

Church Planting in the 21st Century

Bob Vajko

As we consider church planting in the 21st century, here is a very relevant quote relating to the issue from missiologist David J. Hesselgrave during a conference in Kyoto, Japan, in anticipation of the 21st century:

And now as we meet together we stand on the threshold of a new century, indeed a new millennium. Never has the challenge been greater; never the church larger; never mission involvement more diverse; never the need for divine direction more evident. But one of the most important would be the missionary task of planting and growing New Testament churches.¹

But in order to be sure to have clarity in dealing with “church planting” in the 21st century let us define the word church and the word planting with some preliminary remarks about the biblical context for the concept of “planting.”

I. Preliminary Definitions and Remarks in Thinking through the Planting of new Churches

What is a local church? A local church is a “gathering”² where the Triune God is present. This meeting together has come about by God’s supernatural working and is composed of a group of baptized believers who meet regularly under the authority and teaching of God’s Word, celebrate the Lord’s Supper, and practice discipline according to biblical standards. This gathering has leaders who conform to God’s standards. They worship God, build one another up, and have a “yearning”³ for lost people to be saved and enfolded into their midst.⁴

What is church planting? The con-

cept of “planting” a church comes from Paul’s concept of a new church beginning in Corinth. Speaking of this new church start, Paul states, “I planted, Apollos watered but God gave the growth” (1 Cor 3:6). The beauty of this description is that although church planting is done by God’s servants, the true work of church planting including growth comes from God. The first two verbs are in the aorist tense and the third verb in the imperfect. So Charles Williams translates this, “I did the planting, Apollos did the watering, but it was God who kept the plants growing.”⁵

Furthermore, in the light of recent linguistic study of what is now called “verbal aspect” in Greek we learn that the two aorist verbs emphasize the background whereas the imperfect verb emphasizes the foreground.⁶ An Australian scholar states that the aorist gives as the “perfective aspect” or “the view from the outside” whereas the imperfect gives the “imperfective aspect” or “view from the inside.”⁷

This may appear to some like an academic nuance but as we will see lat-

er, these exegetical insights give us a greater understanding of the role of the church planter in his mission and the greater role of God in his mission and how they relate together. Paul is saying here—if you look as an outside observer you see Paul and Apollos in church planting and watering but if you look with an insider’s viewpoint you see God. Now the context shows how true this is as Paul continues stating, “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:7 ESV⁸).

And this leads us to what is developing in church planting in the 21st century in the domain of understanding church planting theologically.

II. Theology and Church Planting

There is a danger of being dominated by pragmatism when we approach the question of church planting and this is understandable since we want to know how to plant churches in order to have a more effective ministry. However, pragmatism can lead us astray. This concern was reflected in my own thinking previously.

What is pragmatism? Philosophically, the question could be complicated, but in this study pragmatism is understood to be the concept that “if it works, it must be right.” What is its danger? That the implication be given that church planting and the multiplication of daughter churches is simply a question of

“know-how” or “techniques.” The assumption could so easily be made that all one has to do is to follow a workable guide plan and then “voilà—a daughter church.” That is a deadly base to build upon.⁹

Although much of the literature on church planting has touched on the theological basis for church planting the greatest critique of not thinking theologically has been the British author Stuart Murray in his book *Planting Churches: Laying Foundations*.¹⁰ Murray states that an adequate theological base or, to use his terminology, “a theological framework for church planting” will take into account three great categories: (1) *missio Dei*, (2) Incarnation, and (3) the kingdom of God.¹¹

Church Planting and the *Missio Dei* (Mission of God)

By *missio Dei* or mission of God, Murray understands God’s mission in the world directed toward the world. The concern in not relating church planting to this great mission of God is that the church may turn in upon itself and not be concerned with social justice. However, if the newly-plant-

ed churches major on social justice above all, will they not lose their cutting edge in evangelism and the building up of believers? Surely, newly-planted churches need to be filled with believers who are both salt and light as Jesus taught. However, to emphasize the church as God’s instrument for social justice may lead to a political agenda rather than God’s redemptive agenda. David Hesselgrave expresses this by concern stating:

But one important reason was that Paul considered the preaching of the gospel and the establishment of churches as his primary task. The biblical record leaves no room for thinking that either Paul or the members of his team were basically engaged in raising living standards, ameliorating social conditions, imparting secular knowledge, or dispensing aid from previously established churches. There can be no doubt that allegiance to Christ on the part of converts in the churches entailed these effects as by-products of faith even to the sending of needed aid back to the Jerusalem church (a kind of reverse flow). That the missionaries were concerned about social relationships, and about minds and bodies as well as souls, is patently true. But Paul’s primary mission was established when the gospel was preached, people were converted, and churches were established.¹²

All of this depends on our definition of the two words mission and missions. Since neither word comes from the Bible, we must see what meaning is given to each. For some evangelicals the word mission is preferred and is related to all that God is seeking to do in the world – the mission of God (or *missio Dei*). This is sometimes called “holistic mission” with the concept of holistic broadening the concept of mission to include providing for social needs as well as encouraging social action that will transform society. This concept implies that the focus on making disciples and multiplying churches is not a fully biblical view of mission (or missions).

A recent in-depth study of the question of mission and the Bible by Christopher J. H. Wright is entitled *The Mission of God*.¹³ In this book Wright seeks to see the Bible in the light of holistic mission. He calls his approach “a missiological hermeneutic of the Bible”¹⁴ What is positive about his view of the Bible is his broad view of seeing the whole of Scripture. This gives a breadth to his work often lacking in seeking to understand mission.

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Second, Wright sees God as the initiator of mission and states in the epilogue that, “The only concept of mission into which God fits is the one of which he is the beginning, the center and the end . . . And the only access we have to that mission of God is given to us in the Bible”¹⁵ And along with this is the emphasis Wright places on mission as God’s work and not ours.

In line with Wright’s thinking is what was stated at the beginning of this article and that is the role of God as the insider—he is the one doing the work. We are only his instruments. So does this not lead to a false dichotomy that says it is either God or us? Or does a more careful exegesis of what evangelism and church planting mean lead to a more clear analysis of the wedding of the mission of God and church planting that is so needed as we continue into the 21st century?

My other concern is that this may be leading us to too broad a definition of mission so that evangelistic church planting is placed on the same plane as anything done for God. In one sense this is true; however, if priorities are misplaced then what will happen to the biblical mandate to get the gospel out to the whole world?

One recent review of Wright’s book by Jim Reapsome shows his concern:

Wright never disparages evangelism—in fact, he exalts it as an absolute necessity—but his advocacy for engaging social, economic, and political issues will arouse controversy. It’s worth asking: Just because something should be the concern of the church and all Christians should it be thrust under the rubric of mission? Wright’s huge all-embracing umbrella of God’s mission could renew fears that evangelism and church planting will be lost. If he seems to indicate that everything is mission, the risk is that nothing is mission in the end.¹⁶

So the concern of some missiologists is that this wide view of mission will play down the Great Commission’s vision for evangelism leading to multiplying disciples and then, as seen in Acts, the multiplication of gatherings of these disciples in church planting. Hesselgrave explains his concern with

this paradigm:

The missionary endeavor was marginalized in part because the ecumenical vision of] mission was gradually broadened by the W.C.C. [World Council of Churches] to include everything the church does in the world—and even what God does outside the church. The effort to carry out *missio Dei* came to be divorced from obedience to God’s Great Commission.¹⁷

In relation to the question of defining mission in relation to church planting, Donald McGavran has stated that there are really only three categories of philosophies of mission:

1. “**The Pauline philosophy**”—“This holds that the central continuing purpose of the world mission is win-

ning men and women, tribes and nations to Jesus Christ and multiplying churches.”¹⁸

2. “**The parallel philosophy**”—“world mission is as broad as the physical, mental, social, and spiritual needs of man and includes his economic, industrial and political life.”¹⁹

3. “**The Temporal-Eternal Philosophy**.”—“This holds that while the acceptance of the Evangel by the whole world is, indeed, the long range chief goal, in the shifting scene which faces us, other ends must sometimes share the stage as equals with church multiplication.”²⁰

Then McGavran continues to explain the practical results of each of these philosophies in terms of decisions made, action taken, and research done.²¹ And here is where church planting can take second place in the light of the great needs facing societies everywhere.

The result of stretching the lens by which we view mission to include a wider view is that the biblical focus is

lost. As missions historian Stephen Neill has stated, “When everything is mission, nothing is mission.”²² A too extensive definition of missions leads to a less intensive ministry in missions. Our definition of missions is solidly based on the lost condition of man and his need for supernatural life from God.

This focused definition does not mean that “missions” should not have as a resultant dynamic change in societies through multiplying true disciples and biblically functioning local churches. This definition is concerned about keeping first things first in order to accomplish our Lord’s concern when he stated, “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). So my defini-

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tion of missions is:

The crossing over of some kind of barrier that hinders the expansion of the church to make and multiply disciples who are integrated into dynamic biblical reproducing churches in which they lives out all that the gospel implies in their context for the glory of God.²³

The question of the theology of mission is going to make a difference in what happens in church planting around the world in the 21st century. What is the true relationship between the mission of God and church planting is a question that must be answered. In this writer’s opinion, the mission of God towards the world flows out of planting churches that become powerful agents for change in culture today.

If by *missio Dei* or mission of God, scholars mean the great intentionality of God for mankind and this earth all well and good. However, if this concept does not do justice to the Great Commission’s focused vision, then it

will inevitably lead to a lessening of the making of true disciples and the planting of churches for the glory of God.

The Incarnation and Church Planting

Then in terms of the theological perspective of incarnation, Murray states that this influences church planting in two ways: “First, Jesus rather than the early church is the source of inspiration for church planters...” and “A second implication of incarnation is that God speaks to people through making his word flesh.”

However, there are many who, although accepting the working of Christ in building his church through his servants, would say that Paul is God’s “inspiration” (or perhaps we should say model) for church planters. Bill Hull alerts us to the difference between what he calls “the Chris-

So churches that are planted and are faithful to the Word of God will have Christ’s discipleship vision strongly rooted in them and will be teaching incarnational truth in their midst. If discipleship is separated from church planting it can only lead to the planting of superficial churches that will not make the salt and light impact that they should.

Incarnational discipleship is the great emphasis of the four Gospels where Christ is the great disciple maker. It is also the great emphasis of the book of Acts where the result of evangelism is always the making of disciples. To fail to make disciples is to end up with loose disciples floating around not relating to one another in the body called the church. Also it is not true to the true biblical flow as seen in the Acts and Epistles.

The beauty of putting the two together leads to a vibrant life-chang-

What is at stake here is more than fine points of exegesis. The question arises whether certain views of 20:21 diminish the uniqueness accorded to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. Entire missiological paradigms have been built around various interpretations of 20:21. The “incarnational model,” for example, sees Christ as present in the church so that the church can fashion its ministry after the model provided by Jesus during his earthly ministry. According to this view, the church is not just representing Jesus—it is Jesus working through his church today. The implication of this model appears to be a focus on the continuity between Jesus’ mission and the church’s mission.²⁶

Another view, the “representational model,” accentuates more keenly the discontinuity between the respective missions of Jesus and of his disciples.

The incarnational approach is built upon believers accomplishing the mission of Christ as exemplified in Luke 4:18-19: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (ESV)

However, this does not do justice to the uniqueness of Christ’s incarnation as Köstenberger has shown us.

If the representational model is our model for mission, then the great vision will be that of the Great Commission in the light of the great Pauline mission as seen in Acts. As Köstenberger explains in another book:

The mission of the exalted Jesus is accomplished through the witness of the apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit. The one who is himself sent by God sends his representatives to bear testimony to his salvation, to announce the forgiveness of sins and to make disciples of all nations. In other words, his witnesses continue the mission of Jesus by declaring to men and women everywhere the glorious gospel of the grace of God. As the Father has sent him, so Jesus sends them. Moreover, this testimony to Jesus and his saving work involves a wide-ranging series of activities that result in believers being built up in Christ and formed into Christian congregations. It is not limited simply to primary evangelism and its immediate results. Conversion to Christ necessarily involved incorporation into a Christian community.²⁷

Again, what Murray calls a “theo-

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Great Commission as recorded by Matthew.

to-centric model” which was the way disciple-making was done when Christ was upon the earth and the “church-centric model” where disciple-making is accomplished within the body of the church and not done apart from church planting.²⁴

So without a doubt, church planting does need to be related to Christ’s life and teaching as reflected in making disciples who reflect the Great Commission as recorded by Matthew:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age Matt. 28:18-20 (ESV).”

ing church where a church grows by following rather than attracting by programs. The failure of not linking church planting to discipleship leads to weak churches with pew-sitting instead of powerful change.

However, there is still a question raised in relation to the incarnation that must be answered. Are disciples today to do exactly what Jesus did or was there a special uniqueness related to his incarnation that they do not share? The Lord stated “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21 ESV).

Andreas Köstenberger has done an in-depth study of this in his book *The Missions of Jesus & the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel*.²⁵ He states:

logical perspective” (in this case that of incarnation) will have a great influence on church planting in the 21st century. However, that perspective will need to be adequately informed theologically.

May many new churches be planted in this 21st century because Christ’s incarnational uniqueness is understood and Paul’s representational model is followed.

There is one more theological perspective to consider in relation to church planting in the 21st century and that is:

The Kingdom of God and Church Planting

To consider this third theological perspective it will be necessary to clarify the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church. Murray states this correctly by stating: “A third theological perspective that might helpfully undergird church planting is the kingdom of God” but then he warns that “identification of church and kingdom is not justified biblically or contextually.”²⁸

The question of the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church is a vast one and it will not be possible to develop this question in this article. However, it may be profitable for 21st century church planters to think through Murray’s three perspectives to which will be added George Eldon Ladd’s insights on the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God.

Murray states that “First, the church is a community; whereas the kingdom is an activity: God extending his rule throughout creation.”²⁹ If this theological insight is kept in perspective, Murray believes, churches will be planted that are not characterized by static but rather dynamic movement as “agents of this kingdom...on the move.”³⁰ George Eldon Ladd agrees stating that “the Kingdom creates the church. The dynamic rule of God, present in the mission of Jesus, challenged men to response, bringing them into a new fellowship.”³¹

Then Murray states that, “Sec-

ond, the kingdom is broader than the church.”³² For him this means that the church gets a greater vision for action from “the implications of the kingdom.”³³ While this is no doubt true, it would appear that the vision for action came from the working of the Holy Spirit rather than a vision for the broader implications of the kingdom. The kingdom and the Spirit work together but the emphasis in Acts is upon the ever and increasing outreach as the Holy Spirit led church planters into new horizons. The emphasis in the book of Acts is upon the Spirit of God constantly moving God’s servants to new horizons. This is powerful seen in Acts 13:2: “While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’”—a work of evangelism leading to church planting.

Finally, Murray states that, “Third, the kingdom rather than the church defines the scope of God’s mission.”³⁴ Ladd states in relation to this that “it

tending to do in the work today then that extensive definition of mission could slow down the intensive Great Commission which is the making of disciples integrating them into local churches. It is as the 21st century church planter majors on that vision that more and more dynamic churches will be planted and make a difference in our world today. It does mean, however, that the implications of the gospel will be worked out in the local church as people not only accept the gospel but live out the gospel as will be seen in this next section.

Two Additional Theological Perspectives on Church Planting

As we continue to advance in church planting in the 21st century, this writer considers two other major theological perspectives to be very relevant in church planting: the gospel and its content and the glory of God.

The Gospel as the Content for the Church that is Planted. If church planting is not solidly built upon the gospel

If church planting is not solidly built upon the gospel in this 21st century, we will be planting churches that are not truly biblically or theologically solid.

is the church’s mission to witness to the Kingdom. The church cannot build the Kingdom or become the Kingdom, but the church witnesses to the Kingdom—to God’s redeeming acts in Christ Jesus both past and future.”³⁵ Here, depending on how one interprets Ladd, it would seem that the redeeming acts in Christ Jesus are the scope of God’s mission. Again this would depend upon how one interprets God’s mission and refers us back to the relationship between church planting and the mission of God.

This author is convinced that if the mission of God (*missio Dei*) is interpreted to mean all that God is in-

in this 21st century, we will be planting churches that are not truly biblically or theologically solid. In planting the church at Corinth, Paul states:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 1 Cor. 15:1-5 (ESV)

Anthony Thiselton in his prodigious

commentary on I Corinthians explains that the word gospel here “denotes the message of salvation; in vv. 3-4 Paul endorses the shared pre-Pauline tradition which both proclaims the death and resurrection of Christ and interprets it in terms of the saving and transforming power of God as this receives explanation and intelligibility within the frame of reference provided by the Old Testament] scriptures.”³⁶

It is necessary to insist upon the gospel as being the foundation of a church plant as Paul states in the great church planting passage in 1 Corinthians 3 which states in verse 11 “For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” Church planters in this new century must know how to communicate the gospel in its integrity if they are to plant churches that make a difference.

In addition, they must insist upon

The Lord’s command in Acts 1:8
is obeyed as the church occupies more territory
and new churches are planted.

the gospel as not just the beginning of the Christian life and the church life but that they must continue to live out the gospel day after day. Paul’s rebuke of Peter and others with him in Antioch was because “their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel...” (Gal. 2:16 ESV). This answers the question of how church planting fits the mission of God in this world—God saves people who then are to be “in step with the truth” they have received. The words “in step with” can be translated “consistent with.” Effective discipleship in church planting leads to people who live lives consistent with the message of the gospel.

When Paul states that he delivered this message “as of first importance” the idea is of “logical rather than temporal force.”³⁷ Church planting in the 21st cen-

tury, if it is to be effective, needs to capture afresh this Pauline emphasis as seen in the missionary journeys in Acts.

The Glory of God as Our Goal. In terms of this theological perspective, John Piper has made it clear that “Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal of missions. It’s the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God’s glory.”³⁸

As we see evangelism and church planting as bringing many into a personal relationship with God then those involved in this ministry are seeking what God is seeking as our Lord explains, “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him” (John 4:24 ESV). If this is not the “mission of God” then what is? As church planters see new bodies

of believers come into being by God’s working as we saw in the beginning of this article, there is the great sense of being representatives of that great mission for which he came and died. Although those who start new churches “plant” or “water,” “God gives the growth,” and he does so for his greater glory. God’s servants planting new churches in the 21st century with this motivation will be truly “God’s fellow workers” (1 Cor 3:9).

III. The Question of the Biblical Base for Church Planting in the 21st Century

It is just as important to establish a biblical base for church planting as we advance into the 21st century as a theo-

logical base. Here are five pillars for church planting and multiplication in this new century.³⁹

1. It is the Will of God that His People Multiply

In an insightful look at Matthew 16:18 where Jesus declares, “I will build my church,” Donald Carson explains that the Greek verb “to build” (*oikodomeó*) used here is in direct line with the OT idea of “building” a people.” The Hebrew word *banah* is used in this sense in Ruth 4:11: “May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel.”⁴⁰ To build up the house of Israel is to multiply the people of God. In Exodus 1 there is the same motif of multiplication. The same God who multiplies his people in the OT multiplies them in the NT as predicted in Matthew 16:18. He does this by building up his church. His church grows as his people multiply and churches then multiply because of this growth. The only way to accommodate the multiplication of believers is by the multiplication of churches. What could be more biblical than churches starting other churches by branching out and forming daughter churches?

Furthermore, Christ is Lord of his church and he is at work causing it to grow. It is not human know-how, techniques, demographics, and surveys. Iain Murray, in his book *Revival and Revivalism*, marks a clear distinction between these two often-confused subjects. For him, revival is the sovereign working of God where there are “times of quickened spiritual prosperity and growth in the church.”⁴¹ Revivalism is men trying to fabricate this by techniques. Again Murray says:

True church growth and multiplication is the forgotten truth that the work of Christ in salvation did not end with his ascension, thereafter to be carried on by the church and human energies. Rather, Christ remains the source of all authority, life and power. *It is by him that his people are preserved and their numbers increased.*⁴²

And it could be added that it is by

Christ that the church multiplies into local churches giving birth to new churches and the marvelous process continues. When this promise in Matthew is fulfilled in Acts, the accomplishment of this “building” by multiplication is seen. A study of the structure of Acts that is informed by the key transition passages (Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20 and 28:30) shows that each section of this book aims at “expansion.”⁴³ Acts shows the growth of local churches and their multiplication. The Antioch church is one of the best models of this as it extends out to begin new congregations. The Lord’s command in Acts 1:8 is obeyed as the church occupies more territory and new churches are planted. If the Acts model is to be followed, churches should not only multiply believers but also churches. Acts 2:42-47 describes the church as meeting in the temple court and in homes. This two-pronged approach gives credence to the idea of the expansion of the church giving birth to new groups in new regions. Those committed to cell-groups point out that the church is just as much the church in the cell-groups as in the larger congregation. This does not prove that churches should start branch churches, but it does show that God wants his gathered people meeting in different geographic areas as a witness. Theoretically and practically this is best accomplished not only by cell-groups but also by some of these cells becoming functioning churches on their own and thus expanding the church into new areas. This will be dealt with later as the question of theory and practice are related.

2. The Activity of the Holy Spirit in the Birth Process

The second reason for this multiplication of churches comes from the activity of the Holy Spirit in this birth process. He works to bring new believers into being but also to bring new churches into being. Boer points out that the impetus for the growing church came not from the commandments to evan-

gelize but from the impetus of the Spirit to move out. He says “Two things stand out with great clarity in Acts: the irresistible missionary expansion of the Church, and the power of the Spirit in that expansion.”⁴⁴

The expansion in Acts 13 comes about as the Spirit moves Barnabas and Saul to give themselves to the work of planting new churches. Much missiological thought has been involved in the discussion about whether this was a modality (church structure) or a sodality (mission structure) planting new churches. From an exegetical point of view, it seems as though a modality type struc-

ture of an “apostolic team” is present here. However, the sending out of this team was within the context of the believers in the church at Antioch. Their being sent out from the church to plant new churches was not planting daughter churches (where a solid group forms the nucleus of the new church). This event does show us, nevertheless, that when the Spirit is at work,⁴⁵ the church (or at least its leadership) recognizes the need to be willing to let others move out from within the church to plant new churches.

Emil Brunner clarifies this:

Mission work does not arise from any arrogance in the Christian Church; mission is its cause and life. The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission, there is no Church; and where there is neither Church nor mission, there is no faith.⁴⁶

So how could a church not envision reaching out to begin new churches in new areas if it is truly “on fire”? The Holy Spirit is given to make be-

lievers “holy” by working in them for he is the Holy Spirit. However, he is also the Holy Spirit. As such He has a ministry to make these holy believers “moving” witnesses who expand the church geographically by the power of their testimony (Acts 1:8). The result should be the creation of new bodies of believers wherever these witnesses go. It is striking to note the multiplication of daughter churches among Pentecostals in France. One reason seems to be their recognition of the fact that groups of believers in an area become the core of a new church. France has long been recognized as resistant to evangelism, yet in this resistant soil, the

When filled with and guided by the Spirit, the church not only reproduced by multiplying believers but it reproduced by multiplying new churches.

Pentecostals have seen many churches planted. According to *Operation World, Revised 7th Edition*, the Assemblies of God alone have created 920 congregations in France with a membership of 65,714 and an affiliation of 230,000.⁴⁷ Has their theology of the Spirit and the congregating of believers encouraged this multiplication?

3. The Church is an Organism—A Body (1 Cor 12:12-31)

Organisms give birth to other organisms by reproduction as life generates life. The church is born to reproduce by giving life. When filled with and guided by the Spirit, the church not only reproduced by multiplying believers but it reproduced by multiplying new churches. We should be concerned to see churches born that recognize from the moment of their birth that they are to produce other churches. This will lead to the multiplication of churches.

Commenting on the power of the re-

productive model as seen in the church of Antioch, Bill Hull states, “We see the power of the model of reproduction: If you multiply a reproductive church, it creates other reproductive churches. This will remain true until modeling breaks down.”⁴⁸ The powerful movement of life coming from the church as an organism led to the expansion of the church everywhere in the Roman Empire. Norman A. Niklas explains:

The first element in this equation represents the most important factor. Without the supernatural resources of our sovereign God, the planting and growing of churches would be impossible. By His power believers are born, disciples are made and churches reproduce.⁴⁹

A French missiological book, quoting a German pastoral theology (*Grundriss der Praktischen Theologie*), stresses the same truth:

The Church particularly insists on the fact that it is not in good health without this expansion beyond its present frontiers. These remarks signify that one should not count missions among the ‘works’ of the Church, to be mentioned after many others, but missions is an integral part of her organism.⁵⁰

4. The Church Functioning According to God Will Manifest a “Yearning”

Fourth, as Charles Van Engen explains, when the church functions as the “true church” it will manifest certain characteristics. One of these will be a profound desire to see others come into fellowship:

The true church “Yearns” for the incorporation of those persons, groups, and cultures which will gather with it in fellowship around the one Head of the Body, and thus construct a true, loving, growing, serving demonstration of koinonia.⁵¹

This is true biblical motivation that causes new churches to come into being. This motivation is a supernatural, Spirit-given desire that incites to evangelism. Churches that have this “yearning” will never be content with one church in one area but they will reproduce themselves so that more and more regions are touched with the

gospel and new churches are born. This is where daughter church planting finds its highest motivational level.

5. The Wonderful Power of “Spontaneous Expansion” Within the Church

Fifth, although to a degree implied in the other reasons, the church of Jesus Christ has within itself the wonderful power of what the renowned missiologist Roland Allen called “spontaneous expansion.” He perceptively saw that this expansion was not just the expansion of this or that congregation but was more than that.

This then is what I mean by spontaneous expansion. I mean the expansion which follows the unexhorted and unorganized activity of individual members of the Church explaining to others the Gospel which they have found for themselves; I mean the expansion which follows the irresistible attraction of the Christian Church for men who see its ordered life, and are drawn to it by desire to discover the secret of a life which they instinctively desire to share; I mean also the expansion of the Church by the addition of new churches.⁵²

Having dealt with the biblical foundation for church planting, we now turn our attention to what could be called major paradigm shifts in church planting in the 21st century.

IV. The Question of Paradigm Shifts in Church Planting in the 21st Century

A Shift from Expatriate Church Planting to National Church Planting

First, a major shift from expatriate church planting to national leaders starting new churches is taking place in this 21st century. This does not mean that there are not some areas of the world where expatriate church planters are necessary. Whenever the Pauline mission vision exists, there will be a need for someone from the outside being sent to begin planting churches in the soil of that region. Look at the two great truths here in this magisterial letter of Paul:

For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written, “Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand” (Romans 15:18-21 ESV).

Here we see that someone has to be sent to this region for there is a great need to initiate a movement of planting new churches.

This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while (Romans 15:22-24 ESV).

And here is the other side of the truth as Paul declares “I no longer have any room for work in these regions.” Does that mean that there is no more room for church planting? Nothing could be farther from the truth. However, Paul had planted churches throughout this region from Jerusalem to Illyricum. Those who lived there now had the mission of fulfilling the Great Commission to make disciples and integrate them into biblical churches.

So there are places where someone must come from outside and initiate evangelism and church planting. However, in so many regions of the world today, national church planting is the key or a mixture of both is also a possibility. In my own experience, this has been the case in great opportunities that I have had to empower church planters in various countries of the world. The most recent experience has been that of ministry in Hungary and Nigeria. In both of these countries, I have had the privilege of teaching church planters and potential church planters the basics of church planting

and multiplication. In both of these cases it was by invitation.

An amazing dynamic of church planting is taking place around the world as church planters from within the nations are planting new churches and the gospel is growing dynamically. I saw this in Hungary as we worked with church planters carrying the vision of not only planting new churches but seeing them grow and multiply. Then the same thing is seen in Nigeria where amazing growth in the number of evangelicals has taken place because of evangelistic church planting. The result is that the percentage of evangelicals has gone in 2010 to 30.8 % with an annual growth of 3.4% according to the recently published *Operation World*, 7th edition. At the same time many Nigerians are presently serving as missionaries planting churches both in Nigeria and other countries.⁵³

A Shift from Church Planting to Church Multiplication

In a number of training seminars overseas, the emphasis has even shifted further from church planting to a vision for church multiplication. Through our experience of church multiplication by daughter church planting, opportunities have arisen to teach how one church can plant another. In Nigeria, working along with a national leader, Dr. Samson Fatokun, doors opened to teach church planting and multiplication in five evangelical schools in October 2009 as well as in a number of churches. The following subjects were dealt with:

- Why Do Some Churches Reproduce?⁵⁴
- Seven Principles for the Planting, Growth, and Multiplication of Churches
- Qualities of an Effective Church Planter
- Twelve Mistakes that Church Planters Make
- A Guide Plan for the Planting of Daughter Churches

It was the first of these subjects that

was given in almost every area and seemed to be one of the most relevant in the Nigerian context. As churches in Nigeria multiply and plant new churches, more and more people will come to Christ and a multiplication of believers will take place.

A Shift from Church Planting to Church Planting Movements

This is one of most encouraging developments in church planting in the 21st century. It is moving from church planting to church multiplication and then to a powerful movement that takes place where many new churches are planted rapidly.

Here is the definition given to this in a landmark book entitled *Church Planting Movements*: “A Church Planting Movement is a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment.”⁵⁵

Many missions and groups

are shifting to a vision of not just planting churches and multiplying them but to see authentic church planting movements take hold.

Then the author gives what are called “ten universal elements we found in every Church Planting Movement.”⁵⁶ “1. Extraordinary Prayer; 2. Abundant Evangelism; 3. Intentional Planting of Reproducing Churches; 4. The Authority of God’s Word; 5. Local Leadership; 6. Lay Leadership; 7. House Churches; 8. Churches Planting Churches; 9. Rapid Reproduction; and 10. Healthy Churches.”⁵⁷

Many missions and groups are shifting to a vision of not just planting churches and multiplying them but to see authentic church planting movements take hold. My own mission, The Evangelical Alliance Mission has a statement to this effect, “Planting healthy churches that multiply and have a missionary sending capacity.”

A Shift to a Greater Understanding of Church Health and Its Relation to Church Multiplication

Along with the vision for church planting movements has come a greater emphasis on church health and an understanding of what makes churches healthy in a qualitative sense. The question of balancing quantitative and qualitative growth plays an important role in church planting in the 21st century. Research done by Christian Schwarz has shown the role of quality in relation to quantity in church growth. Schwarz’s research on churches world-wide leads to eight quality characteristics that make for a growing church.

1. Empowering leadership
2. Gift-based ministry
3. Passionate spirituality
4. Effective structures

5. Inspiring worship service
6. Holistic small groups
7. Need-oriented evangelism
8. Loving relationships⁵⁸

In relating the growth of the church to church planting, Schwarz states, “Hardly anything demonstrates the health of a congregation as much as the willingness—and ability!—to give birth to new congregations.”⁵⁹

Others have developed the idea of a healthy church along the lines of “marks” as in Mark Dever’s book *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* linking the health of a church with a biblical understanding of the varied aspects of the church’s ministry.⁶⁰

In the light of the need of church

Continued on page 12

How to Organize a Successful Missiology Conference

By Bob Priest

Academic conferences are core to the life-blood of any discipline. By conference participation younger scholars are inducted into the discipline, and all scholars overcome isolation, receive encouragement, develop scholarly networks, interact in ways that sharpens their own scholarship, and find opportunities for collaboration and publication.

Each year, around the world, missiology conferences are held, often sponsored by missiology societies.¹ Some are small. Others, like the national meetings of the ASM or the EMS, may bring together 150 missiologists or more. By comparison with other disciplines, missiology is relatively small. And this means we often face challenges in organizing conferences that attract sufficient participants to make them fruitful. In this post I suggest factors that I believe make for conference success.

Ten years ago I was asked to take leadership of a regional conference of

conference success. Directors of other missiology conferences have even attended ours to see how things work. So I decided to write some thoughts up and make them available for anyone to consult. I hope others who've had success with organizing conferences will weigh in with additional insights, or alternative viewpoints, and that all of this will provide a valuable resource for anyone wishing to organize such conferences.

Optimizing Opportunities for Participation

The first thing to keep in mind is

opportunities for participation by having short blocks of time for each presentation (between 15 and 30 minutes), and by having multiple presentations going simultaneously. The regional one-day conference that I have directed for the EMS will have roughly 50 presenters this year—spread across 6 rooms, with no one having more than 30 minutes, and with many doctoral students having only 15 minute blocks of time. At a minimum this guarantees we will have 50 attenders for our conference. And of course many of these presenters will play important roles in attracting and recruiting others to attend.

Conference Theme(s): One can create structural space for many presenters but still have a conference focus that fails to optimize participation. An overly narrow single theme (such as “music and mission”) limits the participation of a majority of missiologists who may not have research interests or

An overly narrow single theme (such as “music and mission”) limits the participation of a majority of missiologists who may not have research interests or strengths related to the theme.

the EMS that had dwindled in numbers until, one year, only three people showed up. As conference director, and with strategic support from other nearby missiologists, I instituted changes intended to increase attendance and participation. Our first year we had 40 registered attenders, then 90, then 170. In the last five years we have averaged 270, with 320 in our most recent year. I am not aware of any other annual academic gathering of missiologists that is larger.

Every now and again I receive a request to share ideas of what makes for

that many, whether young scholars in the final stages of dissertation completion, or older scholars approaching retirement, want to participate where they have opportunity to be presenters. If they are formally on the program they are more motivated—and, importantly—more able to draw on professional development funds from their institutions to cover conference costs. And, if they are already traveling (and presenting), they are more inclined to help recruit others to attend.

Conference Structure: Successful academic conferences optimize op-

portunities for participation by having short blocks of time for each presentation (between 15 and 30 minutes), and by having multiple presentations going simultaneously. The regional one-day conference that I have directed for the EMS will have roughly 50 presenters this year—spread across 6 rooms, with no one having more than 30 minutes, and with many doctoral students having only 15 minute blocks of time. At a minimum this guarantees we will have 50 attenders for our conference. And of course many of these presenters will play important roles in attracting and recruiting others to attend.

strengths related to the theme. By contrast, a theme such as “contextualization vs. syncretism” is sufficiently broad as to allow virtually all missiologists to find some point of contact in their own work with the theme. Alternatively, a conference with several themes also allows for an optimum range of participants. For example, at our conference this year we have two rooms focused on “Missionary Methods,” with other rooms focused on “Preaching and Culture: Contextualizing the Sermon,” “Ethnodoxology: Contextualized Arts in Mission,” “Theology of Religions,”

and “Vocation, Work, and Money in Global Christianity.” It would be surprising if a majority of missiologists would not be able to find points of connection between their own work and one of the themes of our conference. By tracking carefully with the interests of other missiologists, one can often pick timely themes that attract a great deal of interest, as when we focused last year on “Diaspora Missiology.” Certain themes lend themselves to drawing in mission-agency leaders, mission pastors, and other Christians interested in mission. “Short-term missions,” we found, was one such theme likely to draw in young people, mission pastors, and others from local congregations.

Soliciting Involvement

In addition to issuing a general “call for papers,” I have found it helpful to

ton (who wished to combine the conference trip with a personal visit to relatives in the Chicago metro area). This year, I’ve invited Robertson McQuilkin.

Most senior missiologists have a good idea of the strengths and interests of many other missiologists. And so, once I know a conference theme, I immediately think of people I know that have special expertise related to the theme. I drop each a note and let them know about the conference and that I’d love to have them as a presenter, should they be inclined and interested. (I do clarify that presenters cover their own costs.) Because I am interested in getting presenters representing a wide demographic range (see my post on

Missiology—Old, White, and Male?), I go out of my way to extend invitations to women, Latinos, Afri-

leagues and students from their institutions to consider participating. In prior years van loads of students and faculty have attended from Asbury, Wheaton, Concordia, and Cedarville. With a little encouragement, some faculty will actually design their syllabi to allow conference participation to count towards course work for a mission course. Again, when a key denominational or mission-agency leader is a presenter, they are more likely to draw in others from their institution or network.

It is helpful to tap into networks of interest related to special topics. Thus, this year we have a track on “Ethnodoxology,” and it was Robin Harris and Brian Schrag of the International Council of Ethnodoxologists who organized and helped publicize the track. Again, the track on “Theology of Religions” was largely organized by Dr.

Because scholars are embedded in networks, I work to understand those networks and to invite key presenters from as many such networks as possible—trusting this will help pull others in.

be intentional about extending invitations to certain categories of people. First are those with name recognition. Success is enhanced when fairly well-known people commit to be presenters early in the process. Because these individuals often have many chances to present, they are less likely to respond to a generic call for papers. And yet the conference will be stronger if it includes such individuals. I always, for example, invite Scott Moreau to be a presenter—since he lives nearby, is well known, and can be counted on to provide an outstanding presentation every time. While presenters normally cover their own costs, I usually cover costs for one or two prominent presenters who come from a greater distance. For one conference that person was Robert Wuthnow from Prince-

can Americans, Internationals, and younger missiologists (including students) who have done good research on the topic and who I know have special strengths or interests related to it. Because we have multiple slots for presenters, I’m able to selectively offer a number of people a spot on the program, with space remaining for others who apply. The goal is to have a program with outstanding presenters and with a wide range of presenters.

Because scholars are embedded in networks, I work to understand those networks and to invite key presenters from as many such networks as possible—trusting this will help pull others in. For example, when a faculty member or student from a nearby seminary or university participates—they are very likely to encourage fellow col-

Harold Netland. Any time there is a cluster of people working on a topic, this brings extra energy and connections to a conference focused in this direction.

When a publication is planned in relationship to a theme, this too helps motivate presenters to participate. Thus each year the EMS publishes a book on a theme drawing from the best papers submitted, which will be on “Missionary Methods” this year. Greg Scharf and I have arranged a theme issue of the Trinity Journal on the topic of “Preaching and Culture,” which will include most of our papers in this track.

Other Considerations

Clearly many other factors go into conference decisions. For example:

Where: a conference is held makes a difference. Thus holding our conference at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School each year helps us draw in TEDS students and faculty, and draw participants from a major metropolitan area – and this is pivotal to gaining the critical mass needed.

When: a conference is held matters. The ASM gains certain advantages by meeting in June where there are less conflicts with academic schedules. On the other hand, this is when many missiologists travel. And it is harder to draw in students during the summer, than during the semester. In our one-day conference we attempt to schedule the conference so as to avoid academic conflicts with nearby schools.

The cost: of a conference matters. See my comments in this regard in my earlier post *Missiology—Old, White, and Male?*

The right institutional supports are helpful. With TEDS co-sponsoring our conference, additional supports are provided — including critical help by doctoral students. Strategic support from fellow faculty members, and especially my dean (Dr. Tite Tienou), has proved invaluable.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, even after doing some of the above, conference success does not rest on the efforts of any one individual. Rather, success comes when networks of missiologists become invested in the success of a conference, in using the conference to help strengthen missiology, and in using the conference to help their own students become involved in the discipline.

Endnote

1. Association of Anabaptist Missiologists, Association of Professors of Mission (APM), Australian Association of Mission Studies, British and Irish Association for Mission Studies, Central and Eastern European Association for Mission Studies, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Missionswissenschaft, Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS), Fellowship of Indian Missiologists, International Association of Catholic Missiologists, International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS), International Soci-

ety of Frontier Missiology (ISFM), Japan Missiological Society, Lutheran Society for Missiology, Midwest Mission Studies Fellowship, Southern African Missiological Society.

Note from the editor: this article was first posted on Bob Priest's blog *Missiology*matters.com.

Church Planting in the 21st Century continued from page 9

planters to see church health in the new churches they plant, I developed a study entitled, "Ten Qualities of a Healthy Church Plant" putting together these ideas with a vision of church multiplication.⁶¹

As church planters, missions churches, and leaders advance in this 21st century, amazing advances in planting healthy churches winning lost people and multiplying may take place for the glory of God.

May it be so!

Endnotes

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2. I am indebted to Robert Banks in his book *Paul's Idea of Community*, Rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994) for this term as one of the best translations into English of the Greek word *ekklesia*.

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19. *Ibid.*, p.71.

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21. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-76.

22. Stephen Neill as quoted by Hesselgrave in *Missions in Conflict*, p. 329.

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30. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

31. Ladd, *A Theology*, p. 113.

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39. See Robert J. Vajko, "The Biblical,

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52. Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

1962), p. 7 (emphasis mine).

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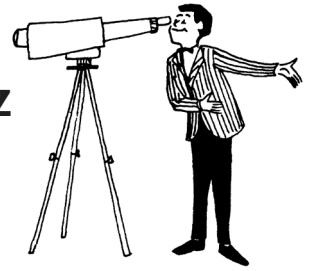
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Bob Vajko is a *TEAM* missionary who served in evangelism, church planting, church development and leadership training for twenty-nine years in France, then seven years at the Adelaide College of Ministries in Australia where he taught missions. He holds a doctorate in missiology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and a degree in advanced studies in theology from the Evangelical Faculty of Theology, Vaux-sur-Seine, France. He presently serves as an international church planting consultant conducting seminars as well as personal training in church planting, church health, and church multiplication not only in the United States but also globally. Bob is also a consultant for Natural Church Development, a ministry to help churches around the world develop greater health.

As seen
through
the **LENZ**



In the year that EMS is considering the work of Roland Allen, Bob Vajko’s article is timely in its content, and direction to enhance our strategic missional thinking in evangelism and church planting. The beauty of his article is that he approaches the subject theologically, which must be the basis of any strategy, as well as practically. I encourage teachers to use this article as a means to help students going into ministry, not only overseas, but as pastors with the goal of planting branch or daughter churches in the States.

The Evangelical Missiological Society has annual regional meetings, and Bob Priest has probably been the most effective Regional Director in organizing his area gatherings, both with program variation, and excellent presentations from main line thinkers as well as students. We are including his article, which he posted on his blog, for useful help to other Regional Directors.

—Bob Lenz, editor