

Healthy Church Formation

The Vehicle and Goal of Missions

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Even though every aspect of the missionary task is vital to cross-cultural missions, healthy church formation is the fulcrum on which everything rests and pivots. Church planting is God's plan for reaching the nations for His glory, which makes healthy church formation simultaneously the goal of the missionary task and the vehicle for accomplishing it.

Yet, it is at the point of healthy church formation that things often derail. Multiple complications can occur in this phase of the missionary task, but the two most common relate to "health" and "formation." Sometimes unhealthy churches are formed, which either inhibits reproduction or results in more unhealthy churches. Another common challenge is the inability to transition from a small group to the formation of an actual church.¹

Most church planters have unlocked Entry, and they have well-developed tools for Evangelism and Discipleship. Even on the back end, after churches are planted, leaders often have tried and true methods for developing other leaders and pushing on to other fields. It is at healthy church formation, this

¹ This assertion is based on my experience as a church planter in Sub-Saharan Africa in various countries and contexts, as well as observing the same in those I have supervised and led across the affinity. Many make disciples, but few get to multiple healthy reproducing churches.

most crucial point in the process, where things tend to get fuzzy. Below are some of the areas that get “fuzzy.”

Critical Errors in Healthy Church Formation

Sometimes church planters fall short at healthy church formation because they started wrongly in the beginning. The missionary task is too often approached from an individualistic, Western perspective which makes it difficult to move beyond the individual to the actual group. *I can enter, I can evangelize, I can disciple, I can train leaders and I can exit...* but I cannot be a church. One must move from the “I” to the “we” at that point, and it is difficult to focus on the “we” when everything up to that point has been about the “I”.

This individualistic approach to international church planting is problematic at several levels. For example, church planters sometimes project a model of church planting divorced from the sending church, and at times, from the local church on the field. This is true not only in parachurch organizations, but even in denominational sending agencies. Rather than the church planter seeing himself as an extension of the ministry of his sending church(es), he may find the distance and time away from the sending church can create a false sense of autonomy. Eventually, he begins to operate more like a professional, independent operator accountable only to the mission board, rather than a “sent one” from his local church and denomination.

This dissonance also creates a model of missions that is problematic and not reproducible. National partners are unable to lift the curtain and see any existing connection between the missionary and his sending church(es). All they see is a professional, paid, exceptionally trained church planter who suddenly appears in their country.

Church planters who are disconnected from the local church may often focus on the lost to the exclusion of the existing church; they “filter for faithfulness” in individuals and focus on those who might have apostolic

gifting ensure reproduction. The problem is not that they filter; it is that they sometimes ignore the existing church in the process. This can lead others to think that the missionary task is just an individual, apostolic task and not also a corporate one. Church planters can fall into the hidden trap of simply reproducing themselves instead of also planting reproducing churches that will plant others.

Obviously, where there is no existing church, it is necessary for individual missionaries to go there and engage in the missionary task. They must enter, evangelize, disciple, and form healthy churches. Those churches need developed leaders, and that same cross-cultural worker should be working towards exit. Yet, healthy exit is dependent upon the formation of a healthy church—a healthy church that sees missions as integral to its health. This is the only way to ensure a continued generational witness in that location and to create churches that will one day send out their own missionaries to the ends of the earth. In short, international church planting is not just the purview of the apostolic worker. It is also the responsibility of the existing church to plant more churches. Healthy churches have reproduction as a part of their DNA.

Ed Stetzer addresses this in *Planting Missional Churches*.² Stetzer refers to Jack Redford's approach in his influential 1978 work *Planting New Churches*.³ While the book is more practical than theological, Redford lays out a 9-step method for existing churches to plant new ones. His steps are simple, like forming a missions committee, selecting the new location, sending church members to cultivate the new field, etc. While Redford focused on the Western context, his work was contextualized for Africa by Claylan Coursey

² Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches: Your Guide to Starting Churches that Multiply* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016).

³ Jack Redford, *Planting New Churches* (Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1979).

in *How Churches Can Start Churches*.⁴ Redford's book is a call for a corporate approach that involves the entire congregation in church planting.

In the '90s, though, the church planting conversation shifted to focus on the role of individual church planters instead of churches planting churches. As Stetzer puts it, "the entrepreneurial planter became more central."⁵ Today, in international missions, the focus is almost exclusively on the apostolic type of church planter and his role in starting new churches. Stetzer rightly advocates for balance and a both/and approach when it comes to church planting.⁶ Churches should involve the entire body in planting other churches locally and send entrepreneurial (apostolic) church planters to plant where there are no existing churches.

While Stetzer is speaking primarily to a North American context, much can be applied to international missions. Cross-cultural missionaries are naturally apostolic as they are sent to unreached people groups, cross cultural boundaries, and learn new languages. It is difficult for local churches to go to the ends of the earth and start new churches. Yet, without careful explanation, the missionary might unwittingly give new churches a model of church planting that is incomplete. There is a definite, vital role for "sent out ones" to go where no one has ever gone. However, there is also a need for every new church to have missions as a part of its DNA and to be simultaneously involved in the missionary task in its local context while sending missionaries to the ends of the earth.

⁴ Claylan Coursey, *How Churches Can Start Churches: An Easy Eight-Step Plan for Beginning New Churches* (Kenya: Self Published, 1984).

⁵ Ed Stetzer, "Should Church Planting Be Done Through People or Through Churches?" *Christianity Today* n.p. [cited 29 Aug. 2020]. Online: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2020/january/should-church-planting-be-done-through-people-or-through-ch.html>

⁶ Ibid.

Missions as a Characteristic of Healthy Church

Much has been written recently on the various attributes of a healthy church. However, the importance of a missions DNA is often missing in the discussion. In Mark Dever's *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*,⁷ evangelism is one of those nine marks, but there is no mention of missions being a characteristic of health.⁸ Yet, reproduction and the ability to self-propagate have long been seen as a core component of the local church.⁹

At the other end of the spectrum, those focused on rapid reproduction are also talking about church health, but they do not emphasize missions as one of those characteristics. As in Dever's book, there is an emphasis on evangelism in the local church, but the driver and implementer of missionary advance is the "sent one" and not the local church. The church circle tool used by groups like "No Place Left," for example, is valuable in helping churches assess their own health.¹⁰ While there are many variations of this tool, most include nine characteristics—but missions is typically not included as an attribute of a healthy church.¹¹

⁷ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013).

⁸ The nine marks came out of a letter Dever sent to a church outlining the nine characteristics they should look for in a new pastor. Building on that concept of church leaders who emulate those nine characteristics, he later wrote the book. There are many characteristics that could be added, but missional focus is one that is lacking in his text.

⁹ Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson are credited with the formulation of the Three-Self model. "Early on, Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson called for the planting of indigenous churches that were self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. These three 'selves' became the watchwords for progressive missions and led to the development of autonomous churches around the world." Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 58. These concepts were further developed by Dixon Hoste, Jonathan Nevius and Rolland Allen. For a current critique of the Three-Self model see Robert Reese, "The Surprising Relevance of the Three-Self Formula," *Mission Frontiers* 29:4 (2007): 25–27.

¹⁰ See the NPL presentation at <https://noplaceleft.net/nf-4-fields-training-videos/>

¹¹ This is due in part to their desire to use the Jerusalem church in Acts 2:36–47 as the healthy church model. In fairness to NPL, they only include the characteristics covered in that passage. Their nine characteristics are different from Dever's. Their desire is not to create an exhaustive ecclesiology with the church circle tool, but to offer a reproducible

A better approach is found in the IMB's own *Foundations* document.¹² In this document, the local church reflects twelve characteristics of a healthy church. One of those is Biblical Mission. The church is responsible for reaching the lost around them through evangelism, and it is also responsible for reproducing itself locally through planting other healthy churches. Additionally, the church must send out and support those called to be "sent ones." The church should pray for them as they go to the nations and look for healthy ways to work alongside them through volunteer projects where they serve. As people are won to Christ in that cross-cultural context, disciplined and formed into healthy churches, those new churches must also be infused with a missional DNA where all believers see themselves as "on mission" and support those who are sent out to be "on mission" in far-flung places.

Biblical Examples of Healthy Church Formation

When reviewing the New Testament account, there are at least 33 local church congregations mentioned.¹³ While there is great diversity in each situation, one can see at least three patterns that emerged: organic church formations, churches planting other churches, and "sent-ones" intentionally planting churches on missionary visits.

Organic Church Planting: It is commonly recognized that many churches in the New Testament were formed by believers who were scattered by persecution (See Acts 11:19). The ethos of those early believers was to spread the gospel wherever they traveled, and this resulted in disciples made and churches planted. These were not intentional church planting missions,

method that can be easily utilized in the formation of churches. However, NPL's vision is not churches planting churches but apostolically oriented disciples making disciples. Missions is more defined as the work of the individual believer (or church planter) than as the work of a corporate body.

¹² IMB, *Foundations*, 61–64.

¹³ For an exhaustive list see, <https://www.bible.ca/ntx-directory-of-churches-in-bible.htm>

but examples of believers being intentional in their witness as they were scattered.

There were also other organic ways that the church spread. Greg MaGee notes that the church in Rome was likely planted by Jews from Rome who had been exposed to the gospel while visiting Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.¹⁴ There were likely other examples of believers traveling for different reasons to various places and taking the gospel with them. Consider all those in Jerusalem at Pentecost who eventually returned to their place of origin, as well as future visitors to Jerusalem who encountered the early church and then reproduced that model back in their hometown.

Churches Planting Churches: There are also examples of churches planting churches in the New Testament. The clearest example lies in the ministry of the church in Colossae. The church in Colossae was not founded by Paul, and many scholars contend that Epaphras (a disciple of Paul) was the planter and pastor of this church. While Colossae was likely planted by an individual, it seems that this church and its influence spread to the nearby cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis, where other churches were planted as well.¹⁵

Intentional Church Planting Missions: These would include the various missionary journeys of Paul and the missionary journeys of Peter and others. Peter was instrumental in the birth of the church in Lydda, Joppa, and Caesarea. Paul, along with Barnabas, Silas, Luke and others serve as the prime example of the classic missionary band sent to intentionally take the gospel to the pioneer places of his day. While this is a vital approach that should continue, it is not the only way that churches were formed in the New Testament.

¹⁴ Greg MaGee, "The Origins of the Church at Rome," *Bible.org*, n.p. [cited 29 July 2021]. Online: https://bible.org/article/origins-church-rome#P100_28698

¹⁵ Richard Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (NAC, Vol. 32: Holman Reference, 1991), 163-64

A Call for a Holistic Model Embedded in the Church

In the New Testament, the prominence of the local church and its focus on Biblical Missions is undeniable. Whether it was churches forming new churches, mission teams sent out by churches, or God-ordained encounters between people and local churches, the local church (not individuals) stands at the center of gospel expansion around the world. Some tend to focus on the “sent out ones” in passages like Paul’s first missionary journey in Acts 13 while forgetting that the story started with a local church that sent them. The very term “sent one” implies a sender. God sends, but He has chosen to do so through His church.

The biblical model of church planting is a holistic one where local churches multiply locally as they also send out cross-cultural, apostolic workers to distant, unreached places. Yet, with our culture’s overemphasis on professionalism and individualism, many churches in the West believe that church planting is the sole purview of those they pay to do it, whether at home or abroad. Disciple-making movements that emphasize individual believers on mission unwittingly make the same error by focusing solely on the individual’s responsibility to the exclusion of the corporate body’s role in church planting. On the mission field, this leads to people bypassing the local church to get to the lost, instead of mobilizing the local church to do her part to reach the lost around her. The result is an unhealthy church in the West and an unhealthy church planted in the world.

Conclusion

Healthy Church Formation and Missions go hand in hand. If one fails to emphasize a missional ethos in the churches planted, then those churches will neither be healthy nor reproduce. The New Testament draws a clear connection between missions, church planting, sent-ones, and the local church. Paul’s first missionary journey (Acts 13) is often cited as an example of individual missionaries going to the ends of the earth. Yet, those early

missionaries were not individuals—they were members of a body, sent out as an extension of the missionary outreach of the church in Antioch. To divorce the sent ones from the senders is a mistake that leads to lazy sending churches and overemphasized individualism on the part of missionaries. This, in turn, can lead to new churches planted that will continue to reproduce this unhealthy perspective and short-circuit their own role in reaching the ends of the earth.

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