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Elmer Towns

Liberty University, eltowns@liberty.edu

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Contemporary Church Planting

Elmer Towns

The challenge of church planting has never been greater. There has always been the challenge of reaching people. But today's challenges are different than ever before, and more extreme than ever before. Today's challenges are exploding population, urbanization, technological innovations, expanding travel, complex international commercialization, the growing threat of terrorism, and growing secularization in First World or civilized countries; and in the Third World countries growing mysticism, spiritism, and demonism. Other challenges involve the influence of postmodernity, the influence of globalization through the United Nations, the collapse of church cooperation, i.e., World Council of Churches, Baptist World Alliance, etc.; the growth of individual addiction, the growth and pursuit of sports, and the exploding world of knowledge through the Internet and computer availability.

Still the only answer to all the challenges is the influence of the Gospel in lives and culture as the church carries out the Great Commission. When Jesus gave the Great Commission, *matheteusate panta ta ethne* (Matt. 28:19), He commanded that disciples must be made in every ethnic group. To become a disciple is to follow Jesus Christ. And when many people follow Jesus Christ, they join a community with others who follow Jesus Christ. When many disciples are made, it's church planting. The challenge is to plant many "Jesus communities" in all the various cultures of the world so all people can be reached with the Gospel. It takes many disciples to influence each *ethne* (i.e., culture) in the world. Therefore, our great challenge is carried out by planting churches.

The ultimate vision of carrying out the Great Commission

Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Spring 2006

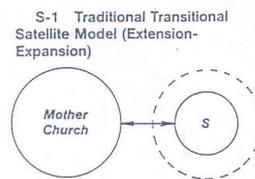
can be completely realized by a strategic policy of church planting. Most types of evangelism focus only in one area and produce limited results, i.e., radio evangelism, literature evangelism, youth evangelism, educational evangelism or medical evangelism. But when churches are planted, every type of ministry can be given to believers in the church who will carry out all ministries, i.e., discipleship, counseling, educating new believers in ministry to serve Christ, deploying believers, and equipping them to carrying on the work of Christ.

Church planting applies the logical progression of evangelism. Through church planting people are won to Christ (Mark 16:15), then discipled (Matt. 28:19), then congregationalized, i.e., baptized (Matt. 28:20), and finally educated (Matt. 28:20).

In our contemporary church world, much training for ministry has been transferred to colleges and seminaries, interdenominational agencies and denominational programs. But in fact, the best place for a person to develop abilities and attitudes for church ministry is to work in a church planting situation. When a church is being properly planted, those who help plant the new congregation are learning the biblical foundations of evangelism, plus acquiring discipline to evangelize an area, as well as gaining practical experience in evangelism. In essence, church planting builds up the believers who are building the church, as well as evangelizing an area.

New Models of Church Planting

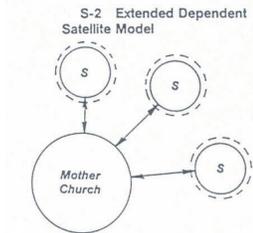
1. *Mother/Daughter-church planting.*¹ The traditional model was a New Testament church sending a church planting team, or members, or an individual to start a new church much like the sending church. Church growth leaders have used the technical expression *extension growth* to describe one church starting another church like itself in a culture similar to the one in which the mother church is located. The technical expression *expansion growth* describes a church that begins a different kind of congregation, i.e., a White/Anglo-Saxon congregation beginning a black congregation made up of African-Americans. Expansion growth describes the differences between the mother church and the new church in regards to culture, language, or class.



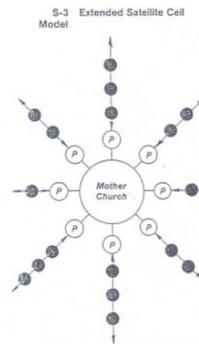
2. *The extended-satellite model.*² This occurs when a mother church begins ministry in another location but without the purpose of making the new ministry an indigenous church plant.

While the new ministry looks like a local church, the purpose was never to make it a separate church. Throughout history, this type of ministry has been attempted through Sunday school extensions, missions and/or mission churches.

Currently, the video-venue church is being used where a strong mother church goes into unevangelized areas to begin a church like itself, offering all of the major ministries in the new location, i.e., that is the new church offers all ministry except the sermon. In these video venue church plants, the music, announcements, special music, drama, children's work, small groups, pastoral care, and other types of ministries are administered by a church team on site. However, the sermon is usually videotaped at the mother church and then shown to the new congregation. The intent of the mother church is to never to break off the new video venue into a separate indigenous congregation. But at the same time, the mother church is extending its ministry into a new area by a new "church plant," called video venue.

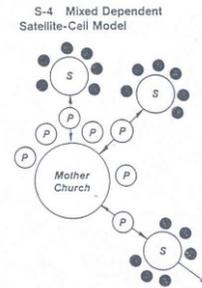


3. *The extended-satellite cell model.*³ This ministry happens when a group is sent to organize a cell made up of Christians in outlying communities from the mother church. As an illustration, Pastor Yonggi Cho of the Yoido Full Gospel Central Church in South Korea, has reported approximately 65,000 small cell groups throughout the city of Seoul, Korea, located in living rooms, laundry rooms, recreation rooms, and restaurants; among other places. Each group has approximately 10 people in number, the leaders of the cell minister to the people of the cell group, i.e., they give all ministry except Sunday morning church services.⁴ The extended satellite-cell model was not intended to start churches, however many of the small groups become strong and break off, forming themselves into a local church.

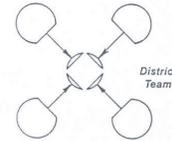


4. *A dependent-satellite cell model of church planting.*⁵ The secret of this church plant is that the mother church begins both satellite churches and cells at the same time. On occasion, some of the cells begun by the mother church become satellite churches. But most of the time, the mother church intentionally

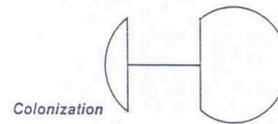
plants a new church. Then the new satellite church forms cells just like the mother church. All churches and cells rely on the mother church for vision, inspiration and direction. Pastor David Earley of New Life Community Church in Gahanna, Ohio, has begun four churches following this model. Each one of the satellite churches bears the same name as his church, i.e., New Life Community Church. As an illustration, the New Life Community Church of Gahanna has approximately 2,000 in attendance. In a nearby community, Pastor Matt Chittum began New Life Community Church of Hilliard, Ohio, with an attendance of approximately 150. The mother church has 90 cells and the Hilliard church has 10 cell groups.



5. *The associational and district-church plant.*⁶ Many Southern Baptist associations (including denominational state and county organizations) have banded together with money, resources, and vision to plant a new church in or near the association. The new church plant is begun by an association, even though it may or may not have one or two sponsoring mother churches from that denomination. The new church is then birthed by the association using all its resources to birth the new church.



6. *The colonization-church plant.*⁷ This is where a church plans to start another church that is an extension of itself, but it is not primarily a new church plant for evangelism. The church extends itself into a different neighborhood with a plan to eventually move the mother church into that neighborhood. The Wallace Memorial Presbyterian Church in Downtown Washington, DC, made a bold initiative in the 1960s to move from a decaying inner-city neighborhood to the outlying suburbs of nearby Hyattsville, Maryland.

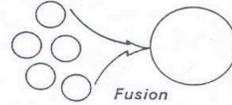


The church staff counseled members to move in the direction of the new church as they moved out of Downtown Washington. At the beginning of the church plant, the senior pastor preached three times a month in the downtown mother church and once a month in the new colonized church. As the new

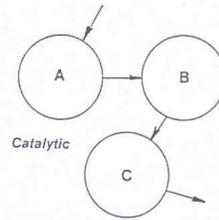
church plant began to grow, the senior pastor increased his presence in the new church as well as some still transferred to the new location. Then there came a time when the entire leadership of the church transferred from the downtown location to the Hyattsville, Maryland, location. The downtown church evolved into an indigenous church of people in the inner-city neighborhood.

7. *The fusion-church plant.*⁸

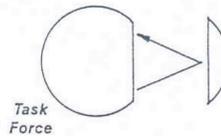
There have been occasions where more than one sick or dying churches have fused together to form a healthy congregation. While this is not a new church plant, it does represent raising up a new church in an area with new goals, new energy, new vision to reach the area.



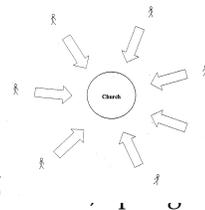
8. *The catalytic-church plan model.*⁹ This is where a dynamic church plants a daughter church like itself. Then the daughter church duplicates the process by planting another church like itself. In the catalytic role one church continues to plant another church, carrying on the investment made in the original church. The strength of this model is the duplication of a new church into different neighborhoods, with the same dynamic expressed in the original neighborhood.



9. *The task-force model of church planting.*¹⁰ This happens when a group is organized in the mother church that focuses on church planting. The group goes to a designated neighborhood and plants a church. When the church is self-sustaining, the task force returns to the mother church and makes plans to repeat the church planting operation in another area.



10. *The house-church movement.* There is a new church planting dynamic in the United States that takes energy from international missions and church history. In America, churches are springing up in homes and usually grow no more than 15-20 people. These home groups are not cells, because a cell is the extension of ministry from a local church. The home churches are completely independent and indigenous. Yet, the house



church looks nothing like a typical American institutional church.

First, most of the churches that I (Elmer) have researched are anti-program, which means they are anti-bureaucratic. They join together around the preaching or teaching of the Gospel and they minister without programs, committees, stated meetings, or organization. They just fellowship together to do what God teaches them to do.

Second, these house churches have reacted to the American expressions of leadership and the professional pastor. They believe ministry emerges from among themselves and is not tied to education, ordination, or ecclesiastical recognition. Therefore, they have no organizational structure of leadership, nor do they have offices and positions. Individuals minister as God leads them to use their gifts.

The great revival of Christianity in China shows Christianity exploding through the house church movement. However, there seems to be no influence from the Chinese house church movement on the American movement. Rather, in America believers apply the Bible to themselves and become a community of believers who happen to meet in one place. The American house church movement doesn't seem to flourish on evangelism—as does the Chinese house church—but rather in America individual Christians who are disillusioned with the American church are replicating the institutional church. Also, the strength of the Chinese house church movement is their reaction to an oppressive government that applies “soft” persecution of the church and will not allow any overt church organization. There's no such pressure in the American house church movement.

The house-church model is also seen throughout history. Perhaps the best known was the Brethren of the Common Life who congregated in homes during the end of the Dark Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance. Again, the strength of this movement was the fact individuals were learning the Word of God in contrast to the ignorance and darkness of the culture in which they lived. Also, the people were reacting to opposition from the Roman Catholic Church.

Those involved in the American house-church movement say it is big, but there's no empirical evidence to prove them right. Their informality dictates resistance to anything of an organized reliable count of house churches or people.

Conclusion

Church planting seems to be a new “Hot” topic among Church Growth enthusiasts. But it is as old as the Great Com-

mission. The best way to fulfill the last command of Christ is to go to every ethnic group with a view of planting a church to evangelize every person in that ethnic group. Today, there are new methods of church planting, just as there have always been new methods of church planting. Remember, the focus is an eternal principles, not methods, because a method is only the application of God's eternal principle across time and cultural barriers (a principle is trans-cultural and trans-temporal). Our new methods are simply our way of carrying out the original Great Commission.

Methods are many,
Principles are few;
Methods may change,
But principles never do.

--Anon.

Writer

Towns, Elmer L. Address: Liberty University, School of Religion, 1971 University Blvd., Lynchburg, VA 24502. Email: eltowns@liberty.edu. Elmer Towns, best known as a college and seminary professor, currently serves as Dean of the School of Religion and Vice President at Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, which he co founded. He is widely known beyond university settings as a worldwide authority on Sunday school and church growth. He has written more than 2,000 magazine articles, and published more than 50 books. He has also created many popular church resources such as Friend Day, and received numerous awards, such as the coveted Gold Medallion Award from the Christian Booksellers Association. He is also co-founder of Church Growth Institute, Lynchburg, VA, a resource outlet for biblical and instructional material. His academic degrees come from Northwestern College, Southern Methodist University, Dallas Theological Seminary, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, and Fuller Theological Seminary.

NOTES

1. Diagrams are by John N. Vaughan and are based on the descriptions by Paul R. Orjala, *Get Ready to Grow* (Kansas City, Mo: Beacon Hills, 1978), 108-15.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. To see a full discussion of his church, see Elmer L. Towns, John N. Vaughan and David J. Seifert, "Imagine . . . 500,000 Church Members," *The Complete Book of Church Growth* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House

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Publishers, Inc., 1987), 61-68. An additional source may also be found on Online Books section of following website: www.elmertowns.com.

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.