

Unit 8: Implications and Applications

Lecture: What We Can Learn From the Cell Church about Church Planting

Over the past weeks we've looked at a variety of cell churches; this week our attention turns to the current situation of United Methodism in the United States. A number of concerns are in the awareness of all persons attending the 2008 General Conference. How can an understanding of the cell church enable us to achieve these goals?

The concern: U.S. membership is shrinking at a time when 50 percent of the U.S. population has no ongoing relationship with a faith community. Since the most effective evangelism is through new churches, the church wants to start 650 new congregations with 63,000 members by 2012 as part of the proposed emphasis on church growth in the United States. The United Methodist Board of Discipleship has created Path One, an office of new congregational development, to lead this effort. Leaders say the goal is eventually to return the denomination to its evangelistic heyday of starting a new church every day.¹

Students of this course know by now that the most effective form of evangelism is through the practice of a cell church discipleship system. Multiplication, such as doubling, is far more effective than any form of addition. Multiplying disciples through evangelistic cells is more effective than adding congregations. Evangelism through cells at Yoido Full Gospel Church generates 20,000 converts a year and has led to the world's largest church with 700,000 members. This is not an unknown reality.

Students of this course also understand the nature of the two winged church, where the faith community is understood as a traditional church worship system linked to a cell-type discipleship system. If you study the process of church planting most commonly practiced, a church planting leader initiates a discipleship system focused on starting a church; once sufficient people are gathered for worship to begin, the discipleship system is subordinated to the worship system and sometimes it almost disappears. The draw toward beginning worship is extremely difficult to resist because the worship system *is* the basic concept of what it means to be a church.

If the worship starts too soon, failure is likely; church planting consultant Jim Griffith refers to this as "premature birth." *Starting public worship too soon is a factor found in almost all church plants that fail. Presenting a quality weekly worship service requires a large investment of time and energy. In most new church starts, the beginning of weekly worship services is accompanied by a decrease in outreach and evangelistic activities. This is due to the demands of preparing sermons, coordinating music, preparing bulletins, set-up and tear-down of the facility in which worship occurs, and the expectations of those attending to receive pastoral care from the planter. Launching with a very small group of people almost inevitably leads to disappointing results and a small or nonexistent church. Planters usually underestimate the amount of time needed to gather a sufficient number of people to move to public worship. Sponsoring agencies usually do this as well.²* There is an eagerness to get to

¹Quoted from "General Conference Issues,"
http://www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.3989587/k.636A/General_Conference_Issues.htm

²#2 of ten reasons given in Jim Griffith and Don Nations, *Why Church Plants Fail*,
http://path1.fhview.com/media/media/mediaplayer.php?id=20080422080449FD7B73&clientId=117615&client_id=117615

worship because public worship, in the basic understanding church, is what defines a church. It doesn't matter whether the worship is traditional or emergent; it's the way we've always done church. Energy diverted into worship and away from evangelism and disciple making before a critical mass of persons is achieved is lost forever. It is unlikely that the new worshipping congregation will again be able to devote the same level of energy to the making of disciples.

Planting Worship Systems

It's easy to recognize that the focus will be on planting worship systems. Below are four statements by a church planting executive on a process that has been very successful for him.³ These statements clearly describe a church that is made up primarily of a worship system.

Statement #1: Develop a worship planning team. **Worship is the most important thing that happens in the church - that is where the most people attend, where forgiveness is found, where commitments are made.** Transformational Worship should be so powerful that it almost doesn't matter who the preacher is. Develop a worship team that does not depend entirely on the pastor. Through the year, invite influential leaders from across the state who will fill the church, and leave everyone with tears in their eyes.

Statement #2: The new church planter is encouraged in the first year to form twelve groups of twelve adults each, a total of 144 adults, before launching public worship. After all, Jesus had twelve in the original small group. The small groups actually end up being somewhere between 8 to 15 in size. When the number of groups reaches 7 to 10 different groups, they become somewhat unmanageable unless the pastor has also been working on leadership development within the small groups.

Statement #3: THE TWELVE SMALL GROUPS:

Each group, (even the Video Team) when it meets, initially led by the pastor around the core values of the church - there is a time of joy and concern, praying for one another, a time of Bible study/devotion, they meet together at least twice a month. {A committee is a group that decides what others are going to do. A team decides with IT is going to do.}

- Intercessory Prayer Team / Launch Team - your future church will look like this team - they anoint and pray for the empty chairs, pray for the lost, pray for those the Lord wants to come to this church, they pray in each of the empty rooms on Sunday morning,
- Worship Planning Team, Worship Leader, and Pastor to plan 6 to 8 weeks in advance. On the first Sunday, you better have the next 7 or eight Sundays already "in the can" with every song, drama, video, and sermon complete. This team has a representative/convenor from most of the other teams. Usually have to pay worship leaders because they are so rare. (We are looking for ways to train a pool of worship leaders.)
- Music team to implement the music program - plans the music. The performers don't have time to get all the charts together, etc. This team overlaps with the Praise Team below.
- Praise Team - the actual singers and musicians - three or four with voices and microphones - don't even think of starting worship if you don't have those key musicians in place. Sometimes you have to pay some of your musicians, sometimes you don't.
- Drama Team - a drama program if you have one
- Video Team - selects videos/editing
- Electronics Team to operate sound/video equipment - usually a large team
- Logistics Team to set up and take down every Sunday morning - about 20 people on this team
- Publicity Team to do advertizing - including handouts
- Hospitality Team for food, name tag, greeters, usher people to the nursery
- Special Events Team to secure special guest, speakers, performers, testimony by star football players that will bring "butts in the seats." It's far easier to witness to people when they are in your seats.

³Emphasis in the original: *How to Have 400 At Your Launch Worship*, Adapted from materials prepared by Dr. Dick Freeman Ph.D., Director of Congregational Development, North Alabama Conference, http://www.sermonconnect.com/media/media/getmedia.php?id=20080316030334F5B78A&client_id=117615&type=Article.

• Culture Surfers Team - what is hot and what's not - meets at Star Bucks, reads the magazines, and keeps worship planning committee in touch with current issues in the culture.

Statement #4: Each of these twelve groups is a task oriented group, yet at their heart they have Bible study, pray together, hold one another accountable for attendance and service, every time they meet. Some of these also have a ministry beyond the local church - singing in the nursing homes, visiting the hospital, etc.

This just becomes the DNA of the new church. These teams continue to be the basic structure of the new church. Empowered laity, and as the body grows and strengthens, the pastor does NOT attend all these meetings. After the constituting conference, you may have 15 to 20 people involved in the four Disciplinary committees (PPR, Finance, Trustees, Council).

The prayer group is really the Leadership or Launch Team. The pastor leads this group, and the pastor begins to discern who has gifts and talents for leading these various other eleven small groups. Look for leadership in the area of prayer, hospitality, electronics, advertizing, set up, music, and drama. You know the jobs that you need to fill. Some of those you attract will not have these particular skills, so you may also be adding what look like adult Sunday School classes that meet in homes mid-week.

The pastor must keep them from worshipping until they are ready - you need to have 144 people involved before you set a date for the first worship service.

You can see why it is difficult to delay the start of the first worship service ... is the center of all that this new church is about. Whether the worship is traditional or Taizé, emergent, contemporary or hip-hop, it is a worship system. It does not attempt to make disciples as much as scoop up people who are unattached to a church and interested in spiritual things. The primary method of this form of church planting is to provide an environment attractive to unchurched people and then invite them to come. There is nothing at all wrong with this system of church planting, and it blesses many people. It is capital intensive to provide that worship place; it is also assumed that the church planter is sufficiently attractive and charismatic to fill any size worship space. Another assumption is that the beginning of a new church is a sufficiently exciting motivation to gather 144 people and hold them together until worship begins within a culture that emphasizes immediate gratification.

Planting a Discipleship System

The preceding description of a church planting process only seems unusual when contrasted with a cell church, discipleship system church planting process, which is also quite unusual. This process has only a few uncomplicated steps and costs virtually nothing; rather than providing a place for people to come, it involves going to where the people are, making disciples out of lost people and then making disciple makers out of disciples. Below are two statements about the church planting ministry of Neil Cole, whose work was featured in Unit 6 of this course:⁴

Statement #1: Steve Lawson, *Jesus With An Iced Latte*⁵

Neil Cole has a saying: "If you want to reach this world for Christ, you have to sit in the smoking section." This planter of postmodern congregations has a way with words. He also has a way of acting on his pithy maxims and seeing dramatic results in the form of changed lives. In 1999, Cole jettisoned his traditional pulpit ministry in Alta Loma, California, to launch Awakening Chapel--founding it literally in the smoking section of The Coffee Tavern in Long Beach, an urban beach town southwest of Los Angeles. In a little more than four years, the crew he gleaned from the smokers' ranks on the patio at The Coffee Tavern has ballooned into a movement of 400 churches in 16 states and 12 countries. Almost four new congregations started up each week in 2003 under Church Multiplication Associates (CMA)--the umbrella organization Cole

⁴For a description of this approach, see www.greenhouseSTL.org.

⁵Steve Lawson, *Jesus With An Iced Latte*, <http://www.charismamag.com/display.php?id=8847>.

leads and started simultaneously with Awakening Chapel.

When Cole, 42, landed in Long Beach from Alta Loma, his initial brainstorm was to birth a coffee shop--à la the Jesus Movement--in a storefront he had rented on busy Cherry Avenue. He said God had told him: "Why don't you just go to the coffeehouse where the lost people are already?"

"Instead of trying to convert them from the coffeehouse they really love to our coffeehouse so that we could then convert them to Christ, we just went and hung out at the coffeehouse where they were already at," Cole recounts.

This taking-church-to-where-life-happens approach has been a cornerstone of the movement since a group of about a dozen people started meeting at the coffee shop, as well as in Cole's living room and in the storefront, to worship, read the Bible, pray and fellowship. Nothing too unusual about that--many congregations have been launched in homes. What wasn't normative was that the first church plant happened within months--among the smokers at Portfolios, another local java joint that has become a nucleus of outreach.

Not all the churches--which seldom grow to more than a few dozen members--meet at coffeehouses. One came together on the lawn of the art building at California State University in Long Beach, another in a parking lot in east Los Angeles and another on a local beach. Many meet in homes, but Cole shuns the classification term "house church" and doesn't apply it to those groups.

"The church is not a building, whether it has a steeple or a chimney. It is the people," he says.

Nor are these groups defined as "cell churches"--because the term implies that the smaller, or cell, church is part of a larger organism.

"In our case we are decentralized and most of them do not have any larger celebration meetings," Cole explains.

"Usually new believers do not want a large gathering--it is just the people who were raised with that tradition who want it."

The core of Awakening Chapel and the associated churches is called the Life Transformation Group. Usually only two or three strong, these same-gender units meet weekly for Bible study, prayer and confidential discussion of shortcomings. There is a major emphasis placed on new believers reaching out to the people in their circles of influence.

Cole comes from a Grace Brethren denominational background, but churches in his movement are aligned with many denominations. Some of the groups have started as offshoots of 12-step programs; one met in a barrio and another among a group of Filipinos.

Pastors are called shepherds. They include people from a variety of backgrounds--a former grocery produce manager, a truck driver, an ex-party girl. "The goal is to always see leaders come from the harvest," Cole points out.

Some of the churches align themselves with Awakening Chapel, but several other groups of churches have also been launched, including The Refuge in Salt Lake City; Big Fish in Mesa, Arizona; and The Fountain, east of Los Angeles. This is all part of what Cole calls organic or natural church growth. Even Cole's daughter, Heather, 17, has started a high school church.

"We did not plant a church. We planted a movement of churches," Cole explains. "We want to reach young, urban, postmodern people. We want to reproduce disciples, then leaders, then churches, then movements."

In fact, Cole would like to see a multiplying of similar movements that have no direct connection to Awakening Chapel or CMA.

What kind of people come? All sorts--from athletes to artists to students. There have been Satanists, businessmen and musicians. Take Scott Hughes, for example. He was one of the first people Cole encountered at The Coffee Tavern.

Hughes was there to meet his drug dealer. Reluctantly he agreed to come to a gathering at Cole's house. Later, more willingly, he went to a baptism at the beach, where he snapped photos. Soon enough Hughes made a decision to follow Christ.

How did he celebrate his new life? He got high. Hughes was an addict and could not buck it. Cole tried everything to help but finally told Hughes: "You and me have got to get into the car and drive over to your drug dealer's and tell her about Jesus." This runs right on course with Cole's belief that Christians must bring light to wherever darkness exists.

Hughes laughed at the idea and said he would go alone. The next day he kept his word. The drug dealer did not accept Christ, but her son did, and he is now a part of Awakening Chapel. Moreover, since that day Hughes has not once been tempted to take drugs and is now a shepherd of an Awakening Chapel church plant.

"We value seeing true transformation of lives, not just converts and not just numbers," Cole says. "We are not afraid to go to very dark places where there is much ugliness. Church should happen wherever life happens. The church is a sent agency, not a sending agency; therefore, we must go."

And go Cole and the people of Awakening Chapel do, even if it means sitting in the smoking section.

Statement #2: Neil Cole, *Sharing the Truth in a Postmodern Context*⁶

I teach people to listen for three things when talking with an unbeliever: pains, passions and purposes. These are the deeper parts of a person's soul and will probably not come out early in the course of a conversation. We don't entrust these things to just anyone. We want to make sure we can trust a person before we share what really makes us tick. Strobel points out that often people will first share something they don't believe strongly in to see if they can trust someone with the deeper, more vulnerable stuff. If we play the antagonist immediately they will never move on to a deeper heart issue and evangelism will remain at a surface level.

Let me give you an example to illustrate this from our ministry. John was a self-proclaimed Satanist. He is also one of the most intelligent men I have met. He reads almost a book a day and can quote ancient Greek poets off the top of his head. We met John by building relationships with people at a local coffeehouse called Portfolios.

One evening we had a visitor at Awakening Chapel who is an expert at using apologetics in evangelism. This particular man had taught me much and I was excited to have him with us. After experiencing an Awakening Chapel time of worship he commented, "Oh, I see if you lower the lights and use candles and incense you can reach postmoderns." I must admit I was a little disappointed; Awakening is so much more than that. I decided that the best way for him to see the heart of this new church was to take him to Portfolios to see where we do much of our relational evangelism.

At Portfolios, my friend ran into John the Satanist (not to be confused with John the Baptist). In the course of their conversation John made some comment about what a good man and teacher Jesus was. This started my missionary friend on a logical message about how, based on Jesus' own words, He is either the Lord or He is a liar or He is a lunatic...but He can't logically be just a good man or teacher. The talented evangelist got as far as the first point and John then jumped in and finished the rest of the argument. Then he commented that he had read all of C. S. Lewis' works and that Lewis was one of his favorite authors. Then John turned and walked away untouched by the attempts of the evangelist.

About a week later, John came to Awakening. During a break in the service he went outside with some of our newer converts to smoke a cigarette and chat. I noticed John was talking with a young girl name Michelle whom had just recently come to Christ herself. Remembering how easily John dispatched the veteran evangelist, I was very concerned for her. A guy like John could really confuse a new believer like Michelle. Later I pulled her aside to see how she was doing. I asked, "I noticed you were talking with John. He's a handful. Are you okay?" She said, "Oh yeah, I'm fine. He just kept talking and talking and I kept listening and listening. Finally at one point he stopped to take a breath and I jumped in and said, 'John, you're too smart for me. I can't keep up with you.'" Then she paused and added, "but I sense that you're lonely. I was lonely too. For many years I would go to bed at night and wonder if anyone in the whole universe cared if I would wake up the next day. Then I met Jesus and I don't go to bed lonely anymore. I know that Jesus loves me and He cares about what is going on in my life."

For the first time in his life, John was silent. Michelle had struck right to the heart of John's soul. This wasn't a peripheral discussion about theoretic facts. This was his life, his need, his core identity.

It isn't what you know that is going to touch the hearts of this emerging generation...it's who you know. If you are willing to listen and share personally with people the difference Christ has made in your life you can be effective in reaching the lost. We need to introduce the postmodern to truth incarnate rather than a defense of propositional facts.

A short time later I was having a conversation with John. He casually mentioned to me that he was thinking of changing his religion. I thought to myself, "Any change is a step in the right direction." I asked, "Oh, what are you thinking of changing it to?" He said, "I'm either going to become a Christian or a Buddhist." At that point I had a choice, I could ask him why on earth he would want to be a Buddhist and then he could defend Buddhism for the next hour, or, I could ask him why on earth he'd want to be a Christian and let him defend Jesus to me. I chose the latter. This time, my instincts proved wise. He said, "The thing that attracts me to Christianity more than any other religion is the concept of grace. No other religion has this. The fact that we can receive God's blessings without having to do anything is amazing to me." Then he went on to describe the cross and how Jesus died even though we are all sinners and John's eyes watered up. He preached the gospel to himself that day—and if he'd given an altar call I'd have gone forward myself! John didn't receive Jesus that afternoon, but I believe he is

⁶Neil Cole, *Sharing the Truth in a Postmodern Context*,
<http://cmresources.org/features/FeatureArticleArchive/SharingArticle.aspx>

on the way, he is in the process. It is the kindness of people that has made the difference. More than that, it is the kindness of God that will lead him to repentance, not our own intelligent arguments.

What if we combined both ways of church planting?

Throughout this course we have discussed a great variety of ways that cell churches organize ordinary people into discipleship systems where they go into the world and make disciples (Matthew 28:19), along with equipping tracks which help the new disciples become better disciples and then disciple makers by “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). These churches are inspired by John Wesley’s original discipleship system and are a good example of his very clear statement: *You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those who want you, but to those who want you most... Observe: It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care merely of this or that Society, but to save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance; and, with all your power, to build them up in that holiness, without which they cannot see the Lord.*

The commitment described in the Path 1 movement (<http://www.path1.org/>) “to start 650 new congregations with 63,000 members by 2012” is a goal of great and wonderful beauty. I support it entirely and with my whole heart. I appreciate and honor the leaders who are involved in it and pray and believe that they will be successful.

As a student of the former and a supporter of the latter, I can’t help but believe that the church would be blessed by reuniting together the two systems that allow a two winged church to fly.