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Church Launch: Start Small, Stay Small—Launch Large, Grow Larger!

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**CHURCH LAUNCH: START SMALL, STAY SMALL—LAUNCH
LARGE, GROW LARGER!**

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Dave Page

abstract

Launching churches is the new paradigm for church planting in America for the twenty-first century. The old school paradigm was to plant a church and watch it grow slowly, like a tree. The new church planting metaphor is launching a church, like launching a rocket ship into space. This article argues that launching large churches is the most effective means of evangelism in the short and long run. Start small, and the church will stay small, as most do. Launch large, and the church has an opportunity to keep on growing. By launching large, churches can break church growth barriers more quickly, become sustainable much faster, and reproduce much sooner.

my story

Truth be told, I really did not know what I was doing when I planted my first church, and not much was written on the subject at the time. I just knew I had a call from God to reach my unchurched friends by starting a church. I decided my best strategy was to find someone who had done it well and have them coach and mentor me in the process. A chance meeting with Rick Warren turned out to be a

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divine appointment. At the time, Saddleback Church was seven years old, and
about two thousand people were attending.

Donald McGavran greatly influenced Warren, who believed that God wanted
His church to grow—He wanted His lost sheep found! Saddleback Church had a
core group of fifteen people who hand addressed and hand stamped fifteen
thousand letters that they mailed throughout the community. The letters arrived a
week early, and sixty people from the community came for a dress rehearsal
service. The next Sunday, the church held its first worship service on Easter, April
6, 1980, and 205 people came. This was the beginning of a new paradigm for
church planting—launching large!

I first met Rick at a Southern Baptist evangelism conference. I shared with him
that God had called me to plant a church in Palmdale, California. He asked, “Why
Palmdale?” I replied, “My wife and I prayed about where to go, and I did some
demographic studies and believe Palmdale would be a great place to plant a
church.” We talked for about twenty minutes, and at the end of our conversation
he said, “Dave, Saddleback Church will sponsor you and your new church plant.”
He encouraged me to attend a seminar that he was teaching the next week that the
Fuller Institute of Church Growth sponsored. The seminar was called, “How to
Plant a Church.”

The first presenter at the seminar was C. Peter Wagner. At the end of his
presentation on demographics he stated, “If I was going to plant a church today, I
would plant in Palmdale, because it’s the fastest growing city in the state of
California of cities under 50,000 people.”¹ My first thought was, “Oh no, now all
two hundred of the seminar attendees are going to move to Palmdale to plant a
church.” In reality, it was God’s way of confirming my call to Palmdale. This was
the beginning of my journey into the world of church planting and church growth.

I figured if Rick could launch large, then maybe I could, as well. We sold our
home, moved to Palmdale, started a home Bible study, and held our first public
worship service out of a hotel five months later. We had 154 people come to the
launch of Harvest Community Church. Eight years later, we felt God call us to
Auburn, California, a suburb of Sacramento, to plant again. This time we had a
core group that grew to seventy people, and we launched Bayside Auburn Church
with 383 people on Easter Sunday, the largest launch in the history of the
California Southern Baptist Convention at the time. Ten years later, we felt God
calling us back to Southern California to start a third church. With a core group of
thirty people, we had 220 people at our first preview service and 260 people on

¹ C. Peter Wagner, quote from the “How to Plant a Church” seminar at the Fuller Institute of Church Growth, 1988.

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Conejo Church's launch Sunday. All three church plants were daughter churches of Saddleback.

If I can do it, so can you! I planted three churches in California, all of which launched large, two of which grew to be very large (over one thousand) and reproduced. I became the primary trainer at the Purpose-Driven Church Planting Seminars at Saddleback Church for ten years. I am not an authority on many things, but I feel I do know a little about launching large churches and breaking through growth barriers quickly. Some have written books on launching large but have never done it. If you feel God calling you to start a church, and you want to launch large, I would encourage you to find someone who has done it before, in order to learn how to do it yourself.

I have a passion to see people won to Jesus Christ and to see changed lives. I also have a great love and admiration for church planters. I enjoy training them, coaching them, and empowering them to launch thriving churches and to reach their fullest leadership capacity. My goal is to do for church planters what Rick Warren did for me.

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I am now the director of church planting for the Evangelical Free Church of America (west district). I help coach all different types of church planters launch their various models of churches as large as possible. By God's grace, our district has planted thirty-five churches in the last six years, the majority of which have launched large. In this article, I will share three examples of churches in our district that have recently launched large and continue to grow.

a major paradigm shift

New church plants typically start out small; many begin as home Bible studies or in a storefront. The old paradigm was to plant a church and watch it slowly grow, like a tree. The Southern Baptist denomination used to refer to new church plants as mission churches. The mission church would not become a full-fledged church until it was at least three years old. When I planted my first church, the director of missions for the local SBC Association gave me a book on church planting that laid out a plan for breaking the twenty-five, fifty, seventy-five, and one hundred attendance barriers within the first few years of the church. We had already broken the one hundred barrier in our grand opening service.

A generation ago, pastors who planted churches had it a bit easier. Regardless of the model they used, if they built a church building, people would come. That was when the majority of Americans went to church. That is not the case now. Today, we live in a postmodern and post-Christian society. Most Americans still

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 5, Iss. 2 [2014], Art. 4 say they believe in the existence of God and are spiritual but not religious, but most of them do not attend church these days. David Olson, author of *The American Church in Crisis*, did a national survey recently and found that only 17.5 percent of Americans attend a local church on any given Sunday.²

In today's culture, a new church is not something put into the ground and tended to, hoping that it will eventually grow—that is an old school church planting metaphor. Rather, starting a church is more like launching a rocket ship into space—a new church planting metaphor. This metaphor fits this postmodern, post-Christian, information age as we transition into a conceptual age characterized by creativity, innovation, and design. This metaphor of launching large is what differentiates it from traditional church planting thinking. Anyone who has ever witnessed a rocket launch at the Kennedy Space Center has seen the power exerted to get the rocket ship off the ground. Neighbors who live nearby remove everything that hangs on their walls because of the blast. People can see the rocket launch hundreds of miles away, and everyone within a thirty-mile radius can feel it. Like a rocket ship, churches are now launched into communities. They explode onto the scene and capture everyone's attention.³

I believe the three main metaphors for church planting include planting, birthing, and launching. Has anyone invited you to a planting? Probably not. If they ever did, I do not think you would find it very exciting. The apostle Paul used the planting metaphor when he said, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."⁴ God is always the One who gives the growth, but Paul was referring to a metaphor that made sense to people living in an agrarian culture in the first century. Has anyone ever invited you to a birth? I am talking about being invited to witness the birth of a baby that is not your own—probably not.

Bob Logan, author of *The Church Planter's Toolkit*, was the first person I read who used the birth analogy for starting churches and the various stages that accompany the birth process. Church planting is a lot like having a baby; it brings incredible joy and pain all at the same time, not to mention the postpartum depression! There is a built-in urgency in birthing a baby with a set timeline. The baby should not be birthed prematurely or wait very long after the nine month gestation period is complete. The goal is to birth a healthy baby. However, I believe the best metaphor for church planting in the twenty-first century is launching. Rockets, movies, careers, new business ventures, new products, and new churches can all be launched.

² David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 150.

³ Ron Sylvia, *Planting New Churches on Purpose* (Lake Forest: Purpose-Driven, 2006), 107.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:6.

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In fact, I believe the early church in the book of Acts was launched. Acts 1 and 2 says that the first church went from a core group of 12 to 120, to over 3,000 believers overnight. Acts 2:47 states, “Each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.” The number of believers actually grew daily! Acts 4:4 reads that many of the people who heard the disciples’ message believed it, and the number of believers totaled about five thousand men, not counting women and children. Conservative estimates put the number of believers around twenty thousand. In the first year after Christ’s death, the number of believers grew from 120 to 220,000. So, not only is crazy, go big, huge growth possible, it is biblical!⁵ Like the early church of Acts, your church, if growth is a part of your and your people’s vision, can grow beyond what you could ever imagine.⁶

New church launches are vibrant, life-changing, living organisms positioned to impact communities in a great way by bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ in a relevant way to a desperate, hungry, lost, fast-moving, and ever-changing world. God’s vision and plans for new churches today are limitless. I believe the greatest churches in the world are yet to be launched. You could be the pastor of one of those churches! I challenge you to stop planting and start launching.

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what is large?

Nelson Searcy (who served on staff at Saddleback, went through our training, and started the Journey Church in New York City and in South Florida), defines launching large as “the ability of a new church to reach as many people as possible within the first six to eight months of existence.”⁷ Large is a relative term, and it depends on your city, your context, and the culture you are trying to reach.

I coached a friend named David Miller, a former mega church pastor turned church planter, who started a church in Exeter, California—think Mayberry R.F.D.! The population of Exeter is around ten thousand people with a little over three thousand households. The largest church in the city is the Assembly of God church that averages four hundred people on Sunday and has been in existence for over forty years. Most of the eight churches in the city average less than one hundred people. For Exeter, one hundred people would have been a huge launch! I told David he could have two hundred for their launch Sunday, and he thought I was crazy. After six months of preparation, Rocky Hill Community Church launched with just over two hundred people.

⁵ Bill Easum and Bil Cornelius, *Go Big* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 8.

⁶ Ephesians 3:20–21.

⁷ Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas, *Launch: Starting a New Church from Scratch* (Ventura: Regal, 2006), 28.

If a church was started in Lone Pine, California, where the population is 2,035 people, 50 people would be a big launch! I started churches in smaller to medium-size areas with populations between twelve thousand to forty thousand people. My wife and I were very involved and embedded in the communities in which we planted churches through coaching club sports, serving as a pastor, and serving as a schoolteacher. However, large would look very different in the heart of Los Angeles, Orange County, or Orlando.

Normally, I think of launching large as starting with one hundred, two hundred, three hundred, or more people at the grand opening. Again, this may differ with certain denominations, cultures, and ethnic groups.

Our mission at the EFCA is to “Glorify God by multiplying healthy churches among all people.”⁸ Launching healthy churches among all different people groups is very important to us. Each year we start at least one Filipino church in our district. We also attempt to start at least one Hispanic church. In both of these cultures, they typically start their churches very small, with fifty or less people. A couple of years ago, we started a Hispanic church in a predominantly Spanish community, with over two hundred people on its grand opening. Launching large is not just a strategy for suburbia.

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why launch large?

Launching large offers many benefits. Launching large provides the opportunity for more people to come to know Christ. Launching large provides a large group of people with which to follow up and assimilate into the church.

Launching large helps a church thrive and become healthy more quickly. Many new churches tend to focus on survivability versus thriving. Ed Stetzer found in his Survivability Study that the typical church plant does not pass one hundred people after four years and that average size is approximately ninety-two people.⁹ This is the difference between viewing the new church as a full-fledged church versus a mission church from the beginning.

Church plants that do not break the two hundred barrier within the first two years after going public lessen their ability to do so ever. “I’ve noticed over and over that if a church doesn’t get beyond 200 within about a year and a half, it usually doesn’t happen at all. On the other hand churches that get over 200 in the first year just keep on growing and growing.”¹⁰

⁸ Evangelical Free Church of America, mission statement.

⁹ Ed Stetzer and Phillip Connor, “Church Plant Survivability and Health Study 2007,” *Research Bulletin*, North American Mission Board, 47 pages.

¹⁰ Rick Warren, quote from his *Purpose-Driven Church Conference*.

and more quickly than churches that do not launch large.

Churches that launch large tend to create a buzz within the community. Crowds attract crowds. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, once said, “When you set yourself on fire, people love to come and see you burn.” People are attracted to new beginnings and significant events. A large launch creates excitement and enthusiasm and can greatly influence a community.

Churches that launch large have a tendency to establish credibility in a given community. “A growing population is a Kings glory; a dwindling nation is his doom.”¹¹ Launching large creates momentum. John Maxwell calls momentum “the big mo.” He writes, “Momentum is really a leader’s best friend. Sometimes it is the only difference between winning and losing. People throughout the organization are motivated to achieve more, and at a higher level. And maybe above all else, momentum makes the leader look good.”¹²

Launching large enables the church to become financially sustainable more quickly. Many denominations provide support for church planters for three years, gradually decreasing it each year. At the EFCA West, our goal is to see the plant be self-supporting within a year or two. Most churches of less than one hundred people are not able to pay a pastor a full-time salary. By launching large, the church can provide a full-time salary for the pastor and even salaries for other staff members. This is a problem with missional communities and house churches. Unless the founding pastor wants to stay bivocational for the rest of his life, he might want to consider a large launch.

Launching large can help a new church reproduce sooner. Our EFCA West goal is to see our churches reproduce a daughter church within the first three years of its existence.

disclaimer: launching large is not for everyone

Challenges certainly must be considered in advance before deciding to launch large. You must count the cost—financially, emotionally, spiritually, and in terms of leadership ability. It takes exceptional leadership skills to launch large. Launching large is not for everyone. Rick Warren stated, “I have discovered one great common denominator in every growing church, regardless of denomination or location: leadership that is not afraid to believe God. Growing churches are led by leaders who expect their congregation to grow.”¹³

¹¹ Proverbs 14:28.

¹² John Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 197.

¹³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 398.

church planter, which includes the following: a clear call, a compelling vision, big faith, likeability, humility, flexibility, leadership skills, entrepreneurial skills, communication skills, evangelism and discipleship skills, emotional health, spousal support, integrity, enthusiasm, and a strong work ethic.

gathering a core group

Church plants without a solid core group will tend to falter and fail. Being able to gather a core team distinguishes the professionals from the amateurs in church planting. If a core group cannot be gathered, then a church cannot be started. I have found that the larger the core group prior to the launch, the more people will be able to be assimilated into the church.

202 So how many people will be needed in a core group prior to starting the church in order to launch large? At least twenty-five to fifty adults or more will need to be in the core group in order to launch large. Researcher Steven Gray found that fast growing church plants had a larger number of people involved in the core group before the launch. While struggling church plants had twenty-five or less in a core group, fast-growing church plants had twenty-six to fifty.¹⁴ In discussing core group size, Malphurs states, “Bigger is better.”¹⁵ Peter Wagner believes, “To launch into public worship prior to building a significant core group is not recommended.”¹⁶ Core group development is one of the most crucial issues of any church plant. I cannot stress enough how important it is to gather a good-sized core group.

Build your core group through your friends and their network of friends. We started each of our churches with a Bible study in our home, which became the core group and grew into the launch team for each new church.

Where do you find core group members to help you start the church? Everywhere! I received referrals from friends, churches, colleges, and employees from my wife’s work. My wife (Carrie) worked as an assistant manager at a yogurt shop, and I was able to recruit many of the workers, including the manager, to be part of our new church.

I registered for a basketball class at the local community college in order to meet and make new friends that could join our church. I also recorded a radio commercial on the local Christian radio station. I shared the vision of the new

¹⁴ Stephen Gray, *Planting Fast-Growing Churches* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 2007), 110.

¹⁵ Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 320.

¹⁶ C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990), 120.

Page: Church Launch: Start Small, Stay Small—Launch Large, Grow Larger! church and invited listeners to our first home Bible study a week later. Nine people came from the radio, and each of them became part of our core group that helped us launch the church.

developing a leadership team

Lyle Schaller said, “Starting a new church is one of the loneliest jobs in the world. I wouldn’t do it unless I were part of a team.”¹⁷ Developing a leadership team is essential for launching large. I have started a church from scratch with just my wife and me, and I have started a church with a team. I highly encourage you to gather a team in order to launch large. When we started our second church, I was the point person over the church—the quarterback of the team. We also had a point person over worship/music/creative arts (a part-time paid employee), a point person over children’s ministry, a point person over evangelism, a point person over discipleship, a point person over students’ ministry, and a point person who oversaw our administration (a volunteer secretary who worked twenty hours per week).

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It is extremely important that team members understand that they are joining the lead pastor in launching the church and not the other way around. They must buy into the lead pastor’s vision and philosophy of ministry, or they need to find another church.

When recruiting team members, we look for people with the right character, competency, chemistry, and culture (organizational fit). Team members need to be responsible to raise a large portion, if not all, of their salary. The lead planter is not responsible to raise funds for other team members. Fundraising is to be short term, one or two years at the most. We normally begin by hiring part-time employees from within our church. When funds become available, we move people from quarter time to half time and from half time to full time.

We also implement what I call the “50% Staff Salary Strategy.” In faith, if you have 50 percent of the salary needed for a potential staff member, then you can bring him on staff. This does not mean that you have half of his salary for the year sitting in the bank. It means that you have half of his monthly salary right now in your ongoing budget. The principle is that a good staff person is worth his salt and will help the church grow, thus bringing in more revenue.

¹⁷ Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 300.



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preview services

Preview services are one of the greatest innovations in the church planting world in the last two decades. David Olson of the Covenant Church originally invented previews, and Pastor Ray Johnston of Bayside Church in Granite Bay, California, first implemented them in 1995. Preview services were designed specifically to attract a crowd, and then turn that crowd into a church. Preview services are monthly services prior to the launch (grand opening), which is when the weekly worship services begin. Preview services ease the unchurched into attending church on a gradual basis—they like it because church only meets once a month!

Bayside Church offered its first preview as an experiment. They rented the Granite Bay Golf Club on a rainy Sunday morning in January. A small core group of people from a Covenant Church in Folsom, California, invited their friends and sent direct mailers into the community. The church initially set up eighty chairs. When Pastor Ray saw it begin to rain, he asked the ushers to remove forty chairs. They had to put back those forty chairs and add a bunch more, as 161 people attended that first preview service. Pastor Ray thought, “Why not do another service like this next month, and see what happens?” At the second preview service, 226 people came. They were onto something. In all, Bayside Church offered six monthly services in order to gather a large number of people for their grand opening. It worked so well, that they had over four hundred people when they launched on their grand opening Sunday.

Preview services are like sneak previews for a coming movie. They introduce the community to what the new church will be like. They should be a model of what the regular Sunday services will be like following the grand opening. They are

Page: Church Launch: Start Small, Stay Small—Launch Large, Grow Larger! evangelistic events that can have extraordinary results. They are “big days” that provide an opportunity for the core group to invite all their friends and family to the new church. They are not to be confused with practice services, even though they provide good practice. I encourage having between three to six monthly preview services leading up to the grand opening. Steven Gray found that the more preview services a church offered, the more people they reached at their launch.¹⁸

All the preview services are important, but in my opinion, the first preview service is the most important. It sets the stage for all the others, and it has the potential to build tremendous momentum if done well. I encourage church planters to do their best outreach and marketing for the first preview service, as it will affect all the other previews.

comeback events

In order to build relationships with the new people who come to one or more of the preview services, a second technique used alongside preview services is called a “comeback event.” A comeback event is scheduled two weeks after the preview service. For my first comeback event, we rented a roller skating rink and invited everybody from our first preview service to join us. We had seventy-two people come to roller skate! For another comeback event, we had a “pastor’s chat” in our home, and thirty-five people came. In this casual setting, my wife and I met many of the new people, built relationships with them, and become friends.

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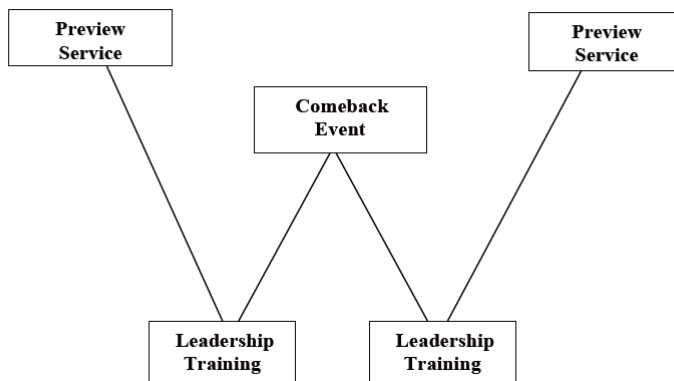
leadership training

Leadership training is scheduled for the first and third weeks after a preview service. This is a time of training for the core group. It is a chance to debrief after each preview service and strategize on how to improve the following preview service. Leadership training also provides a chance to enlist new people for service in the new plant and to continue to do ministry training with the regular core group. However, the primary goal is not to have a new person come to the bi-monthly leadership training but to come to the next comeback event.

working the “w”

The launching large preview strategy includes having a preview service, followed by a night of leadership training, followed by a comeback event, followed by another

¹⁸ Stephen Gray, *Planting Fast-Growing Churches* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2007), 115.



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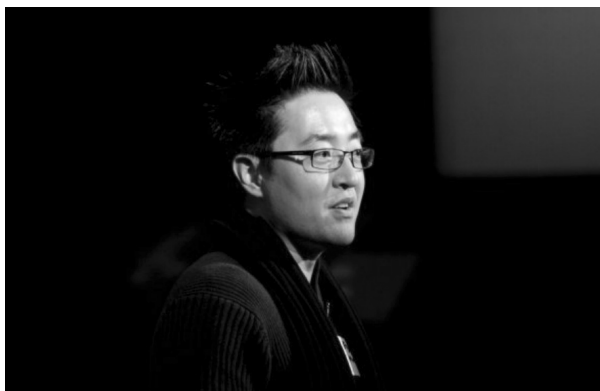
night of leadership training, and then another preview service. The goal is to string between three to six months of “W’s” together in order to have a large grand opening. I call it “Working the W.”

highlighting three groundbreaking church plants

Each of the church planters below launched large churches within the EFCA West district within the last four years. Each planter went through the following A, B, C’s of our district’s training: assessment, boot camp, and coaching. Our assessment is a full-day behavioral assessment of the potential planter and his spouse. Boot camp is five full days of training, and coaching is ongoing.

meet ryan kwon

Ryan Kwon planted Resonate Church in Fremont, California, less than three years ago. Ryan was a teaching pastor at Bridges Community Church when he felt God



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call him to start Resonate. The elders and the staff of Bridges fully supported the new work, and Ryan was able to gather over one hundred people from the mother church to join his core group. Resonate is a gospel-centered church and feels called to become a catalyst that provokes a missional movement to bring wholeness to their city for Jesus Christ.

At my request, Ryan attended the Exponential Conference in Orlando in 2010. It was at that conference that he felt God calling him to start a church. Resonate Church believes in loving their city and participates in many servant evangelism projects. In fact, the church calls itself, “A church for the city.” They began holding public services at Oliveira Elementary School, and members of the church participated in a workday to improve the public school.

At a result, many of the teachers from that school and some of the administration from the school district attended Resonate’s first preview service. Resonate held three preview services. At their first preview service, 170 people (140 adults and 30 kids) came. On their launch Sunday (grand opening), 390 people (350 adults and 40 kids) came. The church is committed to reaching the unchurched with the gospel and last year baptized ninety-nine people! Resonate Church launched large and continues to grow. This healthy church is now averaging over one thousand people each Sunday and has plans to launch many new churches in the near future, beginning in 2014 when the church will be four years old.

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meet mark lee

Mark Lee planted Vantage Point Church in Eastvale, California, four years ago. Mark was an associate pastor at the EV Free church in Diamond Bar when the lead pastor, Mark Hopper, felt their church needed to plant a new church in



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Eastvale. Mark felt God calling him to be the man to start a new church for a new community. Mark gathered about forty people in his core group who went with him from the mother church to start Vantage Point.

They started the church by asking God a question, “Can a group of people doing simple acts of kindness really make a difference in a community?” The church began doing random acts of kindness for residents in the community. They handed out thousands of bottles of water, washed cars, hauled away trash to the dumpster, did a gas buy down, and paid for coffee for the person behind them in the drive-through line at Starbucks! The goal was to show people the love of God in a tangible way. This church seeks to love people into the kingdom of God—they have a genuine heart for the unchurched.

I began coaching Mark about six months prior to their launch. We developed a strategy to launch large by combining servant evangelism and direct mail. Mark said, “We knew going into it that the two hundred barrier is the hardest barrier for a church to break, so we tried to get the biggest running start we could for our launch.” The church sent direct mail to every residence in Eastvale, about twenty thousand homes.

At their first preview, they had 220 people—a tremendous start. The church held five previews, and then launched with 353 people one month before Easter. They intentionally launched a month prior to Easter in order to network many of the friends of those who came to their launch. The strategy worked, as 414 people came to Vantage Point Church for their first Easter Sunday, just one month after the launch. At their first baptism, they baptized fifty-three new believers and have since baptized a few hundred people. Today, Vantage Point Church has over one thousand people attending each weekend.

meet matt larson

Matt Larson planted Anthem Church three years ago in Thousand Oaks, California. Matt was a student pastor at EV Free Conejo Church in Newbury



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Park, California. Matt interned under Dave Ferguson and the *New Thing Network* in Chicago for nearly one year. This was crucial in developing a passion for reproduction. Matt, more than any of our planters, gets it—that we are trying to plant churches that plant churches. Anthem’s slogan is, “Helping people find their way back to God.”

Anthem Church utilized social media, primarily Facebook and Twitter, to draw people to their church. They also sent direct mail for their grand opening but not for any of their previews. Anthem Church held four preview services, had a little over two hundred at their first preview, and launched with a little over three hundred at their grand opening. Anthem Church has seen many people come to Christ over the last three years, many people baptized, and many leaders developed. The church is averaging 350 people each Sunday morning.

What is unique about this church is that they have now planted two daughter churches in just three years! Reproduction is in their DNA. When the church was just eighteen months old, they started Anthem Church Camarillo with Pastor Kevin Bailey. Kevin launched with 153 people. Then just a month ago, they started Restored Church in Mission Valley (San Diego) with Pastor Andy Rodgers. Andy launched with 203 people.

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This is unprecedented within the EFCA, but I believe it will become a model for future EFCA church plants! Some may think it is impossible for a new church to plant another church in that short of time, but as Jesus said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible!”¹⁹

I compare this to Roger Banister breaking the four-minute mile on May 6, 1954. Nobody had ever run a sub-four-minute mile. Most believed it was impossible. Some even thought a runner’s heart would burst if he tried. Banister believed he could do it, and the rest is history. As a result, in less than two years, thirty-seven other runners ran a sub-four-minute mile. I believe this is what we are going to see in the EFCA! I believe we will see many of our EFCA church plants and future plants reproducing churches when they are only one, two, or three years old! This will someday result in multiplication.

what do large launch churches have in common? (twenty characteristics)

Below are twenty characteristics of large launch churches. A common denominator of our three EFCA West churches is that they emulate most if not all of the following characteristics:

¹⁹ Matthew 19:26.

1. Large launch churches are led by strong leaders with extraordinary faith—men who are not afraid to trust God for big things. They are willing launch large, risk much, and go out on a limb in order to see fruit. “If you can explain what is going on then God didn’t do it!”²⁰

2. Large launch churches feel their primary purpose for existing is to reach unchurched people with the gospel. They have a burning passion to reach unchurched people. They have a deep conviction that lost people matter to God and need to be found. They are not trying to reach existing Christians who attend other churches. They also have a deep conviction in the power of the gospel to change lives.

3. Large launch churches have a clearly defined target group of people they are trying to reach. People usually reach others just like them when they start a church—it is called the “homogeneous principle.” Most planters are young, so they reach young people. These planters realize they cannot reach everyone, so they target certain groups that they can reach best. However, as the church grows, it is in a great position to reach all kinds of people. The apostle Paul felt called to reach Gentiles and targeted this group.

4. Large launch churches use contemporary music that is relevant to the community they are reaching. Most of the three EFCA West churches resemble a rock concert. The music is loud and jamming but also very meaningful to those attending.

5. Large launch churches value innovation. They are open to experimenting with new ideas to reach people and improve ministries. They are the R&D (research and development) group of the church. They are not afraid to fail—they see it as an education.

6. Large launch churches start with a team. All three of the church planters had preselected a worship leader, some paid and some volunteer, to help them launch the church. Effective preaching and excellent worship music are the bread and butter for a new plant. All three of our EFCA West churches also started with a full-time paid associate pastor and a part-time paid or volunteer secretary. You can start a church with just you and your wife and kids, but I greatly encourage starting with a team.

7. Large launch churches develop a large core group, usually between twenty-five to fifty or more, before they have their first preview services. Starting from scratch is still an effective way to start a church, but as director of church planting, I much prefer to start churches that have the support of a mother church.

²⁰ Warren W. Wiersbe, *On Being a Servant of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 16.

launch. These churches hold many previews and especially emphasize the first preview as being the most important one.

9. Large launch churches have a mother church birthing them and supporting them. Each of our three EFCA West large launches had a mother church that helped them in significant ways.

10. Large launch churches utilize nice, rented buildings in which to meet. All three of our EFCA West churches began in schools—elementary, intermediate, or high schools. Anthem church started out of California Lutheran University. Each school has a pleasant appearance, is fairly new, and is easily accessible. Most people in the community are familiar with where the school is located in town.

11. Large launch churches love their cities. They serve their communities through servant evangelism projects. They seek to be a blessing to the community and to make the world a better place.

12. Large launch churches look for people who are receptive to reach. Vantage Point Church planted a new church in a new community. These churches realize that people are very open to spiritual things when under tension or in transition. Matt Larson performs strategic weddings for unchurched couples to reach them for Christ.

13. Large launch churches understand their identity and successfully brand and market their church. These churches utilize demographic studies, killer websites, social media, and direct mail. They know who they are and who they can and cannot reach.

14. Large launch churches utilize technology. They use computers, iPads, and video in their offices and in their services. All three of our EFCA West pastors use iPads to preach with and microset headset microphones that clip on their ear and give superior performance. Each of our three churches utilize portable church equipment, great sound systems, video screens, and flat screen TV's.

15. Large launch churches value children's ministry. This is usually a signature ministry for our new large churches and is something each one of our three EFCA West churches emulates.

16. Large launch churches are praying churches. Prayer shows that dependency is on God and His resources.

17. Large launch churches have excellent communicators that teach biblical and practical messages geared toward the felt needs of people. They believe the Bible is the Word of God and teach it in a loving yet truthful manner. They know that it does not return void but that it changes lives.

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18. Large launch churches are generous and unselfish. All three of our EFCA

West churches are generous to those in the community and look for ways to serve others and financially bless them. Anthem Church gave away their first offering to another new church. They also raised nearly thirty thousand dollars to bring fresh water to a tribe in Africa.

19. Large launch churches are led by pastors who are lifelong learners. These church planters listen to their coaches and learn all they can. They seek mentors to help them grow, and they learn from one another through coaching networks and pastor clusters.

20. Large launch churches value reproduction in every area in the church's ministry and in terms of planting new churches. Anthem Church and Resonate Church have already planted daughter churches.

conclusion

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why plant new churches?

Jesus' essential call was to plant churches.²¹ "The Great Commission is not just a call to 'make disciples' but to 'baptize' them as well, which means to incorporate them into a church. Paul's strategy was to plant churches in strategic cities. The evidence is overwhelming that starting new churches is best means for fulfilling the Great Commission and reaching unchurched people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Dozens of denominational studies have confirmed that the average new church gains most of its new members (60–80%) from the ranks of people who are not attending any worshipping body, while churches over ten-fifteen years of age gain 80–90% of new members by transfer from other congregations."²² This means that the average new congregation will bring six to eight times more people that are new into the life of the church than an older congregation of the same size would bring.

I think this is why C. Peter Wagner described church planting as "the single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven."²³ Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church and church planting advocate said, "The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for the numerical growth of the Body of Christ in any city, and the continual corporate renewal and revival of the existing churches in a city. Nothing else—not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, growing mega-churches,

²¹ Matthew 28:18–20.

²² Lyle Schaller, *Church Growth Strategies That Work* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 100.

²³ C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Growth* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1987), 168.

Page: Church Launch: Start Small, Stay Small—Launch Large, Grow Larger! congregational consulting, nor church renewal processes—will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting.”²⁴

why launch large when planting a church?

God desires for all people to be saved. “Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”²⁵ Jesus said, “Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full.”²⁶ Large launch churches are set on reaching large numbers of people with the gospel.

The heart of God is to see His lost people found. The stories of the lost coin, sheep, and son in Luke 15 are compelling. God wants His lost sheep (people) found and His prodigals to return home! The shepherd is willing to leave the ninety-nine to find the lost one. Launching large is an all-out rescue for lost people to help them find their way back to God—not just one by one but in families and in large groups of people through “oikos” evangelism. We must then incorporate those we reach into the body of Christ, and this is what large launch churches do.

God is a sending God. Jesus said, “I came to seek and to save the lost.”²⁷ “Missio Dei” is a Latin Christian theological term that can be translated as the “mission of God,” or the “sending of God.” Mission is understood as being derived from the very nature of God. The missionary initiative comes from God alone. Large launch churches are missional at their very core. They exist for the sake of those who are not part of the church. Their primary mission is to reach the lost. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”²⁸

The early church launched large. We see the launching large methodology used by God to birth the first church in Jerusalem. Jesus selected twelve disciples and then gathered a large core group of 120 people who waited on God to move. This resulted in Peter preaching the gospel and three thousand people being saved and incorporated into the church in one day! Talk about a large launch! I recently coached a church planter named Joby Martin who launched large in Jacksonville, Florida. Joby’s church, Church at Eleven 22, bought an abandoned Wal-Mart and reached out into the city with a large core group. They had 3,300 people attend their launch in the new building. They literally rocked the city of Jacksonville that day!

²⁴ Tim Keller, “Why Plant Churches,” 2002.

²⁵ 2 Peter 3:9.

²⁶ Luke 14:23.

²⁷ Luke 19:10.

²⁸ John 20:21.

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We have the technology that was not available a generation ago to spread out in new ways to reach people. Why not harness that technology for God by launching large churches?

Practically speaking, launching large enables a church to reach more people for Christ initially and in the end. Hundreds of people can be reached in just a few short months of preview services and a grand opening. Ed Stetzer, author of *Planting Missional Churches*, wrote, “Most churches today start with a large launch . . . seven out of ten people in attendance at the (large) launch service are typically unbelievers without church experience.”²⁹ He also stated, “Church planters have learned that a public (large) launch is most effective.”³⁰

By launching large, churches can quickly blow by church growth barriers, especially the dreaded two hundred barrier. It is a great momentum builder. Nearly ninety percent of churches never break through the two hundred barrier. We see many of our churches doing this routinely.

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By launching large, churches become financially sustainable much faster. Most of our EFCA West churches that launch large become financially sustainable within two years, some in less than a year.

Launching large gives the leader credibility. Gaining credibility is a great challenge for a new church planter. When a church grows, it builds momentum and translates into credibility in the eyes of the people attending—especially when it grows beyond two hundred people in the first or second year.

Possibly the greatest reason to launch large is that churches can reproduce much sooner than a typical church plant of under one hundred people, because they have greater resources and more people to do so. Hopefully, this can lead to a church planting movement of reproducing churches!

The bottom line is, churches that start small normally stay small, and churches that launch large normally keep on growing.

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²⁹ Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 258.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 259.

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