

Sub- ~~E~~merging The Church

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Second Draft

A Sinking Problem

All seemed well on the evening of April 10, 1912. As she steamed away from England on her maiden voyage, the RMS Titanic gave her passengers a deep sense of pride and security. After all, this great ship promised to be unsinkable. With reckless confidence, the crew kept her going at top speed even in the treacherous North Atlantic waters. But just before midnight on April 14, an iceberg was spotted and the crew scrambled to avoid disaster—but not in time. The Titanic broadsided the great obstacle, ripping a series of gashes in her hull. Certain that nothing could have brought harm to this monument of human technology, the crew initially reported that no damage had been done. But within minutes it was evident that she was taking on water. Doomed, the Titanic sat helpless. Lifeboats were lowered one by one as the ship was gradually abandoned. Within the space of four hours, this massive ship had submerged into the icy waters, never to sail again. Worst of all, of the 2,223 passengers on board, only 706 survived.

The church is in trouble. It is sinking, like a mortally wounded ship floundering in a relentless sea. What was once a viable force in the world is now struggling to make progress, or even be noticed, in a rising tide of secularism and cultural change. Large sanctuaries, once filled with worshippers, echo the voices of just a faithful few. Young people are not embracing the church as a meaningful option for spiritual expression, opting instead for trendy new age and Eastern practices. Melbourne Age writer Barney Zwartz observes that the church “is only ever one generation from extinction . . . and many today consider its position as dire as almost any time in its existence. Throughout the West, the church is retreating.”¹

This is not to say the church is dead. Far from it. There are thousands of churches throughout the world, with new ones are being planted every day. Many people have a meaningful existence in those congregations. From inside the church we see some wonderful things happening. Conversions are taking place. People are being disciplined and are growing toward spiritual maturity. Many continue to find their way toward vocational ministries. But when we look from the outside, things don’t look so good. The church is alive, but is it well?

The image of the church is in question. To a society with an increasing number of never-churched people, the church has an unfavourable reputation. When people think of church these days they aren’t thinking about a benevolent organisation that has something meaningful to offer. No, instead they think money-hungry, unfriendly, boring, and irrelevant. Add to that a long list of paedophile scandals in recent years, which keeps people wondering if the church is indeed a safe place for their children.

The purpose of the church is in question. In today’s fast-growing world there are more people than ever before who are completely out of touch with God. Even without considering the challenge of keeping up with population growth, the church has a massive task on her hands. The Great Commission is far from complete, and it seems futile to think we will ever see it fulfilled.

The future of the church is in question. By and large, the church is treading water. Church growth trends reveal quite a bit about the current state of the church’s health. Throughout the western world, churches are in decline. In the United States, Southern Baptists and Assemblies of God are the only denominations reporting significant net growth—but even that growth is not a picture of those entire denominations, as the numbers are largely offset by the emergence of a growing number of megachurches within their ranks. Perhaps the most grave concern is that the majority of churches are sterile—they do not give birth to new churches.

While the church is not going down overnight like the Titanic, we do indeed hear the faint sounds of “glug, glug, glug” as the church seems to quietly slip into obscurity. Sinking ships do not suddenly right themselves and become seaworthy again without intervention, and nor will the church. Something has to be done.

¹ *The Age*, 5 April 2003.

What Has Happened To the Church?

In order to understand and fully appreciate what is happening in the church today, we need to delve into history a bit. A brief look at the course of Christianity over the past 20 centuries will help us understand where we are today and how we got here.

A Brief Look In the Rearview Mirror

Just a few days after Jesus returned to heaven, the church was born in Jerusalem. Starting with over 5,000 people, Christian faith spread rapidly as believers carried the Good News far and wide. Much of the known world of that time belonged to the Roman Empire. While some emperors marginally tolerated Christianity, others despised it and actively persecuted Christians for practising their faith, making the first 300 years of the church difficult ones. Yet in spite of this opposition, Christianity spread rapidly throughout the empire and beyond. It was a movement on the fringes of society—virtually invisible in the midst of intense persecution—yet with profound influence as lives were changed one at a time.

In the early fourth century, an event occurred that changed Christianity forever. Emperor Constantine rose to power in AD 306 as Rome's emperor, and just a few years into his reign he had a vision which he believed is from God. As a result he felt compelled to embrace the Christian faith. Within 10 years, Constantine brought the Roman persecution of Christianity to an end once and for all. By 324 Christianity not only had full legal status in the empire, it was privileged with becoming the state religion.

This single event triggered monumental changes in Christian faith and practice. First of all, with the threat of persecution eliminated, believers were no longer constrained to meeting in seclusion. The pendulum swung rapidly to the other side, and congregations began to erect buildings in which they would celebrate their new-found freedom. For the first time in its history, Christianity became an institution housed within walls and structures that had never before existed. Thus we see the birth of the Roman Catholic church. With this imminent status, it was not long before people came to believe that the church was the centre of Rome, that Rome was the centre of the world, and that the world was the centre of the universe. The church, they believed, had finally achieved its rightful place.

By AD 400 Christianity had gained powerful influence in the known world. With this influence, the church had become increasingly intolerant of all other religious groups. This intolerance was followed by persecution—this time being administered *by* the Christians rather than *against* them—and people were punished for their failure to comply with Roman Catholic beliefs. This trend of intolerance would continue for several hundred years, culminating with the great Crusades against Islamic faith. It is no coincidence that this era is known to us as the Dark Ages.

During these years the church became more and more institutionalised. Catholic leaders developed elaborate belief systems and leadership structures, and added a number of doctrinal “amendments” to the faith. These embellishments made Christianity highly complex and increasingly difficult for the common man to embrace. The church enjoyed a growing position of prestige which was reflected in its architecture; churches and cathedrals, with their lofty steeples, were the tallest structures in every city.²

The rise of intellectualism and the university brought new challenges to the church. One such challenge came from the scientific world. In the early 1500s Copernicus boldly declared his theory that the sun is the centre of the solar system, not the earth. Naturally, this infuriated the Catholic Church who for centuries were convinced that the church was the centre of the universe. This and other events began to shake the very foundations of the church, as well as the people's faith in it as an institution. The Protestant Reformation tore the church into many pieces as people rebelled against the evolved faith of the Roman Church. Over the course of time the church gradually lost her esteemed position in society, a trend that has continued to the present. While continuing to be effective in many ways in its own right, the church has once again found itself on the fringes of society. Today the church is just one of a growing multitude of people groups in the increasing climate of fragmentation and tribalisation in the West.

² When the Roman Empire split into two kingdoms, so did the church, resulting in the Eastern Orthodox faith. While this branch of the church is not mentioned in this discussion it is to be understood that they share a Roman Catholic heritage, and a similar evolution of faith and practice.

The Church Today—And Why It's Not Working

Having looked back a few hundred years, it is hard to believe that a church which was once so globally unified is now so incredibly diversified. The church assumes a myriad of forms throughout the world, with freedoms it never had under the rule of the Roman system. This is an exciting era in the history of the church, as we have not only seen a multitude of changes take place, there is the promise of future change as well.

But in spite of this sense of freedom and the promise of the future, the church in the West is still not effective. Although there are countless churches of every shape, size and personality, with new types and styles emerging every year, Christians on the whole are not making significant headway in fulfilling the Great Commission. Churches are being planted, but in most contexts—particular the in the West—the number of churches being planted is not even keeping up with the population growth, not to mention the number of churches that are closing. But before we tackle that issue, it would do us well to explore some important issues facing the church, some of which we have inherited from the Roman church.

The Resource Issue

The first issue we will explore concerns resources. For over 1000 years, the institutionalised Roman church emphasised the importance of the church building, a highly organised structure, elaborate hierarchies of leadership, social action programs, and of course the liturgies involved in weekly worship services. Most churches today carry on all these practices, and to maintain such a complex scheme requires a huge investment of man-hours and money week after week. The church as we know it today is a very resource-hungry animal.

We have long assumed that the more organisation, the better the results. But this is not always the case. For example, one afternoon a man was working on his roof and hit his thumb with a hammer, so his wife drove him to the hospital. Inside the waiting room he saw two doors: INJURY and ILLNESS. He went into the room marked injury and saw two more doors: INTERNAL and EXTERNAL and he chose the room for external. There he saw two more doors: MAJOR and MINOR, so he chose minor. Then two more doors: CASH and CREDIT. He went through the credit door and ended up on the street. He got into the car and told his wife, “Honey, that is the most organized place I’ve ever seen, but my thumb still hurts.” Organisation is only a tool; it is not a guarantee for success. As Paul Powell relates, “A cemetery is the most organised place on earth, but there’s no life in it.” While the church has become more and more organised over the past 20 centuries, it has not become more effective. Organisation is not the key to effectiveness, but it does leave a legacy of expense and busyness for everyone involved.

One of the most important resources in the church is time. In the 1980s John Naisbitt predicted that by the 21st century that to the average person, time would become more valuable than money.³ And yet it is staggering to think how many man-hours are spent maintaining the well-oiled machines we have created. Consider the time needed to plan and prepare for worship, practise and rehearse music, attend a myriad of meetings, prepare budgets and financial statements, discuss issues in committees, and maintain the church building. By the end of a typical week, it is no wonder Christians don’t have many meaningful relationships with non-Christians. They simply don’t have time!

The Survival Issue

Another important issue is that of survival. Throughout the western world, it is clear that the majority of churches are not growing. Instead, they are focussed on survival. Why is this the case? Simply consider the resources which we mentioned above. Every church requires some level of resources, and the smaller the church, the more difficult these things are to maintain. Therefore small churches with average resource needs will always find themselves in survival mode until they grow to the point where their level of giving exceeds their expense—the “critical mass” for that church. In *Community of Kindness*, Steve Sjogren suggests that

“with fewer than 200 people, a church will need to fight just to stay alive.... It is inevitable that your attention will be focussed upon simply trying to maintain the basics of church survival.... Almost everything that goes on is a struggle to pull off each week.”⁴

³ John Naisbitt, *Megatrends*.

⁴ Steve Sjogren, *Community of Kindness*, p. 169

Statistics tell us that the average church in Australia has a membership of 69 (49 in Tasmania)⁵ and is not growing, meaning that the average church is in survival mode. When a person is fighting for his life, he isn't thinking about broadening his horizons or expanding his business; he is thinking about how to stay alive. The same seems to hold true for churches.

The Benchwarmer Issue

Another issue concerns the lack of participation of a large percentage of Christians. In the typical church, very few people have a meaningful involvement. It has been said that 20% of the people do 80% of the work. These 20% burn out while the others rust out. Pastors and their wives probably cop it the worst, as they are "expected" to do the ministry of the church. They crash and burn at a phenomenal rate.⁶

Unfortunately the same isn't true for evangelism, because the 20% that are doing all the work don't have time to share their faith; they are too busy keeping up with insider issues. It is a shame that the 80% who aren't using their gifts in the church are not keen to make an impact with their unchurched friends and neighbours. Every week, people leave their church buildings with the potential to be salt and light in their communities, and every Sunday morning the salt simply manages to find its way back into the saltshaker.

The Control Issue

There is another issue concerning the church which we have inherited from our Roman parent: control. In the pre-Constantine world, the church was fuelled by love; afterward it was driven by power.⁷ As the state religion of Rome, and eventually the becoming the political centre of many empires, Christianity exercised a great degree of control. Today, church leaders tend to spend a great deal of time developing policies and guidelines which keep people in line with their expectations. While this may indeed prevent some undesirable behaviours, it does not completely avoid them. More importantly, high levels of control are not in keeping with the freedoms expressed in the teachings of the New Testament. People today, starting with the Baby Boom generation in particular, are becoming increasingly rebellious toward authorities and the control they exert.

Modern business practices tend to reinforce the control issue. In western cultures tend to think in business terms. We exist to make a profit. We don't give anything away, for every commodity has potential profit value. Our idea of success is based on capitalistic thinking meaning we grow bigger, increase our status, and experience economic growth, and always with an edge on our competitors. And of course everything is done in a controlled process, for we fear the wrath of the auditor! But these characteristics of business do not reflect the essence of the teaching of Jesus—in fact, some are blatantly contradictory to the principles He lived and taught.

Is There Any Hope?

The state of the church seems to paint a bleak picture for the future. In spite of many positive advances in recent years, the church in the West continues to experience declining popularity and falling growth trends. It seems the church has little hope. Will it recover from its spiritual depression and once again become meaningful to the masses? Will Christians embrace the emerging paradigms—and do these new paradigms even hold any promise themselves?

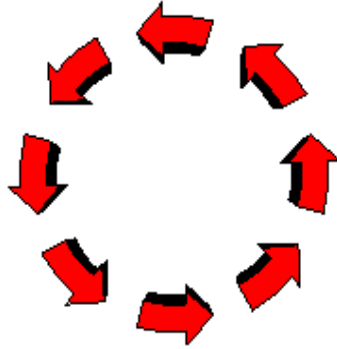
Several years ago I was presented with the following letters along with this graphic, and we were challenged to decipher it:

⁵ National Church Life Survey, 1996

⁶ In our business-oriented culture, Western believers tend to measure their spirituality by how busy they are "for the Lord." It is this busyness that wears them out.

⁷ Alan Hirsch, in a Forge training presentation, 2002.

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The message is profoundly simple: *“If you keep doing what you’ve been doing, you’ll keep getting what you’ve been getting.”* If you want to go to Launceston, you’ve got to stop heading for Port Arthur. If you don’t change where you are going, you’ll end up where you are headed. We can’t expect anything different if we don’t change something. We can’t be effective in a postmodern age if we are still operating in a premodern mindset. If we want to fulfill the Great Commission, both today and in future generations, we *must* change. Nothing will happen until we do.

At present we are heading in the wrong direction, and we need to change our bearings. But before we try to change from where we are going, it would be wise for us to determine the right direction first.

Back to Basics

As mentioned earlier, the church in the West has found itself once again at the fringes of society, losing its influence in the outside world. Over the past 30 years we have witnessed many ingenious ways to remedy this problem. There has been a dramatic shift in our thinking, as we considered first the issues of church growth, then church health, and then an increasing level of sensitivity toward outsiders. Technology has provided us with exciting multimedia tools. We have more and better forms of communication, giving us a multitude of creative ways to share the gospel. There is a plethora of music and musical styles for every type of congregation. Our larger churches are building facilities that rival those of businesses, seated on campuses complete with lakes and manicured meadows, as well as the latest in sporting facilities.

Many churches are indeed growing, and at first glance it appears that we are making a significant difference. But in the West as a whole, are we actually keeping up with the rate of population growth, not to mention the rapid spread of Islam and Eastern religions in our own culture? Perhaps the problem is that we are simply trying to do better what we've always been doing, when instead we need to reinvent the church from the ground up. Edward DeBono reminds us that you can't dig a hole in a different place by digging the same hole deeper.⁸ So perhaps we should stop digging for a while and start thinking about what the church should really be.

One of the most successful science fiction movies of all time is *The Matrix*. In the first episode of this mind-bending trilogy we are told that the real world around us is not real at all; it is in fact a computer-generated illusion. We simply think it is the real world, because that is what we've grown up with. It is the only thing we have really known or experienced, and therefore it is our frame of reference. As the story unfolds, a young man named Neo is encouraged to look beneath the obvious exterior—to “go down the rabbit hole” and discover what is in fact the true reality. The journey that he takes reveals a world quite different from the “matrix” in which he had spent his whole life, and it is his understanding of this “new” reality that enables him to change the course of human history.

As we think about the church and Christian faith, we immediately think of detailed images from our own experiences. In order to grasp the true picture of the faith and life brought into this world by Jesus Christ, we must do as Neo did, and look beyond the images of the church that we have seen and experienced. We must explore the scriptures and look at the New Testament church, primitive and unembellished as it may seem, in order to rediscover this expression of the Kingdom of God as it was intended.

God's Master Plan

In order to rediscover the church, we must go back to the very beginning and take a fresh look at God and His purpose for mankind—God's “master plan” of redemption.

This master plan begins with God's creation of mankind. The garden of Eden is a picture of the harmonious relationship between God and man. But Adam's choice to rebel against God drove a wedge in that relationship, alienating him—and every one of his descendants—from God. It was a flaw he could never repair, and an illness that could never be cured except by God's initiative. Thus the Bible is the story of God's unflinching endeavour at reaching out and bringing man back into relationship with Himself.

In Genesis 12, God took the first major step toward this purpose. Taking Abram aside, He said that not only would he be blessed, but that he in turn would be a blessing to all the nations. For the first time ever, those who were under the curse of sin had the hope of being reunited with God, as this promise to Abram revealed God's missional heartbeat for all mankind.

Through Abraham God would create a nation of people—a dedicated community—that would be able to know and love him, and through whose influence all the peoples of the world could be reunited with Him. Unfortunately Israel proved to be a stubborn and selfish lot, constantly drifting away and then wondering why God seemed so distant. Much of the history of the Old Testament focusses on God's ongoing work of simply keeping Israel on the straight and narrow; with their constant striving with God, they hardly took time to think about their role of being a blessing to the nations.

⁸ Edward DeBono, *Teach Your Child How to Think*, p. 186.

God's concern for the world is evident again at the completion of the first temple. In his prayer at the dedication ceremony, Solomon shared his desire *"that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel."*⁹ As the people of Israel heard this prayer they would be reminded of their role in reaching out to the "foreigner."

Shortly after the schism that divided Israel into northern and southern kingdoms, we see a multitude of prophets sent out to proclaim God's message. While most continued the work of convincing Israel of the importance of serving God, some were sent on redemptive missions to the Gentiles. Jonah is the most notable of such "missionaries," whose task was simply to warn Nineveh of impending doom unless they turn from their sin and trust in God. While most of the prophetic books seem to centre on God's judgement, they ultimately reflect God's heart for all people to be in relationship with Him.

After 400 years of prophetic silence, God announced that He was not finished yet. In fact, the silence was a precursor to His greatest act of redemption. It would be a fulfilment of hundreds of prophecies and predictions going all the way back to Genesis 3.15. Jesus's very incarnational presence, where God *"became flesh and made his dwelling among us,"*¹⁰ revealed the level of God's love for a lost world. He was willing to lay aside the status and the safety of heaven to connect with us on our level and on our turf.

Jesus made it clear that God's redemptive heartbeat was to reconcile not only Israel, but *all* people, to Himself. While his ministry focussed on the Jews, Jesus' concern was by no means limited to them. The words "world" and "whosoever" in John 3.16 certainly include more than that house of Israel. He said that the gospel would be preached *"in the whole world as a testimony to all nations . . ."*¹¹ His parable of the wedding feast in Luke 14.16-24 reveals that "there is still room" at God's table. Not only is God concerned for those on the outside, He is deeply moved by their lostness. The story of the prodigal son is a reminder to Israel that they, like the older son, must be prepared for God's apparent "favour" toward those on the outside who have for so long been estranged from Him.

While the casting out of the moneychangers in Mark 11:15-17 is a bit disturbing for many, it reinforces God's heartfelt concern for those on the outside. Jesus was passionately angry toward the moneychangers because their selfish greed was preventing the Gentiles from connecting with God. He reminded them that they were violating an important missional initiative expressed by Isaiah:

*"And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him . . . these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."*¹²

God has never given up on reaching all people, giving them "a fair go" at knowing Him as Adam knew Him in the garden. Even now, God's redemptive purpose is still proclaimed in the longevity of the world's history, as He is *"patient . . . not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."*¹³

The Church Redefined

Looking at the big picture, we see God's grand plan and feel His heartbeat for people. Through the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, that plan was never realised. Jesus entered the scene as One who would bring God's plan to fulfilment. But a vital part of His plan involved a new agency which was created just days after Jesus left the earth. This is the church, an expression of the Kingdom of God, which would be God's primary means for finally getting the message out to the world.

But in order to fully understand the church as God meant it to be, we cannot look through the spectacles of history. We need to give ourselves permission to forget what we know about church and start again from scratch. Let's look at some key components of the New Testament church.

⁹ 1Ki 8:43b

¹⁰ John 1.14

¹¹ Matthew 24:14

¹² Isaiah 56:6-7

¹³ 2 Peter 3.9

Mission

As we read through both the Old and New Testaments, we clearly see God's roles as pastor, leader, and guide, nurturing and caring for His people. But we must never forget His ultimate purpose of reconciling man to Himself. God is in the strongest sense a missionary God. Likewise, the church is first and foremost missionary because it primarily "the instrument of God's mission."¹⁴ It was never designed to exist for itself, but to be driven by God's very heart to reach those on the outside. William Temple has aptly stated that "the Christian church is the one organisation in the world that exists purely for the benefit of its non-members."

While fellowship is vitally important, any organisation quickly grows stale when its purpose is inwardly focussed. Martin Luther made it clear that "the church must be profane. It must move out of the temple and into the world. Christians must embrace the world as the theatre of God's redemptive activity." The early church had a "go and tell" rather than "come and see" mentality. It was incarnational rather than attractional, and churches genuinely founded on missional DNA will be more likely to grow than those who are focussed on their own survival.

Kingdom

During his brief stay on earth Jesus spent a lot of time introducing the concept of the Kingdom of God. This is essentially God's reign and rule on earth—taking on the leadership of His people once again. While some interpret the church as the Kingdom of God, it is in reality just a tangible expression of it. To fully comprehend the Kingdom of God may be difficult, but it is an essential key to understanding what the church was intended to be.

Community

From the very beginning it is evident that God values community. In the Garden of Eden, God instituted marriage and created to family. In establishing the nation of Israel, God emphasised the importance of a "people" rather than just a bunch of individuals who relate to Him one on one.

We see throughout the New Testament that God continues to value a deepening sense of community or *koinonia* where we become "*fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.*"¹⁵ This is the basis for which the church was created, a "people" who share a common faith, function, and future. Healthy community means getting beyond the barrier of superficiality to a point where "masks come off, conversations get deep, hearts get vulnerable, lives are shared, accountability is invited, and tenderness flows."¹⁶

Stewardship

As mentioned before, church people today tend to spend a large percentage of their time doing "ministry" in the form of maintaining the programs we have created for ourselves. We spend hours hatching up new, elaborate strategies for reaching people but rarely invest the time needed to actually touch people's lives. People, not programs, are the conduits of God's grace. Yet we operate as if the reverse were true, and therefore our most precious resources are tend to get swallowed up in maintenance.

The New Testament church had very limited resources, yet they used them wisely. Instead of focussing a lot of time and energy on themselves and their programs, the believers looked after the poor and needy among them. In essence they were extending to others the compassion that continually highlighted Jesus' ministry.

Leadership

The five-fold ministry of gifted leaders mentioned in Ephesians 4.11-13 is often overlooked or simply regarded as irrelevant for our day. But the purpose of these leaders is to bring the body of Christ to maturity. Maturity is necessary for fruit bearing and reproduction, and therefore we would be wise to align our thinking with this biblical paradigm of leadership.

Apostles initiate, inspire, and organise. They are entrepreneurs. Church planters are apostolic in nature and gifting.

¹⁴ Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey, *Church Next*, p. 55.

¹⁵ Ephesians 2.19b. Cf. also 1 Peter 2.9.

¹⁶ Lynne & Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995, p. 159

Prophets are those who speak to the people on behalf of God.¹⁷ They are gifted in seeing and communicating God's vision. They are good communicators because they have their hand on the pulse of culture, such as the men of Issachar "who understood the times and knew what Israel should do."¹⁸

Evangelists are particularly adept at leading people to faith in Christ and inspire others to get involved in sharing their faith.

Pastors are those who can readily identify people's emotional and spiritual needs and have the ability and the patience to meet those needs.

Teachers impart sound biblical knowledge for the purpose of building Christian character in others.

Spirituality

The church of the New Testament age had a rich spirituality. This is largely based on the fact that the lives of the believers were not compartmentalised. For example, there are virtually no commands in scripture dictating that people meet for worship on Sunday mornings—or even at the same time or place each week. Sunday is not a magical day.¹⁹ The key principle here is that believers met regularly.²⁰ The essence of New Testament spirituality is the integration of faith and life. Spirituality was not just expressed in devotion once a day or once a week; it was an expression of one's entire being all the time.

God does not work in the predictable, logical ways of men. The paradox of the church is that we must grow smaller in order to grow larger . . . we must go backward in order to go forward . . . we must become weak in order to become strong. Not until we understand God's "upside-down" logic will we be able to effectively fulfill the Great Commission.

An Explosion of Growth

Jesus concluded His ministry by inviting His followers to participate in fulfilling God's plan to reach all people. All four gospels, as well as Acts, contain this Great Commission. Shortly after the Resurrection and ascension of Jesus, God sent the promised Holy Spirit to provide the power that believers needed to carry on Jesus' work in the world. God's desire for Israel was that His people have intimacy with God, community with one another, and influence with the world. While this was only partially fulfilled in the Old Testament, it was being fully realised in the early church. Fuelled by the Holy Spirit—God's very presence inside every believer—the church was driven by this mission. It would become the channel through which the world would finally hear the Good News which Israel had failed to take to the ends of the earth.

The birth of the church marked the beginning of an explosive movement throughout the known world. We know from history that this movement did not resemble the church as we know it today. First of all, the church was a movement of people without reference to physical structures. The Spirit of God was now set free, and people did not have to go to a temple to find Him. The church had no connection with buildings or structures dedicated for the practise of faith.

The church was also a grassroots movement impacting the lives of the common man. Because it was not based in a building or a geographical centre, it could spread naturally from person to person, from town to town, and from nation to nation. It was not limited to the elite, or to a specific class or race of people. It was for all people of all kinds. For the first time in history anyone, anywhere, could come to God because in a real sense, God came to them.

The church was a subversive movement. Rome had little toleration for religious expression that did not conform to their own, particularly their convictions concerning the deity of the emperor. For this reason the church was marginalised and nearly invisible, yet never gave in to the status quo. Few churches had complete freedom to practice their faith openly, but this did not prevent them from practising their faith in secret. Believers gathered in the obscurity of caves and catacombs in spite of the illegal status of their faith. It continued to flow against the tide of Roman rule.

¹⁷ On the other hand, the priest was one who spoke to God on behalf of the people.

¹⁸ 1 Chronicles 12.32

¹⁹ Saturday is actually the "seventh day" which we are to keep holy, yet it is probably the most profane day of the week for Christians today! If we really want to be spiritual, we should follow the example of the church in Jerusalem, which met *every* day, not just Sunday (Acts 2.46-47; 3.2; 16.5).

²⁰ Cf. Hebrews 10.25

The church was a persecuted movement. While the early church was a dynamic force empowered by God, it was not without severe opposition. Jesus, the Epistles, and especially the book of Revelation, all gave early believers abundant warnings that their faith would attract persecution. The evidence of persecution found in the New Testament, as well as in the writings of the early church fathers, is overwhelming. From the beginning, Christianity was persecuted by the Jews. During the reign of certain emperors such as Nero, Domitian and Marcus Aurelius—all of whom despised Christianity—countless believers died an agonizing death. Hebrews 11 had given just a glimpse into the high cost of faith in Jesus Christ.

The result of this movement is nothing short of phenomenal. In spite of the barriers, Christian faith had spread throughout much of the civilised world within a century. Once it was started, it could not be stopped.

The Challenge of Church Planting Today

In its first 300 years Christianity penetrated the known world through a dynamic movement driven by the Holy Spirit. This outward movement was accomplished through the starting of new churches in a rather random, uncontrolled manner. When Constantine legalised Christianity, it became housed in the walls of church buildings; its spread continued, but in an increasingly controlled fashion. Being at the centre of society, the church could spread at will, and it did just that for hundreds of years. Today, church planting continues to be the primary means of spreading the influence of the Christian faith.

Why Plant Churches?

The Great Commission urges us to invite people everywhere to become followers of Jesus. From our understanding of the New Testament, we start with the assumption that every believer should be part of a church. Therefore it follows that in order to reach and nurture people in the faith, we must have enough churches.

Church planting also holds the promise of continually renewing the church. Newly planted churches offer vibrant communities of faith that are not restricted by the limitations and the “baggage” of older churches. Personally, I have worked in many churches and have found that it is very difficult to change anything that has been established. Starting new churches is hard work, but it takes less effort to plant a new one than it does to transition an old one into a mode of growth and vitality.

There are other important benefits to planting new churches. Here are just a few:

- ~ Church planting enables us to provide new styles, meaning we can reach more people.
- ~ Church planting allows us to reach people in geographical areas where there is no meaningful level of Christian witness.
- ~ Church planting allow us to reach cultural subgroups and ethnic groups.
- ~ New churches tend to grow faster and win more people per capita than established churches.

Some Practical Scenarios

If we want to get serious about reaching Tasmania with the good news of Jesus Christ, it seems that church planting holds a lot of promise. But before we jump to any conclusions, let’s tease out this idea and look at a few practical scenarios to see what resources are necessary to achieve our goal.

Scenario One

The population of Tasmania is about 458,000. Eighty percent of our residents have no meaningful involvement in a church,²¹ meaning 366,400 are unchurched. Since the existing churches are not growing significantly, and new churches tend to grow faster and win more people, let’s assume we will reach Tasmania through new churches. We could do this by planting 1,000 churches with 400 people in each church. Using traditional church planting methods, we would need 1,000 church planters, 1,000 sponsor churches, 1,000 buildings, and LOTS of money.

That’s quite a high price to pay, but let’s imagine we have these resources on hand. How long would this take? At our present rate of 7 new churches in the past 30 years—one every 4 years—it would take 5,000 years! If we increase that to 1 plant per year

²¹ According to the 1996 National Church Life Survey, 20% of people say they attend church once a month or more. In reality, only about half of this 20% is likely to have a meaningful involvement in their church even though they attend once a month or more.

it would still take 1,000 years. Accelerating to 10 plants per year it would still take 100 years. We don't have that kind of time, so we need to try again.

Scenario Two

Let's imagine we wanted to evangelise Tasmania in the next 25 years. We would have to plant churches at the rate of 40 plants per year, which means we would have to deploy 40 church planters each year. Assuming a salary of \$30,000 for the church planter, it would cost \$1.2 million per year, for a total salary expenditure of \$40 million over the 25 years. Remember, that doesn't include all the other costs in starting a conventional church. The worst news of all is that each of these churches would have to grow to 400 in their congregations to reach our goal.

See any problems with this? There are very few churches in Australia with over 400 in attendance. Large churches are not the norm. No one has that kind of money, even for *one year* of church planting. And finally, this scenario is unrealistic for Tasmania because large churches like this would never reach our rural areas.

Scenario Three

Scenario One and Two aren't all that promising, so let's look at another option. This time we'll lower our expectations on church size and start churches that will grow to a mere 50 (the bare minimum needed to pay a poorly supported full time pastor). This would require 8,000 churches to do the job. Again, using traditional church planting methods, we would need 8,000 church planters, 8,000 sponsor churches, 8,000 buildings, and *eight times as much money* as we needed in Scenario Two!

Problems with Conventional Church Planting

As we have just seen, church planting requires large amounts of money and a myriad of trained church planters. We don't have even a fraction of either of these precious resources, so it looks like church planting is not a good option for reaching Tasmania for Christ. To add insult to injury, the whole process of church planting is fraught with problems. Here are just a few of the difficulties with church planting in its conventional form:

Declining Vision. Although most start out with a strong sense of mission, new churches tend to quickly become preoccupied with finding a building, developing a constitution, and settling down to some comfortable routines. When this happens their growth tends to level out, and in many cases it never recovers.

Rural Population. The rural nature of Australia outside of the seven capital cities creates a difficult challenge. Many towns where churches are needed do not provide much hope of reaching the critical mass needed to support a full-featured church.

Leadership. Starting a church is a formidable task requiring a unique type of leader with a high level of gifting, leadership, and patience.

Burnout. Church planting is a high-stress job and has ruined many a man. As with all kinds of missions, lives are disrupted and families are displaced. The high attrition rate among church planters reminds us that discouragement and defeat are a high price to pay.

Aggressive Optimism. Sometimes planters become overly enthusiastic with the idea that they will "take their city by storm," forgetting that storms always leave some sort of destruction in their wake. An aggressive approach to creating a new religious body in the neighbourhood will only confirm people's preconceptions of the church and can do more damage than good in the long run.

Marketing. Advertising is one of the primary tools used to start new churches, and is used to attract those who will become the core of the new church. But what is important is *who* is being attracted: people with church backgrounds, burned out or disgruntled members of other churches, and church dropouts. These people tend to bring along "baggage" from previous church experiences. They also tend to expect more attention and care, so leaders tend to focus more on their needs and less on mission. Perhaps we could say, "You get what you fish for."

More could be said about the problems and dangers associated with church planting. But this doesn't mean church planting is bad. It simply means that we need to re-think the process. After all, we reap what we sow, therefore it follows that if we want effective churches we will have to be more keenly aware of what we're planting.

CPMs: A Way Forward?

Over the past 20 years we have begun to see an interesting phenomenon. The church is blossoming once again, spreading like wildfire, like it did in its pre-Constantine days. These church planting movements, or CPMs, are occurring not in the West, but in distant, obscure places like Cambodia, India, and Latin America. Churches are being planted spontaneously, which quickly give birth to more churches. Now perhaps it's time for us to start learning from our third world brothers and sisters.

A CPM is defined as “a rapid and exponential increase of indigenous churches planting churches within a given people group or population segment.”²² But a CPM is not a machine, nor is it a formula. It is the result of natural, spontaneous growth and reproduction that takes place when churches possess the right qualities and are presented with the right conditions. And interestingly enough, these conditions are remarkably similar to those of the first century church. Let's examine some of the key characteristics of church planting movements.

Kingdom Focussed

CPMs are not denomination centred. They usually involve many denominations, and no one denomination starts them or controls them. CPM churches have very loose affiliations with any denominational body, but have strong alliances with one another.²³ To nurture such a movement is a true move toward Kingdom building.

Relational

CPM churches are highly relational in nature, not program based. These churches readily incorporate non-believers. They don't wait until people “qualify” to become part of the church, since the churches are not formalised. This allows them to become part of the building of community within the group and better prepares them for interaction and involvement when they become believers. CPM strategists have found that it is easier to group people and then win them, than it is to win people and then to try to get them into a church.

CPM churches take more time to interact with people on a grassroots level than conventional churches. The people spend more time with others in everyday life situations, over meals, at local watering holes, and in their homes. Consequently in CPM churches there is a higher premium on acceptance and belonging. There is greater participation by everyone, both giving and receiving.

Simple

Simple, no frills, grassroots, basic, foundational, plain, open, organic, minimal, uncomplicated, elementary. These are all words that describe CPM churches. Simple means easy to start and easy to run, meaning more people can do it. Simple also means easier to reproduce, which is an important key to the success of a CPM.

CPM churches avoid anything that creates the burden of maintenance: buildings, programs, high levels of structure, and so forth. This minimises “business” and allows churches to maximise their time in missional activities. Complex structures introduce the excess baggage of maintenance, meaning that there will be a higher cost in starting and maintaining churches. It also means more things can go wrong. Complex churches also requires more gifted leaders. The more complex an organisation, the greater giftedness needed to run it. Full featured churches require the skills and talents of a few remarkable people, and preparing such leaders demands years of training and preparation.

Complexity is not desirable in churches because anything complex tends to confuse people. Outsiders must learn the ropes of our Christian culture before they can feel like they truly belong. Simple churches streamline the assimilation process by avoiding unnecessary clutter.

Small and Inexpensive

In our first world context we assume bigger is better. Businesses grow larger and larger in order to multiply their profits, and in the process create more jobs and increase their sustainability and longevity. But bigger is not always better. Think about a

²² David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, p.7

²³William Easum calls this a quasi-denomination.

hive of honeybees, for example: 50,000 or more tiny insects working together feverishly to explore the countryside for nectar to make their honey. Would it be better to have one huge bee to do the work? If this were the case, I can guarantee we would have fewer beekeepers!

With churches, bigger is not always better. In fact, church planting movements universally occur only where churches are small in size. Rarely do large churches play a meaningful part in such movements. Most CPM churches are small, sometimes because of persecution but usually because they meet in homes which are readily available. This “unintentional” smallness is actually one of the important keys to their growth. Because they are small, they do not have the bells and whistles that accompany larger churches, but this is their saving grace. Consider these important benefits to being small rather than large:

- T Small groups can work in any size community including rural areas.** Large churches are only sustainable in larger populated areas.
- T Small groups tend to place a much higher emphasis on people than on programs,** therefore relational interaction is increased.
- T Small groups are immediately successful.** This means less chance of discouragement from not being able to start something big.
- T Small groups are cheap to operate** as they have no overhead and few, if any, operating costs. This means financial risks are minimised.
- T Small groups have fewer maintenance issues,** therefore they do not demand lots of time for upkeep.
- T Small churches provide entry level leadership** meaning a higher percentage of people get involved.
- T Small groups are infinitely expandable** because there are no architectural barriers to growth.
- T Small groups can meet anywhere, any time.** They are far more flexible and forgiving than larger groups, adding a personal touch which enhances relationships.
- T Small groups provide a selection of styles** and can address people at various levels of faith better than one larger group.
- T Small groups are more comfortable for most people.** It is generally easier to get a non-Christian friend into your home than into a church building.
- T Small groups have a low profile.** We might think that less visibility in the community would not be a good thing. But a low profile makes churches less intimidating for non-Christians “checking out” Christianity, less threatening to larger churches, and less likely to incur any kind of resistance that often comes with high visibility—especially in areas of religious intolerance.

Creative

Diversity is vital in church planting because it takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people. A CPM does not lock anyone into doing church a certain way. Mark 4.26-29 speaks of the *act* of sowing, not the *methodology* of sowing; this leaves room for tremendous variety. Every CPM church will be different, because it will fit its cultural surroundings and the gifting of the people in it, and of course the gifting and personality given to it by those who lead it.²⁴ Eric Hoffer has said, “When people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other.” CPM churches resist the copycat tendency.

²⁴ In his essay entitled “*Three Things to Know About the Emerging Church*,” Dan Kimball suggests that the emerging church will produce thousands of models because churches will no longer be looking for something to imitate.

Indigenous

CPM growth is indigenous, not exogenous.²⁵ These churches are started and led by local people. Almost universally, a movement is stifled by the influence of outsiders, including foreign missionaries.

Unpaid Leaders

In most CPMs, church planters and senior leaders in churches are unpaid. When a church uses unpaid leaders, they can rise rapidly to leadership and the church is not saddled with financial baggage. This is a practical move, as small churches can't afford to pay a pastor. When larger churches hire a pastor, they expect him to perform the bulk of the ministry. CPM churches avoid this trap by virtue of their smallness, and by having a flatter structure that encourages everyone to get involved.

Natural Growth

Living things do not grow as a result of being forced. They grow naturally if the conditions are right. This is the biotic principle,²⁶ which is God's natural life force at work. The same is true for churches. Mark 4:26-29 says that "seed sprouts and grows although he (the sower) doesn't know how." The key to a CPM is not methodology, but faithfulness in sowing the seed of the gospel (Cf. also 2 Cor. 9:6 and Gal. 6:9). When the seed is sown, some of it will grow. The biotic principle is all about letting growth happen naturally, if we provide the right conditions.

We have been taught from an early age that God created everything around us. In a sense this is not true of any plant or animal that exists today. God created living things during the initial act of creation, and then uttered the famous words, "Be fruitful and multiply." Having said that, He no longer had to create. All living things were instilled with God's miraculous life force, and every living thing around us at this very moment is here as a result of obedience to His command to reproduce. For centuries we have tried to "create" every individual church, one by one. But CPM churches have learned a valuable lesson from our Creator God: they plant churches that will "be fruitful and multiply" naturally.

Starting new churches is a natural, biblical response to the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, and is one solid indicator of spiritual maturity and health. Rick Warren has said that "the primary characteristic of biological maturity is the ability to reproduce.... The mark of a truly mature church is that it has babies. It starts other churches."²⁷ It is interesting to note that in Cambodia, churches planted by other churches tend to be the most reproducible, whereas those started by funded church planters are not.²⁸ This finding seemingly violates the conventional "intentional church planting" rule, but it serves to remind us that a CPM is the result of a natural, biotic function which only God can do.

Exponential Growth

CPMs are characterised by rapid growth which outstrips population growth. It is exponential growth, not the incremental "one by one" growth of conventional church planting. One important key to this kind of growth is the strong emphasis on multiplication. New believers are urged to start new churches instead of joining older, existing churches.²⁹ Congregations that embrace a CPM vision multiply rapidly, usually within months or even weeks of their own birth. Like strawberries that quickly send out rhizomes that become new strawberry plants, CPM churches spontaneously start new congregations whenever they have an opportunity.

CPM churches avoid the things that slow down churches:

- T** They avoid maintenance introduced by complex structures, policies, and buildings.

²⁵ Exogenous means driven by outside influences such as missionaries or transient workers, as opposed to indigenous, which means the work is directed by the local people.

²⁶ This term is coined by Christian A. Schwarz in *Natural Church Development*.

²⁷ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, p. 180-181

²⁸ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, p. 30

²⁹ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, p. 38

- T** They avoid becoming control freaks, where everything has to be managed perfectly. Racing legend Mario Andretti once said, “If you have complete control of your car, you’re not driving fast enough!” Michael Frost reminds us that we need to get used to the “mess” in the emerging missional church.³⁰
- T** They help people focus on relational progress. They emphasise community rather than performance. Paul Powell rightly challenges us to decide whether we want to operate a showboat or a lifeboat.
- T** They focus on God’s purposes rather than expectations based on the views or heritage of others.
- T** They are satisfied with small gatherings. When a “large” churches has small turnouts, it tends to create anxiety and then complacency.
- T** They are outward focussed (evangelism) rather than inward focussed (fellowship, which is often just “me-ship”).

Why have a vision for a church planting movement? Simply said, it gives us the greatest potential for reaching people quickly, in the largest possible numbers, with an ongoing hope of the future growth and vitality of the church. This is not to say every church will be a permanent fixture, as every church has its season. But the key is the legacy of church planting, ensuring that future generations of churches will continue to emerge.

Images of a CPM Church

What do cane toads, gorse, and black holes all have in common? They are notorious for their tendency to be virtually unstoppable. None of these things would be viewed with such disdain if that were not the case. Back in the 70s when I was living on the farm, we had an acute infestation of Johnson Grass in one of our cornfields. This tall, stately relative of corn looks harmless. But it is nearly impossible to control, as it has an extensive root system that can extend for many metres underground. Simply cutting down the stalk will not control it, because the roots simply keep growing invisibly in every direction—making it virtually unstoppable. When the church has the right DNA and is given the right growing conditions it, too, will be unstoppable. This is the essence of a church planting movement.

To fully embrace the concept of a CPM church, there are a number of images that help us understand the dynamics at work. Consider these:

A CPM church is more like a river than a lake. A lake is large and capacious, but static and relatively safe. A river is constantly changing and flowing; it can be rough and dangerous, particularly in stormy weather.

A CPM church is more like a horse than a mule. Mules are strong, but they are slow, stubborn, and sterile. Horses are fast, attentive, trainable, and cooperative. Most important of all, they have the ability to reproduce.

A CPM church is more like a rabbit than an elephant. Elephants produce one young every 3 years, and their offspring take a long time to reach maturity. Rabbits reproduce at a fantastic rate, bearing litters several times a year, and their young reach maturity quickly. The short gestation period of a CPM church allows it to reproduce many times in its lifetime.

A CPM church is more like a lizard than a frog. A frog waits complacently on a lily pad, waiting for its prey to come to it. A lizard is active, quick, and constantly in pursuit of its prey. “Lizard churches penetrate the homes of the lost with evangelistic Bible studies rather than requiring the lost to come to their churches. They are willing to change their colours, expend enormous energy, even lose their tails if necessary in order to bring the lost into the family of God.”³¹

A CPM church is more like art than science. Science is based on logic and can be tested and evaluated objectively; science is relatively static, as facts do not change. Art on the other hand is dynamic and expressive. It evokes emotion and varies with culture and individuality, thus taking on many forms and styles. CPM churches share these expressive qualities.

³⁰ Michael Frost, in a Forge Tasmania seminar 5 April 2003.

³¹ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, p. 52

A CPM church is more like a web page than a book. Books are solid, tangible, linear, complete and unchangeable, and can be rather expensive. Web pages are less tangible but more accessible by the masses. They are liquid in nature, continually evolving and expanding—sometimes changing on a daily basis. They are not linear, but instead use hyperlinks that can take the user anywhere he needs to go. A web page is usually free to access, but we must remember that it might not be there tomorrow.

Strategic Plan

The CPM church looks inviting and promising. Before embarking on a journey to cultivate a CPM in Tasmania, it would do us well to study our cultural scene and try to understand what we are up against, and whether or not this type of church is an option for our cultural context.

The Australian Scene

In Australia, about 20% of the population say they attend church once a month or more.³² That may sound good compared to many European countries where that number may be less than 5 percent. But we must ask, what about the other four-fifths of our population? A cursory look at the statistics of Baptist churches in any state will reveal that we are not growing, therefore we are not reaching the unchurched at any appreciable rate.³³ Membership and attendance statistics among Tasmanian Baptist churches are basically flat-line. In 2001, there was one baptism for every 49 church members. While evangelism is indeed happening, it seems to be happening at a minimal pace among the vast majority of churches.

Church plants are few and far between. In the past 30 years, Baptists in Tasmania started seven congregations.³⁴ This amounts to an average of one church being planted every 4 years. Presently, Baptists comprise only one half of one percent of the Tasmania's population.

Australians have become highly suspicious and untrusting of any form of organised religion. I have found that many people have some past relationship with a church. Census reports indicate that about 3 out of 4 Australians claim some connection with religious faith—by far mostly Christian faith—yet just a fraction of these have any meaningful involvement in a local church. Most have been embarrassed, burned, switched off, or just left out somewhere along the way. They have “been there and done that” and aren't interested in doing it again.

Having said all this, one might think that any kind of church planting is futile. But the problems we are facing are actually opportunities in disguise. The fact that 80% of the population have no meaningful involvement in church should energise rather than discourage us. Even though we are surrounded by people who are sceptical of what the church has to offer, as many as 90% believe in God. They have found that “you can't simply think God out of existence, because religious feelings rise more from experience than thought.”³⁵ Deep down inside, many Australians want to be able to sort out their beliefs and convictions. Ironically, they don't see the conventional church as an option for exploring faith. Recently, a friend said to me, “I don't have a church I would take my non-Christian friends to . . . but I have plenty of friends who talk faith issues with me.” People may be anti-church, but for the most part they are not anti-God. There is indeed a door of opportunity.

Let's go back now and think about the CPM church. A quick look at the likes and dislikes of Australians will show that CPM churches actually fit our culture far better than conventional ones.

Small vs. Large. Many of our churches in Tasmania are small in number, yet most of them operate as “large” churches.³⁶ The fact that we live in a largely rural state should already suggest that smaller churches would fit our context better. At a

³² National Church Life Survey, 1996.

³³ Dale Stephenson, pastor of Mornington Baptist Church, reports that among Victoria's 176 churches last year, 92% baptised only 1.4 people.

³⁴ Claremont (1977), Eastern Shore (1977), Newnham (1989), Clarence (1997), Westbury (1998), New Directions (started 1994), and New Beginnings (started 1996).

³⁵ Andrew Newberg, University of Pennsylvania. Quoted in Reader's Digest, Feb 2002.

³⁶ Statistics from 2001 reveal that twelve of our Baptist churches had a membership of less than 40, representing more than a third of our churches; nine of these churches were based in a building of their own.

meeting of our Baptist Youth Task Force last year, we discussed at length the issue of size in relation to youth ministry, and we came to the conclusion that smaller is better.³⁷

Simple vs. Full-Featured. The typical Australian tends to prefer informality and simplicity over the formal and complex. In the church scene, simplicity can minimise or eliminate business issues which means more time can be spent in meaningful relationships.³⁸

Lay Led vs. Paid Staff. In Tasmania, conventional church planting is seriously hindered by our limited funds. To think of supporting just one church planter is out of the question. Even many churches that are well established struggle to pay a decent wage for one pastor.

Belonging vs. Joining. Australians in this generation tend resist the idea of joining organisations including the church. Ironically, they strongly desire a place where they can belong and be loved. They prefer an informal commitment on their terms rather than the formal commitment to membership that we have valued for so long.

Word of Mouth vs. Advertising. Traditionally, churches tend to seek a high profile in the community through advertising and signage. While advertising does work, it has several drawbacks:

- ~ it is expensive
- ~ it is impersonal; that is, you get people who don't already have some meaningful relationship with someone in the church
- ~ it tends to attract only certain types of people—usually those who have church experience, often with unresolved issues
- ~ if what you offer doesn't live up to what is advertised, you will lose credibility

CPM churches are low profile churches which don't rely on advertising. Instead they tend to capitalise on word-of-mouth through already-established friendship links. While the church has tended to be geographically oriented,³⁹ more churches need to focus on relational and cultural affinities.

Journey vs. Event. Traditional evangelical theology places a high premium on the conversion experience. A more sound New Testament view is that evangelism is part of the process of discipleship, not just a single event in one's life. Australians don't respond to a "quick fix" mentality as Americans tend to do. They are cautious and suspicious and are not apt to make major decisions quickly (perhaps that is why telemarketing is not practised widely here). They respect having the time and space needed to process what they are hearing, and consider their commitments carefully.

Believers often emphasise the urgency of the gospel in evangelism, but unfortunately this often translates into pressure. We would do well to trust that the Bible will provide the evidence people need to put their faith in God, and allow the Holy Spirit to do the convicting. Our job is to communicate God's word in their heart language, and through the context of genuine relationships, let them discover and experience God for themselves. To do that will require a great deal of gentleness, humility, and patience.

Interacting vs. Listening. One of the hallmarks of Generation X is the need for experience rather than knowledge. Most people today don't prefer monologues, and Australians are no exception. They want to interact, disagree, and speak their mind. They want to experience life and spirituality, not just learn about it.

³⁷ It is interesting to note that one key to the success of Willow Creek Community Church is its imposing size. Sceptics can come into such a church and remain anonymous for months if they wish. But the fact that no church in Tasmania exceeds 1,000 in number, anonymity is not a viable option for reaching sceptics here.

³⁸ Unless there is unanimous agreement, business in churches—particularly voting—can have a divisive effect on the fellowship. A by-product of simplifying ministry is that voting is no longer a primary issue. After all, without a building, property, paid staff, programs, and structures in place, what is there to vote on?

³⁹ Note the parish mentality of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, which comprise about half of the population's religious allegiance.

Relational vs. Programmatic. Most conventional churches, especially larger ones, tend to have their plates full of programs. These can produce effective results, but not without a great expenditure of time, effort, and money.

Australians are highly relational people. They crave friendship, value family life, and enjoy fun times. They seek to relate with others in enjoyable, comfortable environments such as barbecues, meals, and of course the local pub. They like to celebrate special events and love their holidays—hence the country’s moniker “the land of the long weekend.”

The church that expects to have an impact in Australian culture will realise that people here want to be valued as real people—as subjects, not objects. To reach them will require less “in-your-face” confrontation and more “in-your-shoes” compassion.

Any church which can truly put these principles into place will stand a good chance of having at least some measure of influence on those who have tended to reject the conventional expression of Christianity. Amazingly, the CPM churches of the Third World are already in tune with these key cultural principles in our own country.

A Step By Step Plan

For years Australian churches have been observing and learning from churches in other countries, particularly the UK and the US. Many pastors have used these foreign models out of the box, or at least tried to discover the principles that make them work. The results have been successful in some instances, but largely these models have not proven to be effective nor easily transferrable.

Instead of copying models, we would be wise to look at the principles that gave the New Testament church its explosive potential, and apply these principles to our local context here in Tasmania. The strategy that will work best in Australia will be conceived here by Australians. It must be indigenous.

It is vital that we remember that we can’t make a CPM occur any more than we can make a tree bear fruit. But we can provide the right ingredients and remove the barriers to growth. As a starting point, let us propose a strategic timeline for nurturing a CPM:

Conduct a Baseline Study. This is a study to measure local churches and their growth trends. This is done primarily to enable us to evaluate our progress at later intervals. Factors to measure would include the total number of churches, participants (members and attenders), leaders and their primary roles, baptisms, specialised ministries in the community, and some indication of the level of morale in the churches.

Conduct a People Study. This is a study to identify the people we want to reach. Census information, maps, and demographic data is a good starting point. Tasmania has hundreds of cultural and geographical subgroups, so ultimately the bulk of this study will be conducted by local church planters. One important role of the strategists will be to facilitate such a study by providing some of the resources needed.

Share the Basic Vision Broadly. We need to share the vision and this strategic timeline to our churches. However it should not be given with too much detail. We can’t expect people in our churches to buy into this sort of plan quickly, nor is it vital that they do. But they do need to know the general direction we are taking.

Build a Prayer Network. Prayer is a basic key to nurturing a church planting movement. In many CPM environments, prayer walking is used to get people praying and to help them see the areas (both geographic and sociographic) where churches can be planted.⁴⁰

Starting churches is not the work of a church planter, nor of a denomination. It is the work of God Himself, who alone can draw people unto Himself and radically change lives. Paul said, “*It is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*”⁴¹ Therefore, anything we aspire to do in the area of church planting must be saturated in prayer—complete dependence on God to do what only He can do.

⁴⁰ Another creative option could be called “prayer touring” which would use a car, bus, or other form of motorised transport. This would allow many people to participate, and cover a geographically large area.

⁴¹ Philippians 2:13, NASB.

Utilise “Cream Extractors” to Identify Potential Leaders. When raw milk is allowed to sit undisturbed, the cream will rise to the top. A cream extractor will hasten this process. In like manner, information seminars and training events related to church planting will cause certain people to rise to the surface, like the cream that rises to the top of milk. More often than not, these will be people with a passion for mission and a longing to serve outside the confines of their local church setting.

Conduct Local Powwows with Potential Leaders. This is the starting point for networking those who have similar passion for starting churches. It is an important time for organising people into future training and networking schemes.

Identify Leaders. From among those who are passionate about our vision, we must somehow identify those who are both willing and qualified to be our inaugural leaders.⁴² It is important to note that the primary leader in the conventional church tends to be the pastor-teacher. Effective church planting requires the skills of apostles, prophets, and evangelists as well, and it is imperative that we identify these in our assessment.⁴³

Establish a Time Frame. Momentum is one of the most important dynamics in CPM churches. While we don’t want to rush the process or use unnatural pressure to create a movement, we also don’t want to drag our feet. Most importantly the leader must get “relational” as soon as possible. It is a good idea to place some sort of time constraints on the formation of new groups and keep the process in motion.

Conduct Blitz Training. Once leaders are identified and assessed, they must be trained. Initial training should be intense and brief, with the goal of getting people “on the ground” as soon as possible. It is at this time that a coach or mentor be identified for every leader—without exception (everyone should *have* a mentor and *be* a mentor).

Turn Leaders Loose. After the initial training is completed we need to get people involved in some meaningful way with a local people group. Their first assignment would involve balancing their time between social interaction and the “people study” mentioned above.

Network and Mentor Leaders. One of the most important steps in leadership development is the ongoing networking and nurturing of leaders. Once leaders have been initially turned loose, there needs to be an initial gathering and debriefing time. Regular follow-up meetings with leaders would be scheduled to reflect on their experiences and share with others.⁴⁴

Provide Ongoing Training. The purpose of the initial training session is to get leaders oriented to a radically new style of ministry. But that is only the starting point. Every leader must understand the necessity of their ongoing personal development. FORGE provides one of the best means of on-the-field training in the Australian context.

Evaluate. This is a step that must be repeated often, in order to measure what we are doing and how it is working. We must measure everything we do in light of our CPM end vision. Nothing else really matters!

Change will take time. Jesus spent 3 years with 12 men day-in and day-out. It took that long to sink in. We can’t rush and expect instant results—but we should expect results!

⁴² The first leaders are the most important, as they must embody the right DNA to pass on to others. Anyone coming from a conventional church background is naturally going to have to unlearn and relearn not just information, but more importantly attitudes, behaviours, and knee-jerk reactions. Those leaders who emerge in second generation churches will more likely be those who have not been as highly influenced by conventional church characteristics.

⁴³ Cf. Ephesians 4.11-13

⁴⁴ Cf. Luke 10.1-20 where Jesus sent out the 70, and then they returned to give a report of their experiences.

Overcoming the Barriers

We have painted the picture of a CPM and how beautifully it dovetails with Australian culture. But it is important to remember that implementing such a venture in our country and culture will not be without barriers. The fact that church planting movements are primarily a Third-World phenomenon, there must be barriers in our Western culture that have prevented them from occurring here. We would be wise to examine this a bit.

The CPM Barrier in the West

Ever since I first heard about them many years ago, I have been fascinated by the idea of church planting movements. What could be more exciting than churches springing up spontaneously and spreading like bushfires! I have dreamed of how the principles and basic ingredients of a CPM could be applied in a country like the US or Australia, allowing a movement as such to occur and blossom as it does in many third world cultures. But it just doesn't seem to be happening on any appreciable level, and this has left me longing to understand why.

First of all, we must observe that there is a general resistance to church planting among churches in western society. The number of churches that actually initiate or support plants are few and far between. There are several factors that I have observed that help to explain this resistance:

The fear of failure. The western mind is highly success driven and hates the thought of failure. For this reason we tend not to be risk-takers, and therefore do not launch out with high-risk projects like church plants (nearly half of all church plants fail within 5-10 years).

The fear of success. There is the fear that the new church will actually grow and “compete” with the mother church, particularly if it is geographically close.

Survival mentality. Existing churches don't feel they have the resources to start a new church, and hesitate to divide their already minimal resources.⁴⁵ Just the mention of planting new churches creates resentment that resources are not being used to help the already-established churches to become strong. Churches just don't see a need for new churches when they are struggling themselves.

The “unity syndrome.” Most small churches strive to become “one big happy family.” While this sounds very good and spiritual, it keeps small churches small and prevents them from making the sacrifice of sending out leaders and resources to start new work outside their four walls.

Institutional thinking rather than missional thinking. People in western churches tend to think “program” rather than “people.” As a result churches tend to become top heavy with structure, and the maintenance required keeps people busy and takes their minds off their missionary objectives.

In spite of all these barriers, we are fortunate that some churches do eventually “see the light” and embrace a vision to plant (or at least support) a daughter church. While this is a good thing in itself, we know from experience that the planting of these sorts of churches isn't producing a *movement* of new church plants as in a CPM. Why? We must assume that for a CPM to take place, churches must possess the right DNA—that is, they embrace the attitudes, values and principles—which results in rapid replication. As the vast majority of mother churches would not possess this DNA, we would not expect daughter churches to have it either. In order to foster a CPM we need church plants that have the right DNA from the start. Therefore, these church plants will have to look, feel, and act differently from their mother churches.

Let's consider the scenario of a typical Western church giving birth to a daughter church, in which this new church seeks to embrace the genetic code of CPM churches. Having worked in a church plant under these circumstances over the past 18 months, I have observed a number of factors that work against the viability of the plant. In addition to the resistance factors

⁴⁵ Churches who don't think missionally lock themselves into one kind of church planting, namely, one that requires a large outlay of money. But the fact is that small groups missional communities like those of a CPM require little if any financial resources.

mentioned above, here are some of the barriers which prevent CPM churches and other missional communities from developing:

The church wants to have control. Because the institutional church is usually so program driven, it is a natural tendency for church leaders to keep a watchful eye on everything. Perhaps the main concern is that they don't want to sponsor a heretical congregation! The planting of missional communities requires permission-giving leadership, flexibility, and a high level of trust which mother churches tend to be reluctant to offer.

The church doesn't embrace the paradigm shift. While they support the idea of church planting (although sometimes reluctantly) and the fact that the new church will be quite different from their own (even more reluctantly), seeing the resulting organism may leave them feeling like they have given birth to a monster. To understand and accept the "new creature" that they've given birth to requires a quantum leap.

The church wants to be too supportive. This assistance is well intentioned, but results in too much influence on the development of its young, unique offspring. With all this influence the DNA will gradually be corrupted, and the new organism will mutate and eventually become infertile.⁴⁶

These and many other factors come not only from the mother church, but also from dozens or even hundreds of traditional-style churches that exist nearby. With barriers such as these, it is very difficult for "new DNA" churches to proliferate. Overcoming the corrosive effects of institutional church DNA demands church planters who are passionately committed to CPM principles, resilient to continual criticism, and able to protect their new church from these harmful influences.

The bottom line is, CPMs don't flourish in western culture because of the plethora of traditional churches. It appears that CPM's are most likely to blossom where the established church is either weak or absent (particularly in persecuted areas) where the influence of institutional churches is minimal or nonexistent. Wherever the church in its traditional form is well established and plentiful, a CPM is not likely to happen without a bold and intentional move well beyond the scope of their influence.

Criticism: Expect It!

Whatever we plan or do will invite some level of criticism. The greatest criticism won't likely come from non-believers, but from those in churches. The primary source of opposition to Jesus and His ministry were the Pharisees—the religious elite of the day, the ones who *should* have understood and supported what He stood for. There are at least three issues that will rise to the surface from the religious leaders of our day:

The Issue of Heresy

While heretical teachings can originate with anyone, whether educated or ignorant, history teaches us that heresy is more likely to spread through the academics: the scholars and seminaries. From the very beginning, such institutions have been primary conduits of heresy—even the school at Alexandria was a culprit. The liberal theology being proclaimed a hundred years ago was not entirely the work of new believers in small churches, but of high ranking scholars publishing and widely circulating their racy ideas.

There is the fear that small churches are more susceptible to heresy than large, constituted churches. But larger churches are just as susceptible to corrupt teachings. The Toronto "Blessing," for example, influenced churches of all sizes; even the largest congregations were not immune to its detrimental effects.

The avoidance of heresy will only come by valuing God's word as the basis for faith and life. Why don't Anglicans and Catholics practice believer's baptism? The answer is simple: because the church has taught the people another way. If the members of these churches were instructed (or even allowed) to read the Bible and search out the issue, they would learn the truth. Instead, these churches have the people convinced that the church's official position is the right way.

It will be argued that CPM churches should follow Baptist teachings and traditions. But if Baptist churches are in fact truly biblical, it follows that any church which is truly biblical will be Baptist in nature. Therefore our most important task is to be

⁴⁶ I find it interesting that in the biological world, many cloned organisms are sterile. New churches should not be clones of their parents, but should be allowed to fit the cultural context of the people who are being reached.

sure the church is following biblical standards. This is best achieved through the senior leader of the church—thus our insistence on his participation in the network of CPM leaders.

The Issue of Immaturity

Another criticism is likely to come from those who say that simple churches will produce simple believers. But if we look at the ministry and teaching of Jesus, both His message and His methods were amazingly simple. His disciples, some of whom were “unlearned and ignorant men,”⁴⁷ produced the greatest movement the world has ever known. This is not to justify laziness in leadership, as leaders and believers should continually advance toward spiritual maturity.

The Issue of Subversion

The church we have been describing is a major break from the norm. Conventional churches will naturally be disturbed to some degree that these churches don’t conform to certain beliefs and practices. It is interesting that secular music is an example of this sort of subversive, uncontrolled propagation. Consider the most popular forms of music today—that which tops the charts. The musicians that produce this music are not generally the graduates of music schools. In fact, some of the most talented and successful musicians today are self-taught. Yet it is these people, driven and passionate about their music, who capture the hearts of countless millions of people all over the world. In a similar way, we should not be surprised to find that the most effective churches will be those not sanctioned by mainstream Christianity.

A Price to Pay

In the beginning I said that the church needs to change. What we have presented here requires not some minor tweaking, but monumental changes in our thinking and our behaviour. Change is not easy. In fact, it is quite unsettling for most people. Norm Nix once said, “You can’t change the future without disturbing the present.” And how true that is. People who are steeped in the conventional church are going to have three options: 1) try to ignore what needs to change, meaning they will have to shut themselves off; 2) resist change and hold on to the familiar, reclaiming that which they feel they are losing; or 3) embrace the need for change and make room for the emerging church. Those who choose option three will find that it requires sacrifice.

One characteristic common to all missionaries is that they have to sacrifice something. Most of the time it is extended family as they relocate to faraway lands. Some give up the familiar and the comfortable. For others it will be convenience, or safety. In some cases they give their lives. The New Testament calls every believer to be a missionary. It also reminds us that following Christ bears a high price tag. Every believer needs to ask, “What price am I willing to pay? What am I going to give up so that God can carry out His great plan?”

Jesus understood the high price tag attached to His life and ministry. He suffered for His convictions and warned that anyone who follows Him must be prepared to suffer as well. Consider these words from Jesus found in Luke 9.22-24:

‘The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day.’ And He was saying to them all, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.’

In order to achieve anything of great value, we must remember the price tag. The most effective ministries will attract the highest cost. What we are talking about here is a world-changing movement, and Satan will not let this happen without unleashing every weapon in his arsenal. Planting churches requires sacrifice; we need only look at our brothers and sisters in persecuted countries who daily risk their lives for the sake Christ. But the fruit that results will far outstrip the cost.

⁴⁷ Acts 4.13

Conclusion

The church may be slowly sinking into obscurity, but there is hope—a bright hope in fact! Looking back to biblical principles, we know that God desires to give everyone “a fair go.” He hasn’t given up on the world yet, nor has He given up on the church as a means of fulfilling the Great Commission. As we examine the history of the church, we can identify ways where we have lost our effectiveness. It is altogether possible to get back to basics and provide an environment where the church can once again blossom, grow, and reproduce freely as a movement. We already see it happening in some places. But can we allow it to happen here in Australia?

For 1600 years, the church has placed a high priority on keeping itself as visible as possible in its local community. As they struggle for survival, churches in the West are working hard to become more and more visible and conspicuous. But this is not making them more popular or more effective in the long run. Quite the contrary. The Titanic was doomed because it was not designed to submerge into the sea. Likewise, the conventional church has evolved into something that isn’t compatible with the treacherous sea of culture in which it has found itself today. It was never designed for this environment.

Instead, we need “submarine” churches which are specifically designed to submerge into the very heart of culture. Churches that are out there among the people, rather than beckoning people out of their cultural settings and into church buildings. Churches that, like Jesus, have an incarnational presence among the daily rhythms of society. Perhaps the churches which will have the greatest impact will be those which are least visible. As we get back to the church as Jesus intended it to be, the church will naturally become less and less conspicuous for its lack of buildings, signs, status, programs, and political influence. But this emerging, *submerging* church will have a tremendous impact on human life as people are touched, challenged, and changed all over the world. And it will leave a legacy of fertile, fruitful churches until the end of the age.

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Church Planting Policy for the Baptist Churches of Tasmania

Based on the description of a CPM, and the basic plan given above, we will need to make some serious adaptations to our current attitudes toward church planting. Here is a rundown of the important changes that must be made on a denominational level if we are going to participate in a CPM vision:

Redefine Church

The current definition of church has a high standard. Throughout the history of the Christendom church, there has been an increasing standard of qualification for the church. In the NT the church was the presence of believers, thus “the church which is in Ephesus,” etc. Jesus said, “Where 2 or 3 are gathered, I am there in the midst of them.” While a gathering of such a small number of people doesn’t provide a long-lasting business model of church, it doesn’t need to—as long as the functions of the church are fulfilled.

By definition in the Constitution of the Baptist Churches of Tasmania (and virtually every other church or denominational constitution), no CPM churches will ever fit the criteria of being a church, nor will many of their constituents qualify as members. When a denomination places high requirements for becoming an acceptable church, it causes the group to focus more of meeting the requirements than on mission. This will dampen the enthusiasm of the church and it will not likely reproduce, thus choking the momentum of the movement.

CPM churches tend to take on the appearance of the local context. In Australia this will be the family, the pub, or the local youth hang out. It will not have a congregational look to it.

Streamline the Church Recognition Process

In our current system, in order to be recognised as a church the Union requires the following:

- 1) that a request for church status be submitted, signed by the members
- 2) that a constitution and doctrinal statement be drawn up
- 3) that there be a minimum of 5 males over 21 years of age
- 4) that the church be recognised by a vote of Assembly

This is a noble attempt to promote accountability and to prevent small churches from rising and falling in a short season. However, CPM churches universally are small, informal in nature, and often have relatively short life spans. Therefore I would propose the following:

- 1) that the church’s identity be defined by the church planter and his coach, with the consultation of the strategists
- 2) that the church define a set of agreed core values which include adherence to the authority of the Bible
- 3) that a minimum number of two be required
- 4) that there be no voting by Assembly

These proposed identity guidelines will minimise the authority of the churches and place it in the hands of the churches and the CPM strategists. This will streamline the process, preserving momentum, and maintain the dignity and integrity of each new church.

The Consultancy Report requires that “churches be identified with the Baptist Churches of Tasmania.”⁴⁸ This identity will exist but will not be formalised. CPM churches are not “owned” by anyone but can and should be supported and resourced appropriately by networks of like-minded churches and individuals.

⁴⁸ Bill Penny and Jeff McKinnon, *Consultation Report re Advance21 and the Ministry Team*, June 2001, Objective C. Recommendation 2.

Isolate CPM Churches

The Advance21 Consultancy Report requires “the partnership support of Baptist Churches in the area.”⁴⁹ Too much interaction with conventional churches will upset the missional DNA of these fragile, new churches. Jesus taught that new wine should not be put in old wineskins, nor new cloth sewn to an old garment.⁵⁰ CPM churches are not “backward compatible” with the traditional church! This does not excuse the church to go on its own. The key leader of every church needs to have a high level of accountability and must be networked with other leaders.

Also, to seek formal partnerships with other churches could introduce more administrative baggage that will cause a loss of momentum. Therefore the partnership issue needs to be waived. The real issue is partnering CPM leaders with like-minded leaders.

Minimise Financial Support

The primary means of denominational support tends to be financial. However, CPM churches incur very little expense, and support of any kind can create dependencies. I would propose that support be evaluated on an as-needed basis, determined by the CPM strategists.

Don’t Expect Money in Return

CPM churches aren’t likely to support a denomination. It will be more likely that they will contribute to the poor, assist the training of leaders, and eventually to support the broader CPM cause.

Relax Business Expectations

Because CPM churches will be small highly relational in nature, they should operate on a shared agreement system rather than a formal style of government. Parliamentary procedure was developed for the large, business-like setting, and I am continually amused as church meetings with 4 or 5 people go through all the cold formalities of this style of meeting!

As most CPM churches will not have conventional church status, they should not be required to participate in Union meetings or be involved in Union affairs.

Provide Legal Cover

Administrative details can easily distract churches and leaders from mission. The best support which can be provided for CPM churches is to provide assistance with legality, liability, and identity issues. This would include non-profit status and licensing.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Luke 5.37-38