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Stadia: Church Planting in the Twenty-first Century

DAVID LIMIERO

Before falling asleep on a Monday evening in August, Anggie, a little girl in Las Lagunas, Ecuador, prayed a simple prayer—one she had prayed every night for some time. She was turning five that Friday, and she asked God for a birthday gift—a *padrina*—a child sponsor through Compassion International.¹

Less than twenty-four hours later a bus full of Stadia church planters and staff came to visit Las Lagunas. On that bus was Debbie Jones, Stadia's Director of Spousal and Family Support. Debbie had been asked by a good friend to personally select a little girl she could sponsor. When the bus arrived, this little girl and her mother were waiting. Greetings were shared. Tears were shed. A little girl's prayers were answered. That little girl represents just one of the seven billion reasons that Stadia plants churches.²

Behind Anggie's story³ is another story: eighteen months earlier there were no churches—of any kind—in Las Lagunas, a village of several thousand people. And because Compassion International works only through the local church, there were no children being sponsored there.

But by the time the bus pulled into Las Lagunas, some two hundred children were being sponsored by individuals belonging to Stadia's United States church plants and partner churches. Another fifty mothers of infants and preschoolers were enrolled in a Child Survival program, paid for by United States donors. And 250 people were attending weekly services at this new congregation, led by an indigenous church-planting pastor.

The church in Las Lagunas was just one of the four churches Stadia started in Ecuador in 2011. Another twelve were started in 2012, and now more than four thousand children are in child sponsorship. In 2013, those church-planting efforts will be expanded to Bolivia, Colombia and Mexico, and ten more churches will be planted in Ecuador—as many as twenty more new churches in South America. Next year Stadia will *also* plant twenty new congregations in the United States—potentially our best year ever.

The organization has come a long way since its official beginnings in the fall of 2003, when leaders of the Northern California Evangelistic Association (NCEA) met with leaders of the Church Development Fund (CDF) to create a nationwide church planting organization called Stadia.

The name comes from the New Testament, where it is used to describe the measurements of the heavenly city: 12,000 stadia high, by 12,000 stadia wide, by 12,000 stadia deep.⁴ It was carefully chosen to reflect our desire to fill up heaven through the work of evangelistic church planting.

¹For a firsthand account, see "The Story of the Little Girl That Prayed," August 26, 2012, <http://rachel-e-morgan.blogspot.com/2012/08/the-story-of-little-girl-that-prayed.html> (accessed September 29, 2012).

²Stadia's "7 Billion Reasons" vision is based on total world population of just over seven billion. "U.S. & World Population Clocks," <http://www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html> (accessed September 29, 2012).

³"The Story of the Little Girl That Prayed," <http://rachel-e-morgan.blogspot.com/2012/08/the-story-of-little-girl-that-prayed.html>.

⁴Revelation 21.16.

In the ten years since Stadia's humble beginnings, more than 180 new congregations have been started, primarily in North America.⁵ In 2010, Stadia began to shift from a North American church-planting mission to a global one, creating the unique partnership with Compassion International described above. We dream of starting a hundred churches per year, and are actively working to remove organizational barriers that might get in the way of that dream.

Not only is the quantity of Stadia church plants increasing; so is the quality. Roughly 90 percent of Stadia's North American church plants are continuing the work of the Great Commission. Only one in ten churches has closed within five years of launch. When you look at the national picture, across other denominations and movements, the closure rate is one-third; meaning three of every ten churches planted will close their doors within four years and cease to be a presence in their community.⁶

How did this come about? Certainly God alone deserves the glory. As the scripture says, he is the one who builds the church, not us.⁷ On the human side there are three critical turning points that have shaped the organization over the past nine years and increased its capacity to plant growing, healthy churches:

1. Pursuing a decentralized, "network-centric" approach to church planting
2. Changing from an organizational structure based on geography to one based on function
3. Combining an historical commitment to the Great Commission with a new value on reaching children, particularly children at risk

Undergirding these key turning points is an ongoing commitment to best practices; particularly those practices that involve high quality care to our church-planting couples. This has been an organizational value since the founding of NCEA in 1954 and still runs deeply in our veins today.⁸

Let's look at each of the three key turning points that have shaped Stadia over the past nine years.

Turning Point 1: Pursuing a Decentralized, "Network-centric" Model

During Stadia's first year, the leadership sought to replicate the success of the NCEA on a national level. The rapid national expansion led to a correspondingly rapid increase in the number of Stadia staff. The original NCEA staff became the new leaders of Stadia, moving to a national role. Three new regions were created, each with its own staff team.

The NCEA had also been extremely successful using a centralized funding model—individual and church donors gave to Stadia's general fund and, outside of the support individual church planters raised on their own, Stadia provided 100 percent of the funding to each new congregation. This approach was also expanded to the national level.

In its first full year as an organization, Stadia started twenty new churches (in comparison to six in NCEA's last full year of operation). Unfortunately, the funding model could not keep up with the rapid growth. This resulted in a series of painful budget cuts and layoffs as well as an intense reexamination of the centralized church-planting model.

Out of this season of struggle emerged a new model of decentralized, network-centric church planting.⁹ On a practical level, this meant that many of the functions once performed by Stadia staff were outsourced to

⁵Stadia started 188 congregations by year-end 2012. An additional sixty-two churches were started by the NCEA from 1954–2002.

⁶Edward Stetzer and Warren Bird, "The State Of Church Planting In The United States: Research Overview And Qualitative Study Of Primary Church Planting Entities," http://www.edstetzer.com/docs/ASCGJ_Church_Plant_US-final.pdf (accessed September 29, 2012). Stetzer's numbers are based on churches closing within four years of launch.

⁷Matthew 16.18; 1 Corinthians 3.6.

⁸For more information on these best practices for planter care, see <http://www.stadia.cc/about-us/planters/> or contact the author at dlimiero@stadia.cc.

⁹For a general overview of decentralized networks, see Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

service providers and contractors. As an example, prior to the network model, Stadia staff members in each region provided assessment and training. As part of the new model, assessment and training became the responsibility of outside service providers, who were free to provide their services not only to Stadia, but to other organizations as well. To ensure quality, each of these new service providers was required to meet a series of benchmark standards establishing best practices.

There was also a transition in the financial model. Rather than seeking centralized funding for church plants, Stadia set about the task of creating church planting networks to fund and guide specific church plants in their region.¹⁰ Network coaches in different areas of the country had a three-fold task: (1) cast vision for church planting; (2) build relationships among church leaders interested in church planting; and (3) release resources for starting new congregations. Relationships and vision were often developed in twenty-four-hour retreats. When churches were ready to form a network and plant a church, a “Memorandum of Understanding” (MOU) was created, detailing the resources each congregation or organization would release to the church plant, with each partner also agreeing to the best practices that would be used in the project.

While any number of churches and organizations can come together to form a network (our current record is fifteen), a church-planting network typically consists of four partners (three churches plus Stadia), which nicely matches the four leaves in Stadia’s logo. In this standard model, local partners provide 75 percent of the network funding, with Stadia supplying the other 25 percent.¹¹ Church planters continue to raise additional support as a statement of personal commitment to the project.

With some minor changes, the network model developed in 2005 is still the model used today.¹² There are now dozens of Stadia church-planting networks spread throughout the United States, each championed by a network catalyst (usually a volunteer). Overseeing these network catalysts are Associate Network Directors (ANDs), each responsible for a larger geographic region. These ANDs are employed just a few hours a week with Stadia, while remaining fully employed in local church ministry.

Adopting this model has allowed Stadia to dramatically increase the number of churches that are started, at a lower cost, and has greatly increased the ownership of church planting among our network partners. Several networks have gone on to plant multiple churches together because of this increased ownership for church planting in their region, a trend that continues to accelerate as new networks form and develop.

This network-centric model is captured in the first part of Stadia’s mission statement, “*We bring people and churches together* to transform lives and communities through church planting”—especially bringing churches together—and also reflects our core value of relationships.¹³

Turning Point 2: Changing from an Organizational Structure Based on Geography to One Based on Function

Under the network-centric model, Stadia’s impact grew exponentially and dozens of new churches and campuses were started throughout North America, along with a scattering of international projects, primarily in India and the Middle East.

By this time, Stadia’s original three regions had become two, roughly divided by the Mississippi River. The Eastern and Western Regions were highly autonomous—each had its own staff, its own budget and its own set of preferred outside service providers. Over time what began as one degree of separation in best practices grew wider, until there was a noticeable disparity between the two regions. Funding models were

¹⁰Most, but not all, networks are regional. A notable exception has been the networks formed to plant churches in Utah, which has very few existing non-Latter-day Saints churches. In this case, partners came from across the nation to form these networks.

¹¹Currently, Stadia’s 25 percent is provided through church-planting services, which are provided at no cost to the network or church planter.

¹²For a more detailed history and explanation of Stadia’s network model see Marc Bigelow and Bobby Harrington, *Together: Networks and Church Planting* (Self-published, 2011, available at http://www.amazon.com/Together-Networks-Planting-Marcus-Bigelow/dp/0615466362/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1360277630&sr=8-1&keywords=networks+and+church+planting+bigelow).

¹³Stadia has four core values: Relationships, Impact, Urgency and Children. We currently recognize Children as an aspirational value and are working to better live out this value in all of our church plants, both international and domestic.

different in East and West, both in dollars and services provided. So was church planter training, with each region's service provider having a different training philosophy than his counterpart in the other region. Stadia East had management teams with strong accountability for the planter, while in the West those teams were advisory in nature. Stadia East had a ministry to lead planter spouses (called *bloom!*), which did not exist in the West. When planters from the different regions got together and shared stories, these differences became even more apparent.

Stadia's regional and national leaders gathered in the summer of 2009 to discuss these differences, and emerged with a commitment to becoming a unified national organization with common best practices that would apply to all networks and church plants. In the spring of 2010, these changes were put into practice, resulting in three teams, each focused on one of Stadia's core constituencies: planters, networks and donors.

- A **Planter Care Team** focuses on the care of church planter couples once they are hired by the church-planting network and oversees all of the church-planting services provided to these couples.
- A **Mobilization Team** works to develop and strengthen church-planting networks, both domestically and internationally, as well as assessing and recruiting the church planters who will be hired by these networks.
- A **Donor Team** works to build and cultivate ongoing relationships with individual, organizational and church donors.
- All of this is overseen by a **Leadership Team** composed of Stadia's president, Greg Nettle; its executive director, Tom Jones; along with Brent Foulke, mobilization executive and David Limiero, planter care executive.

This streamlined structure has increased focus, decreased inefficiencies and standardized the planter services provided to our church planters.

Turning Point 3: Combining an Historical Commitment to the Great Commission with a New Value on Reaching Children, Particularly Children at Risk

The third turning point came in January of 2010, when Stadia's executive director, Tom Jones, invited a group of Christian Church ministers and other leaders on a Vision Trip to Ecuador with Compassion International, which is best known for its child sponsorship programs in twenty-six countries around the world. Among those leaders was Greg Nettle, who would later become Stadia's president, and Wess Stafford, the president of Compassion, whom Greg had invited to attend. The group visited several projects and saw firsthand the work that Compassion was doing to release children from poverty in Jesus' name. Research by George Barna has shown that 85 percent of Christians in America who accept Christ do so before the age of fifteen.¹⁴ In some circles this is described as the "4/14 Window," and the 1.2 billion children worldwide in this demographic cohort represent a significant missions opportunity.¹⁵

Compassion is committed to working only through the local church, which led Tom to ask, "What happens when you have an area of desperate poverty, but no local church? What can you do then?" The answer was disturbing: "Nothing. We can't do anything."

Nobody was happy with this answer, and over the next few days, an idea was born. Stadia planted churches. Compassion rescued children from poverty. Was there some way the two organizations could work together to start churches in areas that had none, so that the children in those towns and villages could also be rescued from poverty?

¹⁴"How Does Targeting the 4/14 Window Benefit Children?," April 13, 2011, <http://blog.compassion.com/how-does-targeting-the-414-window-benefit-children/> (accessed September 29, 2012). Original research by George Barna is contained in *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003).

¹⁵As an example, see "4/14 Movement: Raising Up Christ Followers from 4/14 Window to Transform the World," <http://www.4to14window.com> (accessed September 29, 2012).

Out of that question came a unique, visionary partnership with Compassion International that has fueled a new international church-planting strategy with three key players:¹⁶

- A credible national church planting movement in the host country
- Compassion International
- Stadia

The national church-planting partner selects, trains and deploys individual church-planting missionaries into communities to start new churches. These national partners are selected jointly by Stadia and Compassion, and typically have a long-standing relationship as a Compassion partner in that country. Church planters are funded locally, either bi-vocationally, through congregational giving or support from the national church-planting partner.

Compassion International works with these brand-new churches to provide three specific programs in each community, all designed to release children from poverty in Jesus' name:

- A Child Survival Program (CSP) aimed at mothers who are pregnant or have children under the age of five.¹⁷
- A Child Development Sponsorship Program (CDSP) aimed at children ages five–eighteen.¹⁸
- A Leadership Development Program (LDP) focused on young adults ages eighteen and up.¹⁹

As mentioned above, Compassion only works through the local church, so the sixteen new churches started so far have opened up sixteen new towns or villages to one or more of these Compassion programs, where Compassion was previously unable to go.

Stadia's role in the partnership takes several forms. Stadia leaders, working alongside Compassion staff, take regular trips with donors, partners and planters to visit the churches we have started and the Compassion programs in those churches.

- Our United States church partners and donors provide the funding necessary to construct the church buildings, which are then built by local labor.
- Donors, partners and church plants have the opportunity to sponsor as many as two hundred children per project, providing individual connections with United States congregants and the children they sponsor, as well as opportunities to fund the Child Survival Program in that congregation.
- Our newest United States church planters take a training trip to Ecuador, learning from their international counterparts. They are also matched with a sister church in the host country, giving them an international missions component from day one.
- United States congregations can also take missions teams to the churches they helped start, fostering long-term relationships between churches in each country.²⁰

This three-way partnership has created new opportunities for “glocal” ministry, giving both congregations and individuals the opportunity to participate in both the United States and international church-planting

¹⁶This strategy was further cemented with the 2011 hiring of Greg Nettle as Stadia's second president. In addition to his role as president, Greg also serves as lead pastor at RiverTree Christian Church in Massillon, Ohio. Greg's personal passion for children, particularly children at risk, has resulted in RiverTree sponsoring hundreds of children through Compassion, as well as numerous local initiatives.

¹⁷“Rescue Babies and Mothers,” <http://www.compassion.com/help-babies.htm> (accessed September 29, 2012).

¹⁸“Sponsor a Child Today,” http://www.compassion.com/sponsor_a_child/default.htm (accessed September 29, 2012).

¹⁹“Develop a Future Leader,” <http://www.compassion.com/student-leader-on-page-gs.htm> (accessed September 29, 2012).

²⁰In the summer of 2012, Stadia sent a mobilization assistant to Quito, Ecuador, to serve as our local coordinator for these trips.

missions. Significantly, these opportunities are not limited to sending resources, but are focused on building relationships, one life at a time, until individuals and communities have been transformed by the love of Jesus.

For Angie, as well as her Ella, her United States sponsor, that relationship has just begun.

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