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Book Review: The Facilitator Era: Beyond Pioneer Church Multiplication by Tom Steffen

Matthew L. Pierce

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Pierce: Book Review: *The Facilitator Era: Beyond Pioneer Church Multiplication* the task in terms of programmed steps instead of where it belongs, as a part of spiritual leadership. As Hammett emphasizes, Christians earn the right to talk about their own spiritual journey by establishing trusted relationships with those outside the church. At the same time, a sense of urgency leads us to be intentional about sharing our story and the biblical call to follow Christ. This happens in many ways, often numerous times within the same relationship. There is a difference between judging which causes a relationship barrier and demonstrating clearly that a personal relationship with Him, through Christ, is the desire of God's heart.

Several editorial weaknesses plague this book, not the least of which is the lack of a cohesive structure; Hammett simply tries to put too many varied topics, assessments, and resources into one package. The result is not enough space for in-depth case studies to help illustrate the principle themes. It is helpful when reading this book to remember that it was published in 2005. Some of the important websites Hammett recommends no longer exist or have changed addresses.

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In conclusion, Hammett is one of those people who understands clearly the challenges faced by North American churches in the face of shifting cultural landscapes. Christian spiritual leadership is effective to the extent it connects to those outside the church, while maintaining the integrity of faith. The congregation must decide: Is our church for us or is it for them?

Tom Steffen, *The Facilitator Era: Beyond Pioneer Church Multiplication*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011, 399 pp., \$46.00.

Reviewed by Matthew L. Pierce, former missionary to Thailand, student, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Tom Steffen served with New Tribes Mission for twenty years and is Professor of Intercultural Studies in the Cook School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University in La Mirada, California. Steffen's aim in this current work is to address what he has noticed to be a growing trend: many missionaries are moving away from the role as pioneer church planter into the role of facilitator. Facilitators work with existing national church-planting movements in training, Bible translation, and even selecting national church planters. Their roles are varied, and they are usually more holistic than previous generations of church planters.

Ralph Winter identified three eras of modern missions: Era 1, William Carey focused on the coastlands; Era 2, Hudson Taylor went inland; Era 3, Donald

According to Steffen, the fourth era has begun with the new focus on the facilitative role in ministry. Before he explains what is involved with this new era, he goes back and gives a history of church planting terminology and the Church Growth Movement. After establishing the background, he outlines the necessary skills for a facilitator and what the facilitator does.

He continues on to describe what is happening with megachurches in this new era of church planting. These megachurches are often averse to training and tend to glorify zeal without knowledge. Within this section on megachurches, he critiques Rick Warren's PEACE plan. The PEACE plan, like many other efforts by megachurches to do missions, was not developed in the context in which it is being implemented. The plan is answering the wrong questions. Before we begin to train leaders in another context, we need to learn their questions so we can address their problems. If we do not take the time to learn the context in which they are working, we will not address their needs.

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Next, Steffen discusses how missionaries are using Bible stories in training and evangelism. He provides sixteen case studies from around the world. In the concluding section, he critiques these case studies and notes the requirements for good facilitation. This section includes a chapter on the necessity of having all the skills of a pioneer church planter, even when one is doing the work of a facilitator. Steffen believes that McGavran and Townsend have passed the baton of leadership on to Rick Warren who is leading this era of facilitative church planting.

The first strength of Steffen's book is that when he critiques new movements, he offers suggestions for improvement. Should we always teach the gospel chronologically, using stories? Not necessarily, we should work with the local people's learning styles and not our own preferences. When we teach the gospel chronologically, we must remember not to leave out the propositional truths. He writes, "Propositions normally evolve from stories, not vice-versa" (128). What about western megachurches in missions? Many of these megachurches are averse to mission training and are making the same mistakes professional mission agencies made years ago. Such churches would be better off "standing on the shoulders of effective missionary predecessors so they don't have to reinvent the wheel and make the same mistakes of former generations" (85). If megachurch leaders would take the time to listen to missions experts, they could avoid some of the costly mistakes they have been making and more effective work could be done.

The second strength of Steffen's book is that he recognizes that neither the pioneer nor the facilitator should be in a hurry! Steffen helpfully writes that we

Pierce: Book Review: *The Facilitator Era: Beyond Pioneer Church Multiplication* must “*make haste slowly*, so that an *authentic* movement results” (355), not just a movement with large numbers and no staying power. He critiques David Garrison’s emphasis on speed in the book *Church Planting Movements*. This emphasis on speed is a Western idea that is foreign to most other cultures. Most cultures take their time and talk over decisions about major life changes as a group. The decisions might not happen as quickly as the missionary would like, but if he or she takes the time, the gospel message is more likely to remain pure, and be understandable, hopefully resulting in an authentic movement.

The third strength is the idea that the best facilitators use wisdom in church planting, training, and evangelism. They recognize that people are different from one context to another. Steffen states, “We must learn to match the model to the moment and to select effective strategies to accomplish it” (361). Saddleback Sam and Sally were great in Southern California but are not applicable in every context. Not every person within one people group has the same worldview. Even within one people group, there are subcultures that are very different from the majority culture. Globalization is changing everything, and effective facilitators need to be ready to reevaluate quickly what they are doing. Cross cultural workers need to be more dogmatic about the gospel and less dogmatic about their culturally defined strategies.

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While there is much good material to be gleaned from this book, there are shortcomings. The first limitation is the way the book is written as a dialogue between two stateside missionaries and a missions professor. At times, this narrative style was distracting.

Another shortcoming is the fact that case studies make up forty percent of this book. Case studies are helpful if they are used in a way that creates an opportunity for lengthy comparisons and critiques. When case studies are too long and varied, they are not amenable to generalization, and much of the chapter following the case studies could have been written without the sixteen case studies. This section might have been more helpful with fewer case studies that were varied in experience.

Even with these limitations, *The Facilitator Era* is a book every missions practitioner or student must read and keep around for reference. Steffen’s inclusion of the history of the Church Growth Movement, necessary skills for facilitators and critiques of short term missions, eschatologically-driven missions, and chronological Bible teaching make this book indispensable.