

small, clustered, multiplying churches

(A proposal -- still half-baked)

by Brad Boydston

WHEREAS

- Research shows that small churches generally exhibit greater health than larger churches - with more people utilizing their spiritual gifts and actively involved in ministry... (1)
- Research shows that smaller churches are generally more effective evangelistically than larger churches...(2)
- Anthropologist Robin Dunbar argues that "the figure of 150 seems to represent the maximum number of individuals with whom we can have a genuinely social relationship, the kind of relationship that goes with knowing who they are and how they relate to us..." (3)
- Smaller churches are more relationally oriented than performance driven... (4)
- Most churches have a difficult time breaking the 200-barrier...
- The number of pastors who can effectively lead larger churches is relatively small...
- Many communities are actively resisting the presence of large churches because of their perceived impact on city services and the environment...
- The per capita cost of small church ministry is significantly smaller than that of a larger congregations... (5)
- George Barna's research notes that adults who are new to church attendance are more likely than adults who were church-ed as kids to associate with churches of less than 100 adults. (6)

It is proposed that we develop a strategy that would encourage the formation and multiplication of smaller churches.

POSSIBLE SCENARIO

What if we intentionally designed churches so that they would parent a congregation once they reach an average of 150 worshipers on Sunday morning? At that point 10-15% of the congregation would be commissioned to start another congregation. The church would utilize a launch system similar to what we do with larger plants—except on a smaller scale and with a slightly relaxed schedule. The pastor of the existing congregation could oversee both churches until the combined total of both congregations reached 225 - at which time another pastor would be called to serve one of the churches. Each congregation would parent again at 150 and the cycle would go on.

Multiplying churches would receive denominational appropriations to help them through the transition with the new congregation receiving aid for 3 years and the existing congregation which stays with the current facility receiving limited aid for 1 year. (Unless congregations were sharing facilities - then some other arrangement would be made). All new churches would remain under denominational (cluster?) supervision and direction until they have completed a cycle and multiplied at least once.

Churches related to each other through multiplication would be a part of the same cluster. The cluster would be set up as a separate entity for the purpose of establishing ministries that a single smaller congregation might have difficulty establishing on their own. For example, the cluster could call a youth minister to serve a youth group that is made up of students from all the congregations in the cluster. Or a cluster could implement a combined women's ministry. At times churches within a cluster would work together to start new congregations.

CHALLENGES

- While small churches have been the norm in many places for many years, multiplying smaller churches is a new concept. It would require an adjustment of expectations and church culture. How do we create a culture that supports a mission-driven set of smaller churches? How do we communicate up front that this is a growing small church that will multiply without scaring off new people?
- We would need to find ways of celebrating and honoring churches each time they multiply.
- We would need to develop some way for congregations to have access to larger facilities for events such as weddings and funerals.
- We would need to retrain church leaders for effective ministry in multiplying churches.

- Some pastors would need to be trained in serving churches intentionally yoked for mission (as opposed to survival).
- At what size can a congregation support a pastor on their own? Will some of the churches have to be yoked or served by part-time pastors?
- How does being in a constant state of flux affect "ownership"? For example, will people support the purchase or building of a facility that they know they will likely not be using in 3 years because they are off starting a new church?
- Even though churches will be purchasing smaller facilities and less acreage if they build will they be able to afford the cost of building at the same time they should be multiplying?
- Will people burn out on multiplying? How long can the pattern be sustained - if at all?
- What happens when a church fails to reach multiplying size?
- If all churches in a cluster multiplied once every five years at the end of 35 years there would be 128 churches. What percentage of the churches will realistically complete the cycle? More than once?
- If 150 is the optimum relational number is it workable financially?
- A key person in the system would be the cluster leader—a missionary-pastor-type who would be responsible for coordinating common ministries and perpetuating the multiplication vision. This person might be a pastor whose primary responsibility would be to coach and provide some hands-on assistance to the church planting pastor during a multiplication. Who would fund the cluster leader?

STRUCTURES

CLUSTERS—A group of 5 or 6 smaller congregations that would work together to plant new congregations and own some common ministries - such as youth groups or children's clubs. Congregations in a cluster would also meet one or two times a year for a big Sunday - baptisms and other celebrations.

CONGREGATIONS—A group of up to 150 people who meet together for worship and ministry. Each congregation would be an autonomous member of the Evangelical Covenant Church and the Pacific

Southwest Conference. Congregations may share a pastor with another congregation in a cluster.

SUM

Does this mean that we would become anti-big-church? To the contrary! We want to be supportive of whatever God is doing. Large churches have their place. They just have to "work" a lot harder to have the same kind of Kingdom impact that flows more naturally out of healthy smaller churches.

This is a proposal to add an additional strategy or model(s) to the existing mix of churches. While there will be some similarities to the small-church models that have been the default of the American church scene it is unique in that it is mission-driven and dynamic. "Success" will be determined not by size or stability but by how often a church multiplies itself.

END NOTES

(1) Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (Church Smart Resources, Carol Stream, IL, 3rd ed., 1998) 46-47.

(2) Schwarz, 46-47.

(3) Quoted in Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point How Little Things Make a Big Difference* (Little, Brown, and Co., Boston, 2000) 179. Dunbar argues that the number 150 pops up over and over again in anthropological literature.

Noting that the number 150 is the optimum size for a military unit Gladwell summarizes Dunbar, "It is still possible, of course, to run an army with larger groups. But at a larger size you have to impose complicated hierarchies and rules and regulations and formal measures to try to command loyalty and cohesion. But below 150, Dunbar argues, it is possible to achieve these same goals informally..." (180)

Gladwell "If we want groups to serve as incubators for contagious messages, then, as they did in the case of Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood or the early Methodist church, we have to keep groups below the 150 Tipping Point. Above this point, there begins to be structural impediments to the ability of the group to agree and act with one voice..." (182)

(4) This seems to be a significant issue for the post-Boomer generation. While Boomers are looking for performance, their children and grandchildren, or so we're being told, put greater priority on relationships.

(5) See for example Lyle Schaller, *Reflections of a Contrarian* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1989) 150-160.

(6) George Barna, "Adults Who Attended Church As Children Show Lifelong Effects" November 5, 2001, <http://www.barna.org>

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