many of these groups meet in intentional communities, are self-sufficient, and often act as refugees (sic) for people who need extreme help and can't make it in the streets. They are Pentecostal in nature, adventist in outlook, and place a heavy emphasis on the preparation of God's end-time remnant for the time when the "sons of God are manifested."

Stream 9. Those who circle their lives around the 3 H's (home church, home school, and home birth). Many are influenced by the teachings of Bill Gothard and believe that God wants virtually all Christians to raise large families which are home schooled. According to some, these groups have often become their own subculture, wholly disconnecting themselves from the larger culture (including Christian) and from anything that is conventional. Some House Churches of this ilk have a penchant for keeping the Jewish customs.

Stream 10. This stream has known little to no human influence (consequently, folks who swim here have probably never heard of any of the above streams). These groups are characterized by a sovereign leading of God's Spirit to meet according to New Testament principles.

Stream 11. The eclectic types. These are those who swim in two or more of the above streams.²⁸

The focus of this discussion will be on the streams described in numbers six and ten. These are not fringe groups or sects, but instead, these groups represent New Testament Christians seeking to be faithful in becoming a biblical expression of God's Church in their local context. Unfortunately, many have experienced the "sect" groups and think that all House Churches belong in the same category. In many cases, that is an unfair stereotype.

Finally, one other word is helpful to the person unfamiliar with the House Church movement. House churches often exist in networks; they are not

²⁸ Frank A. Viola, "Some Streams of the House Church," Present Testimony Ministry; 1405 Valley Place; Brandon, FL 33510; Email: Fviola3891@aol.com.

isolated, independent groups of Christians. They are related to other house churches in a regional area. These House Churches often meet together for fellowship with other House Churches, but it is not usually on a weekly basis. In addition, these network meetings are not seen as “real church.” Real church takes place every time a particular house church meets.

If a house church is genuinely a *church*, then it should function as one. The Bible teaches that churches have pastor/elders and other leaders. Biblical churches covenant with one another. These churches participate in the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. All the characteristics of a New Testament church need to be present in a house church for it to be a biblical church.

In the New Testament, “the word ‘church’ was applied to a group of believers at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home all the way to the group of all true believers in the universal church.”²⁹ Many biblical passages refer to local house churches (1 Thess. 1:1, the church of the Thessalonians; Rev 2:1, church at Ephesus, etc.). However, part of the challenge is that many enthusiastic house church proponents have neglected some of the ecclesiology described in scripture by de-emphasizing New Testament delegated leadership, misunderstanding the role of covenant and related church discipline, and failure to practice the biblically prescribed ordinances.

Church is well described as...

...an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and

²⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 857.

privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.³⁰

Part of the challenge is confusion about the fact that “two and three” can “gather” in his name, and Jesus “is there” (Matthew 18:20). The presence of Christ does not necessarily mean that a local church exists in that context. A church, as described in scripture, has certain elements that make it a *church*. The North American Mission Board partnered with Stan Norman to develop (and then formally adopt) an excellent guiding ecclesiology to help assure that *churches* are being planted, whether they meet in a home or a brick building.

(See http://www.churchplantingvillage.net/v3_pages/7Steps_Partners/EcclesiologicalGuidelines.pdf for this document.) The increased interest in house churches is sign that evangelicals are open to new missional approaches. That is good news. However, as with any new emphasis (or in this case a reemphasis of New Testament practice), evangelicals do not need to just search the Scriptures for permission to function in the manner described. We also need guidance in how to implement the practice—taking into account the full biblical teaching on ecclesiology.

Finally, the biggest challenge on the broad scale of church planting may not be the few well-meaning groups that have minimalized ecclesiological principles. In most cases, these are errors of enthusiasm rather than doctrine. Instead, the greater problem for the biblical house church is the millions of believers that consider their brick, institutionalized, non-multiplying church to be a

³⁰ “The Church,” <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp>

more biblical model than the fifteen people meeting in a home with a passion to grow and multiply.

Conclusion

These are observations from one researcher. There are certainly other trends of which I am unaware. Furthermore, my observations are my own. Many thoughtful leaders will have different opinions. However, I will close with this simple observation.

All three of these observations imply an increasing desire to reach people. As I mentioned earlier, interest in church planting seems to be increasing significantly. Combined with that interest comes a desire to effectively support church planters through systems, work together with other churches and networks to clearly support church planting, and effectively promote church multiplication and impact through house churches. All of these issues come with challenges and dangers, but they are appearing because the North American Church is beginning to point in a missional direction. More and more evangelicals are seeking ways to impact the lostness of our culture in a way that has not occurred in North America for some time.

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Ed Stetzer, Ph.D., is the Research Team Director and Missiologist at the North American Mission Board. He is the author of *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* and several other articles and books.