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**8 Passions Needed for Church Planting and Church Renewal:
Impressions from a Church Planting Tour in Australia**

Edgar Machel

In April 2002 I had the opportunity to be part of a church planting tour in Australia. Though main parts of the country are desert area, Australia is one of the most urbanized countries of the world; 66% of the population lives in 5 cities alone. In addition, it is also one of the most secularized countries. Less than 5% go to church on a regular basis, despite the fact that 80% of the population believes to some degree in some God. Religion is a private issue and people feel uncomfortable talking about it in public.

Both factors made it especially interesting to observe several case studies of successful churches and church plants. How are churches able to reach secular and a-religious people? How are they different from traditional churches? How much is transferable and how much is culture bound? Those questions accompanied us while we were planning our excursion. The churches we attended and/or studied were Independent, Charismatic, Baptist or Seventh-day Adventist.¹

It was challenging to observe how churches were able to reach people in this difficult environment and to break social barriers. The organizational culture of those churches were so unique and contagious, that many people felt attracted. The term "passion" in the article was chosen, because the way they were doing church, was a result of a serving lifestyle embedded in the faith and mission of Jesus Christ. It was so much different than in many traditional and plateauing churches that the term passion seemed appropriate. While traditional churches tend to

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grow inward and to focus on the satisfaction of members, those churches were extremely evangelistic and community oriented. Most churches had chosen the term "community" as part of their name. Eight decisive items indicate how much a church can make a difference and what it takes to be such a high impact church in today's society.

1. *The passion for the Lost*

As two pastors said: "It is all about people, people, people" and "The main purpose is evangelism". Some churches we visited can be considered to be small, and were not able to provide the quality of large churches. They did not impress through the quality of actions; some sermons, some programs were even mediocre, but all churches very much impressed by their passion to reach the lost and their vision to really make it happen. In everything that the churches were doing, they focused on mission. For example, in one church even the Sounds and Visual Effects team was called the SAVE-Team. Vision statements like "A growing church for growing people", "Drawing people into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ", "A new church for new people" or "Changing and growing lives for Jesus Christ" conveyed the conviction that a life with Jesus Christ changes everything and that the main focus of evangelism is the essence of the church. They were able to mingle with people and to feel comfortable with Non-Christians being around. People felt welcomed and realized quickly the evangelistic approach, but they did not feel pushed to become a Christian. One could observe how McGavran's statement became alive: "Church growth follows where Christians show faithfulness in finding the lost".² They were obviously "seeker targeted".³

Their evangelistic approaches were creative. Some went to malls just to meet people, because research indicated that about 40% just go to a mall in order not to be alone. Some welcomed new citizens with a gift of a doormat, a pizza and a welcome business card from the church.⁴

The growth rate of the churches was outstanding, especially in a secular environment. For example, Living Water started in 2001 with 29 people and one year later they had an attendance of 104. In 1995 Southside Community Church started with 12 people and over 300 people are now coming to worship. Central Coast Community Church started in 1997 with 3 people and 5 years later welcomes 180 people to worship on a regular basis

and is still growing.

2. *The passion to serve the community*

One of the most interesting meetings was organized by the Southside Community Church. Politicians and other public persons were invited to present their perception of Southside Community Church, though not being members of the church. They were more than willing to “witness”, because they had seen the contribution of the church in their community. The church has helped especially young people to get a better life. 45% of the population in the community were under 30 and just 4% had a good education. The unemployment rate with 30% was extremely high. The church provided a place for young people to gather and some special programs like “How to find a job” helped them to find employment. Sherie, working for the city council, after she saw what they were doing for young people, even asked them to start a program for the elderly people, which was missing, too. And she helped to fund it. As one pastor mentioned: “The world not only needs us, we also need the world, legally and financially to support us...Be prepared to include the community in your plans and actions”.

We could observe a very close interaction of the community and the church.

The Central Coast Community Church was renting facilities from the Salvation Army. Through the work of the Salvation Army the suicide rate among young people dropped from the highest rate within Australia to the lowest. And the community church was now able to focus on another needy group of the population: parents and adults. The unemployment rate in this area is extremely high and through the lack of industry, there is no real hope that it will change in the future.

The New Life Community Church even decided to use the building as a community center, calling it “The Crossing”, to communicate to the public that the building is theirs. The church just used the building for worship, the service center “included” the church.

The community aspect was one of the reasons in all churches that during worship the people still were dressing casually. People were invited to come in, even if they just passed by and the casual setting allowed people to fit in easily. They were trying to take away unnecessary social hurdles, which would make the church rather socially distinctive than spiritually. Cultural un-

necessary barriers make evangelism ineffective and in order to be “salt of the earth” (Mt.5:13) a church should be careful not to separate from the people. “There is no impact without contact”.⁵ The congruency factor between the community and the church was the most important factor for growth. Conn has found out in another study, that conservative churches grow not because of their theology, but because of their ability to stay in contact with their community.⁶

3. The passion to worship God, to live for Christ and to celebrate the community of the Holy Spirit.

“We are here to celebrate the reality of Christ”! The joy to worship and to be in the presence of God was obvious. They talked much more about God acting in their lives than God acting in history or past times as often heard in stagnating churches. Prayer was a natural part of church life, whether in worship or other programs and meetings. Some even used prayer as an evangelistic tool. The Crossing offered a “Still Space” introducing an “old medieval technique” to find inner peace. They were using the esoteric interest of people to introduce people to the discipline of prayer. Others prayed while they were walking in the neighborhood or prayed every morning in every room of the building. One pastor tried to explain the exciting atmosphere through giving all the credit to God himself, saying “We are just ordinary people, with an extraordinary God”. The numerical growth experience, the ability to start programs and to built facilities despite the lack of funds made the churches willing to risk and obey more. The God-centeredness of their actions was leading to worship and prayer and like a spiral prayer was leading again to more action and risk taking. The interaction of quiet times of prayer and purpose-driven actions increased the passion to worship God and to celebrate the reality of Christ.

4. The passion to serve as a team

The priesthood of all believers is a prerequisite to plant or renew churches.⁷ Since, as one pastor mentioned, each church accepts within 6 months the church culture of the planter including weaknesses, a team will help to make the church better and stronger. Most churches, therefore, offered intensive leadership training or other training programs, so that people were able to serve according to their spiritual gifts. None of the growth was

possible by the pastor alone, although each pastor was a strong leader with a clear vision and a deep passion for evangelism. "Every member is a minister", "We built projects around people" and "We stop or do not start any program if we do not have a leader for it" are all statements of a clear conviction that teams make a real difference. The program of Southside Community Church "to identify, invite, involve, and to integrate people" stands for the many similar approaches of the churches to grow the church by teams. The given responsibility to members and teams increased the evangelistic potential because every team focused on mission themselves. It also created an atmosphere of freedom. People were allowed to be creative and to start a ministry if they felt the call of God and if it fit the mission of the church.

5. The passion to serve 24 hours/7 days a week

The serving attitude toward the community and the evangelistic approach determined the use and the construction of the building. All buildings were multi functional and some had large auditoriums. "We form our building but after that the building forms us". This attitude determined the philosophy to have a building that allows the church to serve members and the community every day of the week. Some churches had climbing walls for young people, some had food services for the poor or an open meeting place like a café, a billiard table, a radio station, counseling programs, or a special dinner with jazz music every month. The church is supposed to be a "place without walls" a facility which enables to "empower our congregation to present Jesus Christ effectively". The worship place was not a sacred place which could be used just once or twice in a week, but was rearranged for several purposes during the week.

The limited usage of church buildings, as it happens in many churches, was considered to be a waste of money and resources. If church is a lifestyle and not a building, the facility should support the evangelistic life style of the church and not separate the church from the community.⁸

6. The passion to grow

Growth requires an openness for change. If churches want to grow, dissatisfaction with the status quo is always a satisfying feeling and a good sign. But the leaders of the church knew, that introversion is a normal process of every church. "I need to refo-

cus every 6 weeks”, one pastor said. To keep the church going was a challenge to meet. But the passion to grow was so strong that the teams were open to change personally, organizationally, spiritually, strategically and numerically.

In addition, this is a challenge to deal with control. The larger the church gets, the more people will require a clear set of rules.⁹ But the tension between controlling and leaving space for creativity or with other words accepting a kind of chaos was recognized by the leadership. The constant and redundant communication of the vision, the high accountability to keep motivation high and the focus on God’s ruling the church was helping to grow organizationally without losing the vision, creativity and energy. The kind of character trait needed for regularly refocusing the church is endurance. Leaders need the courage to take time off to rethink the strategy and not to lose sight of the vision themselves.

They saw the danger, that busyness could keep them from working on the important issues. Hence, the constant reflection of their work, whether through a personal coaching process or the use of the Natural Church Development test, was imperative for some of the churches.

7. The passion to patiently love people

Leading people to Christ takes time, especially in a secular context. The culture of society has changed so much, that the distance to a church culture increased. Also the way of finding truth has changed. Traditional evangelism expected that people responded to the Gospel and afterwards were integrated into churches (believing > belonging). Nowadays, people want to belong first, before they believe (belonging > believing). The relationship determines the intensity of trust and the willingness and/or openness to change. People want to prove the authenticity of a church and their leaders.¹⁰ “What you see is what you get” was meant as a compliment by one of the Non-Christians friends of one of the churches. The openness of churches to include people, even to employ people, which are not part of the church, at least led to a relationship of respect in the community and was giving freedom to people to grow. “We have found, that God grows his church—so we can give freedom to people”. The risk to involve people even as non-members came from the conviction that it is better for people to be close to a church and their members, so that they can make a decision at some point in

time than being apart and having no Christian around when needed. The only thing the church can do is to love people and to invite them to follow Christ. The goal was not to baptize people as quick as possible (in most the worship attendance was much higher than the membership rate), but to make disciples; and as Jesus mingled with people, so that they could taste and touch the reality of God, so important and mandatory is the closeness of Christians and non-Christians for a living church. Jürgen Moltmann once described the new life style of a church as a friendship:

Nicht der vereinsamte Christ und nicht die große, aufwendige Betreuungskirche fürs Volk, sondern die in der Freundschaft Christi versammelte Gemeinde, die jeder als seine eigene Sache ansehen kann, ist die lebendige, weil gelebte und lebendigmachende Hoffnung in den Konflikten der heutigen Gesellschaft.¹¹

The danger especially for young people of getting influenced by the secular mindset of non-Christian friends was rejected. The early involvement of young people in ministry and the missionary attitude of the church made it even easier for young people to make a decision for Christ. A non-missionary and segregating atmosphere is more dangerous for young people than the opposite. Young people were more seen as potential evangelists with the advantage that “they do not (yet) realize, that it cannot be done”.

The closeness of people was enabled through the intensive use and implementation of home cell groups. Worship and other church programs were not considered as sufficient and satisfactory to help people to grow. Programs helped to get in contact with people, but the main discipling making process took place in the homes of people.

8. The passion to be relevant

None of the churches used an organ as an instrument for worship service, but this criteria was just a minor factor for their perception of relevancy. Risk taking and honesty were the real challenges. Meeting the needs of people required a constant time of reflection. Honesty toward each other, about the quality of the programs and the goals were a prerequisite to recognize growth obstacles and necessary changes to be made. “Be aware of managing your emotions and your anxiety of failure... all I could do

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is crying and praying". The pastor communicated the level of tension they were dealing with in the process of creating a passion-driven church. Since they just go forward step by step, the possibility of failure is always around. Anxiety and the threat of failure could paralyze the church. The natural and human tendency to withdraw oneself and to be satisfied with the status quo in order to avoid the feelings of anxiety or insecurity was a factor to be aware of.

Some churches were so inventive that they even got in trouble with their own denomination. Relevancy is dangerous because it allows churches to meet people and to attract crowds, which changes the atmosphere of the church. The basic response of all churches was to point to the mission of the church and the centrality of Christ. The vision and passion prevented the churches to satisfy its members and denominations first instead of serving the world by preaching the Gospel.

Final thoughts

Passion is very much related to conversion. Church Growth is never just a methodology or ideology. It is based on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and His Great Commandment to preach the Gospel to all people and nations. The challenge for every participant of the church planting tour was the reconsideration of what church is all about. The observed passion of the people asked for the conversion of many traditional churches. If mission is really a *nota ecclesiae*¹², and the church is really changed by the Word of God, the missionary emphasis and the passion for the lost will be a natural ingredient of every church, whether old or new, traditional or modern.

But passion goes along with the willingness to let go and to risk something, leaving the comfort zone and trusting God, living with constant change and ambiguity, the possibility of failure and the chance of conflict. The excitement of passion goes along with surrendering one's convenience and making all other priorities second.¹³ Or as Paul said, to experience the "power of the resurrection" we have to accept the "fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death (Phil. 3:10).

Passion, finally, is related to trust. Traditionalism is so strong, because trust can be replaced by rules, security and control. The natural tendency to manage life is the opposite of God's request to go and to make disciples because He is in control (Mt.28:19). This is maybe the biggest challenge of today's church.

Are we willing to go because we trust or are we concentrating on us, because we have lost not just passion but also trust?

Writer

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NOTES

1. The churches were: 1. Brisbane area: Southside Community Church, Rivers Community Church, Heritage City Community Church, Ipswich Region Community Church; 2. Sydney area: Central Coast Community Church, Fox Valley Community Church, Rouse Hill Community Church; 3. Melbourne area: New Life Community Church (The Crossing), Living Waters, Gateway Church, Innisfail Church, Gateway Family Church.

2. Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988, 5.

3. James Emery White, *Rethinking the Church - A Challenge to Creative Redesign in an Age of Transition*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books 1997, 46.

4. Rainer in his research also found that successful churches are "passionate about evangelism" (Thom Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996, 11).

5. Joseph C. Aldrich, *Life-style Evangelism—Crossing Traditional Boundaries to Reach the Unbelieving World*. Portland: Multnomah Press 1981, 19. See also: Samuel L. Goltermann, *Urban Ministry* in: *Missio Apostolica*, March 1999, 6-12.

6. Harvie M. Conn, (ed), *Planting and Growing Urban Churches—From Dream to Reality*. Grand Rapids: Baker House, 1997, 142-143.

7. "Erneuerung der Kirche ist daher nicht dankbar ohne Wiederentdeckung des einzelnen Glaubenden, ohne Wahrnehmung seiner Berufung, seiner geistlichen Ausstattung, seiner Erleuchtung und seines Geheiligt-Seins, ohne die Achtung seiner spezifischen Würde und der mit ihr verbundenen inneren und äußeren Möglichkeiten". (Hans-Martin Barth, *Einander Priester sein—Allgemeines Priestertum* in

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ökumenischer Sicht. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990, 23.

8. It is interesting to note, that the early church did not built churches until the end of the second century (Karl Heussi, *Kompendium der Kirchengeschichte*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Verlag, 1981, 74).

9. Ichak Adizes, *Managing Corporate Lifecycles*. Paramus: Prentice Hall, 1999; Edgar Machel, *Will Church Planting Help a Denomination to Stay in Prime? A Reflection about the Lifecycle of a Denomination and Church Planting*, in: *Journal of The American Society for Church Growth*, vol. 13, Wi 2002, 9-18.

10. The search for authenticity “reveals the longing after the uniqueness of one self”. Credibility allows people to find themselves because they get in touch with something real (Matthias Horx, *Trendbüro—Megatrends für die späten neunziger Jahre*. Düsseldorf: Econ Verlag, 1996 (2), 135).

11. Jürgen Moltmann, *Neuer Lebensstil—Schritte zur Gemeinde*. München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1977, 153.

12. Hermann Brandt, *Mission als nota ecclesiae*. in: *Zeitschrift für Mission*. 1/2002, 7-31.

13. Dan Southerland, *Transitioning—Leading your Church through Change*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999.