

Good to Great Church Planting: The road less travelled

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The business world awakened to a new bench mark one morning when Jim Collins published his provocative findings in the book entitled “Good to Great: Why some companies make the leap . . . and others don’t”. Supported by a large research team, Collins identified companies that made the jump from good results to great results and sustained those results for fifteen years or more. Good companies have been lulled into doing business as usual, while great companies have excelled in the areas of personnel appropriation, reality checks, “transcending the curse of competence”, cultural discipline, and technology acceleration (Collins 2001, 13). The elaboration of these disciplines riveted the attention of many and made the book into a long-standing best seller.

What surprised Collins was not the enthusiastic reception his work received from the business community, but from members of the non-profit sector. One third of his readers resided in social occupations, and they were most eager to apply his principles to their setting. Collins obliged the hunger of the non-profit community for greater clarity by writing a supplemental monograph on how good to great principles could be carried over to the social sectors.

The imagery of “good to great” applies not only to businesses, to the social sector, but also to church planting. Stellar church planting churches bear down on specific disciplines that infuse their ministries with remarkable movement-based energy, vision, and effectiveness. The purpose of this article is to explore the regions beyond successful church planting in a Western culture and to explain how it can rise to become great in nature. This article is written for church planters and church planting churches: those that have done it, and seek to do it better.

In my experience of over twenty years as a church planter in Germany, I have come to refer to six disciplines of good to great church planting as “G6”. By that I mean that they seem to have six great qualities that set them apart from merely good church planting ministries. These six great qualities of church planting are: timed release, generational distance, discipleship depth, intentional mindset, external focus, and reproducible models. I’ll attempt to explain them in the order listed. These six elements were developed after studying church planting in both the established Protestant Church and the various larger Free Churches in Germany which are reflected in my D.Min. dissertation entitled “Creating and Sustaining a Church Planting Multiplication Movement in Germany”.

The chart below succinctly illustrates the major differences between good and great church planting. Individual elements will be addressed, explained, and illustrated in the rest of this article.

Good to Great Church Planting

Good Church Planting

- Long recovery time
- Direct involvement
- Emphasis on leadership
- Haphazard and situational

Great Church Planting

- Timed release
- Generational distance
- Discipleship depth
- Intentional mindset

- Centripetal force
- Emphasis on giftedness
- External focus
- Reproducible models

Timed Release

For colds, the flu, headaches, and insomnia pharmaceutical companies have given us the ubiquitous tiny time capsules. These tiny time capsules are controlled-release systems engineered to provide ongoing medical treatment with one kind of capsule beginning to work when another has exhausted its capacity. Great church planting incorporates the concept of timed release. Timed release is the discipline of setting the date of the next church plant shortly after the current church has been launched.

My wife Jan and I, along with two other adults, planted a German Evangelical Free church in the city of Kaiserslautern in March of 1999. Four years later, in the fall of 2003 with sixty members and one hundred adults in worship services, we launched our first daughter church in the nearby city of Ramstein. The mother church was not big, but it was healthy.

Too often I have observed a mother church, after having planted a daughter, going into what seemed like an unusually long recovery period. In our European context it might take a decade or more before a church summons enough resolve and resources to begin another daughter church. Such is the fate of church starts that fail to begin with the end in mind, which is the genesis of a new church.

Church planting churches will hardly highly impact their society with the power of the Gospel in increments of ten or twenty years. The discipline of timed release on the other hand puts before us the goal of launching new churches in shorter periods of time consisting, at the maximum, of five years. Every five years high-impact churches will see to it that a new church is birthed from their midst. To use another analogy, every five years these churches set their clocks to run down to the date of their next launch and do all in their power, trusting God, to see a new life set free.

Generational Distance

Whereas timed release is the discipline of chain reaction church planting, generational distance is where multiplication begins to set in. My wife's grandparents were married for more than seventy-five years when they died. Grandpa was 105 and Grandma 97 years old, and they left behind over 150 progeny. In their lifetime they saw themselves forwarded into five generations! Imagine holding a fifth-generation baby in your arms, knowing you and your spouse were the first cause! How effective a mother church is in forwarding itself via ensuing church starts reflects the issue of generational distance. Thus great churches focus not so much on the churches they have spawned, but on the number of generations that they have spawned. Great church planting counts the generations, not just the number of children it has fostered.

This is the stuff of multiplication. For multiplication to occur, the first cause of new life must free itself from direct involvement. Great grandparents do not give birth directly but indirectly to their great grandchildren. Direct involvement is the vocabulary of addition; one church starting another church via direct influence. Multiplication's quality, however, lies in its indirection: one church setting its offspring free to procreate churches. Generational distance is an emphasis that has rarely occurred in our European setting, but is a key ingredient needed for multiplication to take place.

Discipleship Depth

It sounds so easy! Why is it that the vast majority of churches never experience such a level of church-planting growth? The answer lies in the third dimension: discipleship depth. This takes seriously Jesus' charge for His followers to make other life-long learners of Jesus. Dallas Willard paraphrases our clarion call beautifully. *"I have been given say over everything on heaven and earth. So go make apprentices to me among people of every kind. Submerge them in the reality of the Trinitarian God. And lead them into doing everything I have told you to do. Now look! I am with you every minute, until the job is completely done!"* (Dallas Willard – Paraphrase of Matthew 28:18-20).

The quality of depth in good to great church planting churches is directly linked to how well they make disciples who in turn make disciples. The constant need for new leadership is the challenge of church multiplication. But good leadership begins with good discipleship. A proven disciple is the best foundation for an influential leader. In short, making disciples that make disciples becomes the launching pad for churches planting churches.

To get to the place where discipleship is intentional, reproducing, evangelistic, leaning into leadership development, we need more than gifted leaders. We will value and implement healthy systems of discipleship training that are better than the people using them. A healthy system of reproduction does good things to all involved. It instills Christ-likeness into people in a manner in which they have not done for themselves.

Great church-planting churches witness life-change and healthy growth in their smallest life units: small groups or triads. Churches reproduce rapidly externally because they have been systematically reproducing internally. As is with the church organism, its various disciple-making members will live with timed-release dates. Enfolding non-Christians as well as believers, seeing both make strides in coming to or maturing in Christ is assumed and experienced in such systems.

Parallel to our small group Bible studies we have fostered triad discipleship groups in our fellowship in Kaiserslautern. Last year a man in his early thirties by the name of Falk gave his life to Jesus. I promptly invited him to join two others along with myself in a mini group. The group has since divided and now Falk and I are beginning our next group with a young man who is seeking. The three of us are reading three chapters in the Bible daily, meeting together weekly to share and pray with one another. Our weekly checkups regularly deal with topics pertaining to family, temptation, finances, anger, and sharing our faith. I've seen so much change in Falk's life as a result of high biblical intake and regular sharing of how we are doing in our daily walk with Christ.

Intentional Mindset

The will to want church growth is the engine that drives it. This is the succinct conclusion of C. Peter Wagner (Wagner 1984). The same applies to good to great church planting. It must be intentionally sought after for it to occur. No person has ever drifted into becoming a concert pianist; in the same way, no church planting movement emerges from nonchalance.

Inspiring vision and deeply felt need are the propellant fuels of purposeful action. God inspired the patriarchs by transmitting wide-eyed pictures to them of what was to come: teeming masses of people as countless as are the stars of the heavens or the sand granules on the sea shore. A truly inspiring vision sees the future with the grandeur of God and draws the onlooker into it as metal is attracted to a magnet.

But even the most compelling vision loses its drawing power with time. The builders of the wall around Jerusalem were obviously inspired by Nehemiah's vision. They set to work immediately. Yet this vision did not stop them from stopping what they were doing. In their case, the vision lost its lustre after 26 days, and they subsequently left off doing the work. Vision is like a campfire: it cools off with time and thus needs periodic stoking, preferably monthly, for people to remain committed to it.

Vision by itself, even if periodically "stoked", is insufficient to propel most people toward action. Inspiration needs the additive of deeply felt need. Need propels us to act. Spiritual and societal movers and shakers such as Martin Luther King Jr., William Wilberforce, Madame Curie or Mother Theresa bear this out.

My father died at the age of 58 brought on by a heart attack that was preceded by kidney failure. Knowing this, my doctor urged me to have my kidneys checked annually. I nodded in assent – and did nothing. That is until one morning when I noticed symptoms that could be indicators of kidney problems. Within an hour and a half I was sitting in the office of a specialist. What brought about the change in behavior was not the vision; it was a deeply felt personal need. To see blood where it should not be has a way of spurring one into action.

A great church-planting multiplication movement shifts into gear by feeling the brokenness, hurt and pain of those not being reached by conventional churches. Jesus was angered and smitten by the hardness of heart of some of his hearers (Mk 2:5); he was in psychosomatic pain over the lostness of the lost (Matt 9:36). It was this deeply felt sorrow over that state of the heart of the lost that propelled him and his followers to move into the harvest.

It has been twenty-eight years, but I still remember the first sentence spoken by my first homiletics professor in my first hour of class. Quietly yet firmly Dr. Holmes said, "Most of you will not become great preachers (pause), because you do not *plan* on becoming great preachers." Intentionality is the mother of quality. Though not guaranteeing a qualitative spiritual movement, such a movement is not the by-product of chance, but of intentionality.

Early on in the church plant in Kaiserslautern I secured a colourful bag of plastic locomotives from a toy store. As people became members of the church each was given a locomotive to place on his desk at home. The locomotive was a word picture. We told our people that we were praying and working toward establishing new main train stations (German: Hauptbahnhöfe), which were new churches. We put church planting in our literature, talked of it often, did it, and are intent on continuing to do it. This is intentionality at work.

External Focus

Where we spend our time underlies our values. Thus our behavior will always serve to surface our true beliefs. Behavior is belief. We may profess the importance of seeking the lost, but where we spend our time decrees what we truly deem important. The men and women behind great church-planting ministries spend lots of time with those they are called to reach. As they do this, they behave as Jesus did. He was internally motivated while being externally oriented.

For many people in ministry, time spent with the already reached is where they devote their energies. The study desk can become a convenient barrier to time spent with the lost. This barrier we must overcome. When we look at where Jesus spent his weekdays, we see him in the harvest, criss-crossing Galilee with half-baked, not yet truly convinced, but seeking followers.

The older a ministry gets the stronger the gravitational pull is exerted toward the inside people. Gravity is the problem in wanting to get from Frankfurt to Chicago. To get from the barn to the harvest we will need to be externally-oriented and pull away from the centripetal force of the church.

In the first two years of our church plant in Kaiserslautern I intentionally visited over 400 businesses personally. I purposefully asked to speak with the boss, stating that I was the new pastor of a new church in town and as such wanted to meet the “neighbors”. Some significant and memorable conversations, some ending in prayer, resulted from those visits. I certainly had enough to do without seeking out the business community, but I realized that I needed regular contact to non Christians – and they needed a Christian in their life.

Should we intentionally want to see a church-planting multiplication movement occur, we will emphasize the size of each individual’s OIKOS. Tom Wolf and Ralph Neighbour have illuminated the concept of OIKOS as it relates to evangelism (Neighbour 1990, 82). The OIKOS is our relational network. To discover our evangelistic OIKOS we will note the names of every person with whom we spend an hour or more in an average week who is not a follower of Jesus. These people make up our natural bridges into the gospel. The more such relationships we have, the greater the inroads that God has into their lives through us. The composite OIKOS of church planting teams makes up the potential church. Neighbour summarizes the problem of church planting dysfunction where he states: “Less than 1% of the salaried *pillars of the church* were (sic) investing one hour a week developing personal relationships with the huge mass of totally unchurched” (Neighbour 1990, 82). Is Neighbour perhaps telling us that being off the job is really being on the job?

Jesus taught us to be externally-oriented, the focus upon which a good to great church planting movement thrives. The future of every visible ministry is in the harvest (Matt 9:35-38) from which will come tomorrow’s leaders. The future of the church consists of people who today are not yet believers. The external mindset is the missional mindset.

Reproducible Models

Every great movement needs healthy systems of reproduction that are better than the people using them. Such systems are not only practical, easy to use, and reproductive, but exert benevolent power upon its users. Benevolent power is the power to change into Christ-likeness and the power to reach outsiders.

In the church that we planted eight years ago in the city of Kaiserslautern (pop. 100,000) we have been experimenting with a hybrid form of triads made popular by Neil Cole. The model is as simple as it is reproducible. Initially, three men or three women, all Christ followers, band together to form a triad, or a mini-group. At the first meeting an “expiration date” of six months is given to the group (yogurt and healthy mini-groups share the commonality of an expiration date. The expiration date tells us how long we may count on its goodness). Each member covenants together to exercise what Cole calls spiritual breathing. In our context we each inhale (read) three chapters of God’s word daily, all reading the same texts. When we come together once a week we share how God has been speaking to us, and then we exhale (confess) how we have lived during the previous week. Much discipleship falls short of life change because it tells people how they *ought* to live. Only when we honestly tell one another how we *actually* live does deep life change occur. Thus we ask questions related to temptation, finances, family, anger, etc. In the process of the next several months we add a fourth member to the group.

At the end of the six month each group meets for a meal to celebrate God's goodness and to signal the division of the group into two groups of two. Each dyad then invites a non-Christian from their OIKOS to join their mini-group for an initial two week period. In this way we give the seeker enough time to get wooed by the grace of God as well as giving a convenient and face-saving exit, should he desire to discontinue. The groups are intent upon seeing non- Christians come to faith in Christ and continue on in life transformation in the mini-groups. These are again time-released to divide after six months.

The beauty of this form of reproducible system of disciple-making is that it is leaderless. It is not dependant upon giftedness to make it work. And it not only sees the lives of believers grow deep; it is harvest-oriented: seeing people come into the kingdom of God by virtue of its essence.

“Grace is opposed to earning, but not to effort”, says Dallas Willard. It takes effort and a good reproducible model to make disciples. John Wesley discovered this in his reproducible system which he labelled the “class meeting”. “They met weekly to give an account of their personal spiritual growth, according to the rules and following the procedures which Wesley had carefully crafted” (Henderson 1997, 11). Life change occurs where there is nearness, openness, and accountability. It is the stuff out of which movements of God stem and lead to healthy multiplication.

Conclusion:

Although the Western world has seen a new impetus to plant churches, many efforts have and will continue to be good, at best. As in the business world, so too in the world of church planting, new benchmarks or disciplines are needed to travel from good to great. It will take the power of God and the steady determination of purposeful men and women to see great church planting movements birthed. As Robert Frost indicates, not many travel such roads, for only a rare few are willing to go the way less travelled.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The power of God and the power of choice will make all the difference in the impact we have in planting churches. The difference marks our determination to rise above the good to get to the great. We will determine to be intentional, external, and reproducible in our drive to see G6 churches planted: those that make the difference between good and great church planting churches. Missionary statesman, Roland Allen, put it succinctly, “The great things of God are beyond our control” (Allen 1997, 13) - beyond our control, but not beyond our faith or our influence as we partner with the Spirit of God in alignment with His Word. Great church planting takes the road less travelled – and that will make all the difference in the destiny of myriads of people.

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