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Innovative Ways to Plant Churches in the 21st Century

Robert E. Logan

A title like “Innovative Ways to Plant Churches in the 21st Century” can be intimidating for an author, so I decided to enlist the support of some colleagues. I sent out an e-mail message to a number of people asking if they had any stories for me to share. I couldn’t believe the response. There was a flood of story after story.

As I read over the stories and reflected on what God has been doing, I was amazed. Yet I find myself reluctant to share those stories. I feel the need to caution the reader against an emphasis on methods and models. We in the western world are obsessed with copying models and methodologies. It’s easier to copy what is on the surface rather than taking the time to examine the underlying core principles. I am hesitant to share any models or methods for fear that people will simply copy them without regard to cultural context. Rather than trying to replicate the experiences of a church that is different from your own, start by considering what you want to accomplish. What truly constitutes success?

My father was an engineer. If you ask an engineer what time it is, he’ll tell you how a watch works. Even as a boy, I knew not to ask Dad a question unless I had time. There was no such thing as a concise answer, only a complete answer. As a 7 or 8 year old, I would ask a question, and Dad would get out some paper and draw diagrams explaining the principles of leverage. I would have been satisfied with “Because it’s round.”

One time I asked him, “Dad, What is success to you?” He

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said, "Bob, I've thought about this for a long time." I settled into my chair, prepared for a lengthy discourse. "In fact," he continued, "I was 20 years old when I first pondered this question and considered what the major success of my life ought to be. After reflection, I got it boiled down to one sentence: Find out what God wants you to do and do it."

I've never come across a more profound definition of success. The reason it is so profound is that it takes into account the fact that we must discover God's agenda in our own unique context. As I share these stories from different countries and different situations, look at the underlying key principles, not just the methodology. Ultimately, we each need to discover what God wants us to do in our situation at this particular time at this particular place to reach these particular people.

The Pond Church

In a certain part of London, a low-income housing project surrounds a polluted lake. Just down the street is a wealthy, professional church. For years, this church had done nothing to reach the housing project community because of the huge socioeconomic gap. Finally, they hired an evangelist who worked half-time in the church and half-time in the housing project. The evangelist began building relationships with those in the neighboring community and listening to them. One woman who lived in the low-income housing area spoke for all the people when she voiced what was on her heart. Three things rang through loud and clear. The number one problem was the polluted lake. Two, she wanted to bring people together in community. Three, she wanted a better place to raise her children.

The evangelist got started. He recruited a team of 80 volunteers to clean up the lake. Forty came from the housing project and forty came from the wealthy church. They worked side by side, poor and rich, cleaning up the lake. The team got a lot of publicity. The newspapers, radio, and television all picked up the story, and people got energized. The momentum created by the effort motivated them to find other ways to improve their situation. As one woman in the project said, "It used to be them and us. Now it's just us."

The wealthy church decided to start a worship service in the housing projects. They began by teaching the people Christmas carols and sharing the gospel. The excitement caught on and

spread throughout the community. Soon they had more than a worship service; they had a church. The residents named it The Pond Church. Rather than focusing on converting individuals, they're trying to plant the gospel in a whole community.

One of the natural benefits of outreach is renewal for the sending church. Seeing the gospel spreading down the street, the wealthy church began asking, "If it's happening there, why isn't it happening here?" They are beginning to open up to God in new ways themselves.

Ichthus

Another story comes from a church called Ichthus in Pomona, California. Downtown Pomona is not a place you'd want to go. It's a place people have left. It's a decaying urban landscape of deserted buildings. Yet God called a planting team to go there. The team began by just hanging around and observing. They watched the people—they were looking for the ant trails to find out who was there, where they went, and what they did. The team was elated to discover one common thread: art. A planting team composed of artists had found themselves in the midst of an artists' colony. They felt a sense of confirmation that God was calling them to this place.

The team decided a good entry strategy would be to start new businesses. They started an art gallery, or more accurately, an art lounge where people could sit down, discuss art, and build community. They opened an art studio, where people could come in and do art together. They also started a Brazilian jujitsu studio; one of the planters had a specialization in this area of martial arts. These businesses gave the church planters presence in the community. They were communicating a message to the people: "We are here to stay and put down roots. Our livelihood is hinged on the success of these businesses."

Next the team started a worship service, which they now regard as a strategic mistake. The worship service began attracting churched people instead of the unchurched people they were trying to reach. During the last few months, they've transitioned out of the weekly worship services, and started four house churches of 15 to 20 people each instead. Most of those who attend are new converts and many are involved in growth groups of two or three. The movement has spread organically and is now reaching close to a hundred people.

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Awakening Chapels

A third story comes from Neil Cole, pastor of Awakening Chapel. He started with the question, "How do we reach people?" Neil and his team considered starting a coffee house, then someone suggested that they just go to the coffee houses where people already are. They found a place called The Coffee Tap just a few blocks from where their core team cell group met. Team members began stopping in several times a week to pray and meet people and get built into the community. After their cell group meetings on Friday nights, the whole team would come in to talk and meet people. They developed relationships to such a degree that people began opening up to spiritual things.

The group started offering evangelistic studies in the gospel of John designed to reach postmodern people. Their ministry focus group is young, blue-collar workers. Most are not college students, although some are attending junior college part-time while working full-time. They are streetwise, and many of them come from hostile or abusive homes. Some are former drug dealers or users, yet their lives are being radically transformed. As people came to know Christ, they started coming to the cell group, or house church, on Friday nights.

Soon the place was overflowing, so they had to start more. They expanded to another coffee shop. They also sent out an apostle to the secular recovery groups in the area. He himself was a recovering addict. Coffee houses and recovery groups have been their two most fruitful places for ministry. Their follow up system for new converts is very simple: life transformation groups. No training is needed. Two to four people come together regularly for scripture reading and accountability. Started just five years ago, life transformation groups are now functioning on all seven continents.

House churches, or chapel gatherings, take place almost exclusively in homes. They've found that when people are given the choice between a larger group that has better music and a smaller, more intimate group that meets in a home, people will choose the smaller group every time. It's consistent. No one ever goes the other route except churched Christians.

The cultural norms of Awakening Chapel's ministry focus group extend to sermons as well. In fact, they don't really have sermons at all; they have dialogues. People assume they can

make a comment or ask a question at any time. Since the majority of them don't come from church backgrounds, they don't know any differently. When they enter into more traditional settings, they don't know what's expected. Their pastor, Neil, once went to speak at a Quaker retreat, and brought along some of the people from Awakening Chapel. A few minutes into his talk, they started interrupting him with comments and questions. Those who were there from the Quaker church were taken aback, and Neil had to explain to them that his was how they did sermons in their church. Participatory sermons were just a part of their culture.

The phrase Neil uses to describe his philosophy of ministry is, "First things first. One thing at a time. Always one more thing." He helps people grow step by step into leadership, raising up leaders from among the converts through a continual discipling and mentoring process. Meanwhile the chapels have been multiplying. Neil started in April of '98. There are now eight Awakening Chapels, eight more out of their network, and new ones currently starting in San Francisco, Portland, Ashland, Salt Lake City, Long Beach, Paris, and in a restricted access country. Overall, they have a 50% conversion growth rate.

Janesville

A fourth example of innovation is a church that was started by a youth group in Janesville, Wisconsin. A youth pastor wanted to help raise money for church planting. When he approached the director of church planting for his district, the director asked, "Why don't you do the whole thing? I'll guide your youth group through the research and the demographics, and even the recruitment of a planter." The youth group took him up on his offer. They hung door flyers, conducted surveys, took prayer walks, and met people with in the community. Once they had prepared the way, the youth group called the church planter.

Cell churches

I wish I had time to tell you about all the cell church plants. The stories are phenomenal. It's one of those underground movements that most people don't even realize is happening. One group in Toronto, CA spent a year grafting themselves into the social fabric of the community before starting cell groups. Four years after launching their first cell, they have 120 adults in

cell groups with an 84% conversion growth rate. They did this without even holding services for the first year.

One cell church planter writes, "I did a survey about a month ago in our congregation to find out which aspects of our ministry are most effective. I asked people to choose which of the following had the most impact on them: one-on-one mentoring, their cell group, the equipping track, or the worship service. The mentoring and cell group tied for first. The equipping track came in at number two, and the worship service was dead last. What they're saying is, 'It's nice to be in that large corporate service, but it doesn't really change me. What changes me is being in authentic Christian community where I can open up and be in relationship, where I can really start sharing and confess my sins. That's where I see God show up and change me.'"

Adventure Christian Fellowship

I could tell you about Adventure Christian Fellowship, a new church whose motto is "Knowing God is life's greatest adventure." They take a "ministry first" approach. Instead of doing advertising, they organized ministry teams and rented a community hall. In the various rooms, they began to do all kinds of community projects and ministries. After three months, when they had a hundred adults from the community involved, they launched their church and continued to grow through the multiplication of ministries.

Hope International Bible Fellowship

I could tell you about Hope International Bible Fellowship, in the inner city of Hollywood. The church was founded in the 1920s, and became a church for Hollywood stars such as Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. Over the years, the neighborhood changed and the church started declining. They dropped down to just 25 people, had a negative cash flow of \$3,000 per month, and were about to close their doors. They knew they had to change or die. As a last ditch effort to save the church, they called Ed Carey to be the pastor, a man who has seen a radical transformation in his own life. They were so desperate they agreed to follow his leadership completely.

When Ed preached his very first sermon, he came walking in with a sledgehammer and started talking about the problem with idols. "In the Old Testament, when people needed to repent

of worshipping idols and change their ways, they were told to destroy those idols. I've prayed long and hard over this issue, and I've come to the conclusion that the idol here is the choir." Then he took the sledgehammer and began pounding holes in the nice solid wood of the choir loft. After about ten minutes of swinging the heavy hammer and working up a good sweat, he turned to the people and asked, "Well? Are you going to help me?"

Today, five years later, the church is thriving with over 200 people. They've also planted another church that runs about a hundred adults. They share their facilities with other congregations who are also involved in birthing new churches. The people at Hope International Bible Fellowship are poor, but no other organization in Hollywood except the Salvation Army feeds more people every week. Each night they host a meal and offer everything they have to whoever will come. Sometimes it's rice and beans, and sometimes it's steak. It just depends what God provides. They have visions of establishing a church planting training center with an urban focus. They want to raise up leaders who will know how to minister incarnationally in environments of incredible diversity. Within a 20-minute drive of that church, you can almost reach the entire world.

Escanaba

I can take you to the upper peninsula of Michigan. There's a little church there in Escanaba, a town of 19,000 people, that helped set up a foundation to help raise funds for church planting. They leased the Historic Michigan Museum, which was no longer in use, for \$600 per month. Then they renovated the building and began renting it out for community events, generating a cash flow of \$1,500 to \$2,000 per month. A concession store and thrift shop, Born Again Clothes for Kids, generates additional funds for church planting.

There are so many stories I could tell you. Leaders in ministry are continually finding new ways to reach people. As I consider these stories, five underlying principles stand out to me.

1. *The need for a customized approach.* No two of these stories are exactly alike, and none of them should be. We need to think and act like missionaries if we are going to reach the harvest. What will work in your particular context with your particular people?

2. *Listening prayer and powerful intercession.* Prayer is woven into all of these stories. It's the essential, invisible foundation of all that has been accomplished for God's kingdom.
3. *Authentic relationships.* The essence of ministry has always been people—people being real, building community, acknowledging their shortcomings, and moving deeper into relationships with others. At no time have authentic relationships been more crucial than in this thirsty postmodern age.
4. *Making disciples.* We need to recognize disciple-making as the mission Jesus has given us. He has not commanded us to build up any one particular church; he has commanded us to make disciples and multiply little groups of believers that will be lovingly committed to Jesus.
5. *Simple, reproducible methods.* Find methods that lend themselves to multiplication. These methods will necessarily look different in different contexts, but they should all ultimately lead to stronger, better disciples.

With these principles serving as our foundation, we can move forward to paint a broad-stroke picture of church planting and multiplication. Out of these principles flow seven essential activities:

1. *Praying and expecting.* Engage in listening prayer as you envision what God desires to do through you. Step out in faith because Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."
2. *Visionizing and strategizing.* Get a clear picture of what the future may look like and begin taking appropriate steps in that direction. In each culture group, intentionality will look different. Nevertheless, it always involves seeing the end that God wants and beginning to move toward it. It's like having bifocal vision: you need the long distance vision to see where God wants you to go, and you need to have enough clarity to see the next few steps along the way. You may not know the whole path, but you have to know where you're heading and you have to know the next step.
3. *Evangelizing and gathering.* Connect with the people you are trying to reach in such a way that you can under-

stand what good news is to them. How can you relate to them in a way that will resonate with their souls and hearts?

4. *Shepherding and building community.* Pastoral care and the one another commands of scripture are crucial for building a caring, inclusive community that has the ability to reach out with the love of Christ.
5. *Training and multiplying.* Focus on a leadership development system that flows naturally out of the harvest. In order to start a continuing movement, we must evangelize and raise up leaders from the harvest simultaneously. Leadership development is essential for long-term, sustained growth.
6. *Assembling and celebrating.* Worshipping corporately helps us recognize that we are part of a much bigger picture. This experience may not be possible in all places in the world, but it is in most.
7. *Leading and managing.* As the church grows and multiplies, the priorities of pastoral leadership must shift to accommodate new situations and needs.

These seven essential activities create the framework for effective church planting and effective multiplication movements. More and more missions and denominational groups are getting serious about cultivating church multiplication movements. They're returning to their roots to recapture their original apostolic vision, for multiplication must always start with spiritual empowerment. God has to show up. After that, we must be intentional about becoming culturally relevant, connecting with people where they are, and creating a reproducible system to aid multiplication.

Reproducible systems

A reproducible system is what made the difference between John Wesley and George Whitfield. Whitfield had thousands upon thousands of converts, and yet at the end of his life said, "My converts are like a rope of sand." What a chilling statement. The converts didn't last. They didn't become disciples. On the other hand, Wesley left behind an entire movement of churches. In his lifetime, Wesley won 57, 000 people to Christ. Yet in the generation after his death, countless thousands more came to know Christ and today there are still people coming to faith who

can trace their spiritual heritage back to the Wesley revival.

What was the difference between Whitfield and Wesley? The difference was a reproducible system. It was Wesley's critics who identified the secret; they called his followers the Methodists. It was not a compliment, but a derogatory label. Yet they had accurately identified the secret: a simple, reproducible system that empowered ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

Church Multiplication Movements

A reproducible system is designed to give birth to a church multiplication movement. Yet both a system and a movement must be founded on a shared vision in order to be successful. In order to move ahead with confidence, you need to know where you're going. As you pray, your heart will begin to break over what breaks the heart of God. God's agenda must become a reality in our own context.

Missionary Church

In the 1980s, the Missionary Church denomination started only 32 new churches and had a 33% survival rate. In 1986, they made a decision not to plant any more churches and plateaued at 280. Their national church planting committee began exploring the issue. At one of their conferences, a speaker brought a prophetic word: "You call yourself a missionary church, but you don't care about the person across the street."

That statement caused much anger and some repentance. A number of senior pastors present at the conference began to repent and confess their sin. They started to refocus on church planting. Behind the scenes, the national church planting committee set a goal of seeing 140 new churches planted. God blessed their efforts, and they saw over 180 new churches planted. By adopting reproducible systems, the survival rate for those churches has gone from 33% to 84%.

Foursquare Church

The Foursquare church is a second example of the development of a shared vision. They recently began the process of creating a reproducible system for their own ministry context. Through a series of cluster consultations, they developed a national focus and a strategy for empowering their district teams. They began to see the implementation of systems and the chang-

ing of vocabulary and outlook. They moved from planting by addition to planting by multiplication and have seen increased fruitfulness. Ten years ago they had a 35% success rate. In the last six years, they've achieved a success rate of 87%, and as high as 96% in some districts. The original churches are larger and healthier and have begun to multiply districts.

The Foursquare church now has a vision that includes the planting of 3,000 new churches. They've begun the process of developing a comprehensive set of reproducible tools and processes that will integrate their coaching, seminars, training, cluster groups, and resourcing. The end product will be a seamless, customized system that is completely compatible with their philosophy and style of ministry, yet integrates them with the Internet and its resources.

They are even beginning to pray about whether God is going to release some of their apostolic leaders to leave and start new denominations. How's that for forward thinking? Most denominations start by accident. How much more blessings would come if we would recognize those whom God has gifted and freely release them to do powerful works to advance God's kingdom.

Looking Ahead

We are only seeing the tip of the iceberg of all that God is doing. Ultimately, it's not about the methodology. It's about finding out what God wants you to do and doing it, so that one day you can stand before him and hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." One day we will see that picture painted in the book of Revelation: a great multitude that no one can count, from every tribe and people and language, standing before the Lamb.

The end is not missions. The end is worship and the glorification of God. In the words of John Piper, "The reason missions exists is because worship doesn't." All of our efforts to disciple the mosaic, to go into every segment of society, to do all that we can to reach people and win them to Christ, and to multiply disciples, groups, churches, ministries, denominations, and missions movements are ultimately designed to contribute to that great worship experience before God where we'll stand together and sing his praises.

Writer

Logan, Robert: Dr. Logan was the recipient of the Donald A. McGavran Award from the ASCG in 1993 in recognition of his church planting expertise and his work as an author, consultant, and pastor of a vital local church. In 1998 Bob founded CoachNet to provide resources, web-based training and coaching over the Internet.