

Planting Churches that Reproduce

Starting a Network of Simple Churches

Joel Comiskey

Published By CCS Publishing



www.joelcomiskeygroup.com

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Published by CCS Publishing
23890 Brittlebush Circle
Moreno Valley, CA 92557 USA
1-888-344-CELL

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Printed in the United States of America.

Cover design by Josh Talbot
Editing by Scott Boren
Copy editing by Susan Osborn and Brian McClemore

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CCS Publishing is the book-publishing division of Joel Comiskey Group, a resource and coaching ministry dedicated to equipping leaders for cell-based ministry.

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Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication

Comiskey, Joel, 1956-

Planting churches that reproduce : starting a network
of simple churches / by Joel Comiskey.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

LCCN 2007909331

ISBN-13: 9780979067969

ISBN-10: 0979067960

1. Church development, New. 2. Church growth.

3. Cell churches. I. Title.

BV652.24.C66 2008

254'.1

Praise for *Planting Churches that Reproduce*

“There is an old saying, ‘Better late than never, but best never late.’ Where has this book been? How different might the church be today if Comiskey’s invaluable resource had been available even ten years ago? Don’t discover Comiskey ten years from now and exclaim, ‘Where have I been!’ The book we’ve needed and been waiting for is here now. Tag, you’re it.”

— **LEONARD SWEET** Drew University, George Fox Evangelical Seminary, sermons.com

“Here is a thoroughly practical, encouraging, and thoughtful contribution to the small but growing body of literature on multiplication movements. This is an important book not only because it involves a return to a more genuinely biblical ecclesiology, but also because it envisions the much more dynamic form of church that will advance the cause of Jesus in the 21st Century.”

— **ALAN HIRSCH** Author of *The Forgotten Ways* and *The Shaping of Things to Come*, Co-founder of shapevine.com

“Joel Comiskey brings both his experience and the experience of others together in a clear, easy to understand fashion that will be helpful to any simple church planter today. As I read, I kept thinking of chapters I wanted to recommend to the various church planters I coach. Based on timeless principles of church planting, Comiskey lays a firm foundation for multiplying churches which I believe is on the heart of God. His practical application of these principles keeps the reader focused on the path toward church planting success.”

— **JEANNETTE BULLER** Church planter and coach

“Joel Comiskey does a great job in his book of explaining what a simple church is and how to plant them. He provides solid theology, numerous examples, and strategic steps for planting simple churches. We will use it with our planters as a resource. I’ve read a lot of books on simple, cell, house churches defending them or promoting them - I don’t think I’ve read anything as clear and as concise as this or as practical to get them started as this.”

— **BOB ROBERTS** Pastor NorthWood, author *Transformation, Globalization, The Multiplying Church*

“Joel Comiskey’s lifelong passion for multiplying churches does not allow him to get stuck in the past. I love this excellent book because it is a book for the future. Joel’s blueprint will help many find their proper position for enriching their life and for extending the kingdom of God.”

— **PETER WAGNER** Presiding Apostle, International Coalition of Apostles

Praise for *Planting Churches that Reproduce*

“Joel Comiskey is a veteran church planter. His new book “Planting Churches that Reproduce” is biblical, practical and inspirational. If indeed church planters are going to get serious about evangelistic reproducing movements that start new testament churches then we must take a long and creative look at Simple churches or some variation of the house church movement. The typical suburban church planting model will not get the job done alone.”

— **DR. TOM JONES** Author, Stadia East Regional Director, professor, and veteran church planter

“Over the last ten years Joel’s writings and research have deeply influenced who we are as a people. His genuine love for Jesus and his heart to capture what God is doing and saying is bearing great fruit for the body of Christ. His latest book, *Planting Churches that Reproduce*, is at the heart of what God is speaking to the body of Christ worldwide, whether in the United States or around the world.”

— **JIMMY SEIBERT** Senior pastor of Antioch Community Church

“Once again, Joel Comiskey has felt the pulse of the body of Christ and has given a prescription for its well being. This book is a combination of spiritual insights coupled with personal experience in the field of planting Biblical communities. I recommend this for the group that God forms to form a new Christ centered missional congregation.”

— **RALPH NEIGHBOUR** Author, professor, and church planter

“Planting Churches that Reproduce is a good solid manual for planters who want to get back to the basics and discover what church is really all about. Comiskey helps Christian leaders make the paradigm shift from buildings and events to people and evangelism--and then provides clear strategies for moving forward. He underscores that what makes a church effective is not about size so much as it is about how well it can reproduce.”

— **BOB LOGAN** Author, professor, and church planter

“Planting Churches that Reproduce is an important piece in the body of work God has produced through Joel Comiskey. This book builds upon Joel’s extensive research, personal experiences and previous books. It takes us back to simplicity: the simple church and the simple steps for planting that simple church. But Joel also shows us how God forms the basic simple church into larger sizes and shapes that are appropriate for the 21st Century world.”

— **BILL BECKHAM** Church planter and author of numerous books

Praise for *Planting Churches that Reproduce*

“Joel Comiskey’s latest book, *Planting Churches that Reproduce*, is an easy-to-read, inspiring, educational, and practical nuts-and-bolts tool to help church planters and church plants of any style get to where God is asking them to go. There is a twist that is worth the price of the book. Comiskey examines the growing global phenomenon of ‘simple church networks’ which challenges conventional assumptions and complicated models of what it means to be an effective Great Commission church. Simple, strategic, and scriptural are the watchwords for the church in this hour.”

— **RAD ZDERO, PhD** Author of *The Global House Church Movement*, Editor of *Nexus: The World House Church Movement Reader*

“In the late twentieth century there was only one or two books on church planting. So I wrote my book-*Planting Growing Churches*, because America desperately needed more churches that would reach unchurched Baby Boomers.

However, eight years into the twenty-first century, we have a number of books that will guide us not only in starting churches to reach the Boomers but for the Next Generation. Joel Comiskey’s *Planting Churches that Reproduce* is one of these books. If you’re a church planter or part of a church plant that is passionate about reaching the Next Generation-the future of the North American church, then this book is a must read!”

— **AUBREY MALPHURS** Lead Vision Navigator with the Malphurs Group, Senior Professor at Dallas Seminary

“In *Planting Churches that Reproduce* Joel paints pictures of multiplying churches from real life examples. He uses research, reflection on biblical principles and field tested strategies to show how struggle and space are critical to developing healthy multiplying churches. Joel applies simple biblical principles to a variety of models from cell churches to house church networks to stand alone house churches. As he describes real life examples of each model he offers wise critique and a clear practical focus on prayer and building relational webs. Could church really be as simple as Christ followers gathering in a home supporting a life style of loving God and others? This is a book every church leader should read to more effectively align with Christ’s work of building His church.”

— **DR. ROY KING** Professor of Leadership of Columbia International University

Praise for *Planting Churches that Reproduce*

“*Planting Churches That Reproduce* is yet another great resource from Joel Comiskey. In this useful tool, full of practical application and case studies, Joel draws from the years of actual experience now under the belt of the cell-church movement, to demystify and simplify the church planting process. This clearly written and inspiring manual is a breath of fresh hope for the weary saints of God hungry for the harvest. A recommended must read for all cell-celebration leaders and leaders-in-development.”

— **SUSAN M. SKOMMESA** Lead Pastor, Verdugo Community Free Methodist Church, Superintendent for FMC in Urban LA

“I highly recommend Joel’s new book “*Planting Churches that Reproduce!*” This insightful book is not just about theory. It is filled with field tested examples of healthy new churches being planted, and provides practical spiritual insights and principles for us to learn and emulate. Planting simple churches that network together is vital to fulfilling our Lord’s Great Commission. This book will serve as a practical manual to help us on this journey.”

— **LARRY KREIDER** International Director, Dove Christian Fellowship Intl.

“Joel Comiskey is one of those rare church thinkers who understands how cell groups form the basis for an organic, simple and growing church. In this book he describes a clear step-by-step process for birthing evangelistic churches that are built upon cell groups. I have often said that two of the most common missing ingredients in churches are the lack of expansive prayer and the lack of expansive cell groups. Every church leader who wants to recapture the organic, simple and life-changing nature of the church will discover in this book a roadmap for church change: into something more simple, connected and healthy.”

— **BOB WHITESEL** McGavran Award winner for Outstanding Leadership in Church Growth and author of five books

“Joel Comiskey’s books have always been a blessing to me personally—they have brought special insight into issues that people in cell churches are interested in. ‘Joel, you have out done yourself again! You have written a book that will be used to bring the house church and cell church people together. Well done!’ All those who are interested in the new move of God for these final days must read this book!”

— **BEN WONG** Advisory pastor of Shepherd Community Grace Church, founder of CCMN

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	7
Acknowledgements	11
Foreword	13
God Uses Little Things to Make a Great Impact	14
Cell Churches & House Churches Are Readily Reproducible	16
Grounded in Experience, Holding Forth God’s Word	17
Held by God’s Hand	18
Introduction	21
Section I: Simple Church Foundations	25
Chapter 1: Life in the Desert	27
Plant or perish	28
Growing to survive	30
Making room for leadership	33
Sharing brings life	35
Springs in the desert	37
Chapter 2: What is a Simple Church?	39
What is the church?	40
Back to the basics	42
The assembly	44
My understanding of church	45
Chapter 3: The First Simple Churches	47
Christ empowered the first Simple Churches	48
Simple church planting in Acts	51
Paul and simple church planting	55
Raising up new leaders	62
Section II: Simple Church Principles	65
Chapter 4: Do You Have What It Takes?	67

Table of Contents

Is there a specific church planting gift?	69
Do you need a particular personality type?	70
What characteristics are important in church planters?	72
Is it necessary to take a church planting assessment?	74
The husband and wife team	77
Chapter 5: Root System	101
Prioritize prayer	79
Concentrate on core values	81
Establish leadership	83
Raise funds	84
Determine the method	86
Find a coach	88
Chapter 6: Aiming Accurately	91
Learning the customs and culture	91
Reaching the people	93
Improving your aim	98
The person of peace	101
The bridgehead	102
Section III: Strategies for Starting Simple Churches	105
Chapter 7: Simple Cell Church Planting	107
What is the cell model?	108
Snapshot of cell church planting	109
Return to simplicity	110
Variations of cell church planting	112
Plant!	113
Chapter 8: How to Plant a Cell Church	115
First step: recruit a team of prayer warriors	116
Second step: develop values and vision	117
Third step: invite people to the pilot cell group	119
Fourth step: multiply pilot group	126
Fifth step: start celebration worship	127

Table of Contents

Sixth step: build the infrastructure	134
Seventh step: plant new cell churches	135
Chapter 9: Planting House Churches	137
Not only in persecuted countries	138
Characteristics of house churches	139
Simple structure	139
No clergy or “professionals” are necessary	140
No special buildings	142
Fully the church	142
Simple order of meeting	142
Different Sizes	143
Starting house churches	144
Networking the house churches	145
Cell churches and house church networks are cousins	147
My bias: cell church or connected house church	148
Chapter 10: Simple Reproduction	151
Simplicity	151
Reproduction	153
God’s on your side	154
Appendix 1: Resources by Joel Comiskey	157
Appendix 2: Additional Options	165
Appendix 3: Order for the First Cell	169
The four Ws	169
My own life group	171
Sample cell meeting	172
Appendix 4: Cell Church Principles	175
Appendix 5: Bill Beckham and Celebration	177
Appendix 6: Xenos Christian Fellowship	181
Index	185
Endnotes	191

Acknowledgements

This book has taken years to research, write, edit, perfect, edit, perfect, edit . . .and finally see light. In the long process, many hands and eyes have handled and contributed to the final work. Several people deserve special recognition.

I want to thank Steve and Linda Cordle for taking the time to edit this book. Jay Stanwood offered incredible insight into how to clarify obscure phrases. John and Mary Reith, as always, offered lots of encouragement and keen insight. Oliver Lutz carefully critiqued the book. I appreciated his objective analysis. I want to thank Patricia Barrett for her helpful suggestions and practical advice.

Rad Zdero went way beyond the call of duty to give me deep insight into the house church movement and the biblical text.

Kelly Bokovay spent lots of time on the manuscript. Kelly's church planting experience made his critique very valuable.

Rae Holt offered me key, foundational advice. He was also a great source of encouragement.

My good friend Rob Campbell took precious time reading this manuscript and helped steer me away from some dangerous landmines.

I appreciated Brad Briscoe's practical advice on what he liked and didn't like about the manuscript.

Anne White thoroughly critiqued this manuscript, even scouring the endnotes for mistakes and errors. Her insights were invaluable to the final draft of this book.

I really appreciated Brian McClemore's helpful criticism about the weaknesses of my church planting arguments and how to improve

the overall book. He spent a lot of time critiquing this book, and the book is much better as a result of his hard work.

I appreciated Susan Osborn's expertise in copy-editing the final edition of this book.

Scott Boren, my chief editor, continues to do an incredible editing job. We've been together on nineteen of my twenty-one books.

I also thank God for my wonderful wife, Celyce, for the listening ear and solid counsel she's given me throughout the process of writing this book.

Foreword

I planted my first church in 1988 among the urban poor in Buffalo, NY. At the time, I was aware of only one book on church planting. Church planting conferences didn't exist; neither did church planting websites, webcasts, or blogs. Outside of a call to plant and a radical faith in the Lord of the Harvest, church planters were largely void of any sort of information base from which to glean in those days.

Now everything has changed. It seems like new church planting resources (e.g., conferences, books, blogs, webcasts, podcasts, and websites) are constantly popping up. And, as Martha Stewart would say, "It is a good thing." These new resources provide tools to help church planters in a new way.

Successful church planters are life-long learners. Learners are gleaners and processors of information. Successful church planters thrive off of conversations with other planters, books by church planters, and conferences led by church planters. Even after planting several churches, I'm still a learner. If I ever stop learning, I lose my focus. The same is true for you.

I know, maybe you are thinking, "but I mostly learn from my personal experiences." Or maybe you are a doer and you learn from doing. Sure, personal experiences lend much towards personal growth. But what if you could add to your own knowledge by learning from someone else's personal experiences, from their mistakes and from their successes? Now we're talking. This is why I'm glad you've joined me in reading Joel Comiskey's newest book, *Planting Churches that Reproduce*.

If you are like me, you have been tweaked as you interacted with professors, authors, conference speakers, or denominational officials trying to teach about church planting without having actually planted themselves. I am sure they mean well and in many cases know a few things about planting—but it sounds a bit like "do as I say, not as I

do.” They’re experts who tell you everything you’re doing wrong in church planting, even though they’ve never planted a church. Unlike these well meaning givers of theoretical advice, Joel is a voice to be heard. He is a church planter. He’s been in the trenches. He knows what it’s like to experience both the hurts and the joys of church planting.

Joel has walked a long mile in the church planter’s shoes. Along the journey, Joel has learned the things he now shares with you, not only from his own experiences, but also by his extensive networking with church planters across North America and all the way to South America, Africa, India, China, and beyond.

In this, his newest book, Joel has given us a valuable tool in relating the principles of Jesus’ earthly ministry and of the rapid growth in the early New Testament church to the need to create and network reproducing simple churches.

Church planters can be some of the most amazing people in ministry today. Many have followed God’s call into church planting at great cost. Some have left high paying positions with established churches while others have left promising careers in the corporate world, trusting God for their every need, as they seek to put the needs of the unchurched before their very own.

Church planting can run the gamut, from well-funded planters launching mega churches with mega bucks, to planters with more faith than cents, pursuing a call and a dream to be a part of something that only God could orchestrate. If we are going to truly impact the growing lostness in North America and throughout the world, we must recognize not only the value of the church planters who’ve been blessed to launch big, but we must also recognize the importance of planting churches without great resources and fanfare.

God Uses Little Things to Make a Great Impact

The history of God’s activity in the hearts of mankind is replete with examples of God’s use of ordinary people with ordinary means to do extraordinary things. God used the common harlot, Rahab, to spare the Israelite spies as they scoped out Jericho in the land of

Canaan. God used little David to kill a mighty giant of a man and a fierce invading army with a little pebble and a sling.

God has used ordinary men and women, many without their own copy of the Bible, to launch church planting movements in difficult places like China. The success of the rapidly growing church in China isn't because of money. As I'm sure you know, the Chinese government isn't exactly kind to Christians and certainly not to the underground church. Yet, the underground Chinese Church is growing exponentially through the teaching of the Gospel in rapidly multiplying house churches. It's a simple model being propagated by everyday, ordinary people, many of which are new believers. What can we learn from how God is working and moving there?

If we are going to see a church planting movement in North America, it most likely will not come from the mega churches in affluent suburbs—as good and important as those are. Most planters simply will not have the money for all the flashy bells and whistles to create marketing systems and concert-like sound and lighting effects used by the big boys. Yet, the “rest of us” are not insignificant, and the potential scope of their impact doesn't have to be limited because of fewer funds and limited partnerships. If we are to see a church planting movement in North America, as we have in other parts of the world, it will come from ordinary people becoming missional and incarnational church planters, embracing the unchurched culture through simple, reproducible churches that won't necessarily rely on big budgets and big buildings.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not opposed to big budgets for church planters. God has greatly used many church plants that were blessed to launch big (I've launched one myself). God is even greatly using many established churches that have grown to mega church status over the course of time. Yet God has used even more of our average, ordinary church plants, who've started with much less, to make a far greater impact on the lostness of our continent and world.

Cell Churches & House Churches Are Readily Reproducible

Joel Comiskey has given us a glimpse into a growing cell church movement through his previous books, *The Church that Multiplies* and *Reap the Harvest*. In still another book, *Leadership Explosion*, Joel has helped us to understand leadership principles for identifying and training leaders who will identify and train other leaders in an ongoing effort to begin more mission outposts for the proclamation of the Gospel. Now with this, his latest book, Joel has enriched our understanding in the creation and growth of a reproducible model for church planting through simple cell churches and networks of house churches.

Not everyone will have a bank roll of \$100,000 start a church. But everyone can start small and full of faith, by investing in one person and then in a small group of people who can be trained to reach others. I believe one of our greatest needs is for a simple, reproducible model for starting many new and multiplying churches.

This book challenges us to reconsider a common church planting model from the 1980's forward where massive resources have been poured into launch efforts to take a new church from 20 to 300 in the space of one service. I have used this approach several times and it worked. It still works today. However, I have also seen this approach bomb. Sometimes no one came. Other times, great crowds came out to a well-advertised launch service but then got lost in the shuffle because the church plant's leadership wasn't trained and ready to handle the influx of new people from a huge launch service. Launching is often a tool God uses—but there are other ways where a church may grow more naturally. It goes without saying, as we look at the early church, the church largely grew in a more natural way. Sure, there were accounts of huge days like the Day of Pentecost, but by and far as the New Testament Church spread and took root, it was planted person by person as one person invested in the life of another who invested in the life of another.

The early church was catapulted to growth as the Spirit of God used the proclamation of the message of Christ by believers who just couldn't keep quiet about Jesus. While appearing before the Sanhedrin, Peter and John preached to their captors, risking great punishment, even death, saying "for we are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20, Holman Christian Standard Bible). They invested in others, who invested in others, and the church grew and grew. They simply couldn't keep silent, because they'd seen the Savior. As the message spread and as the early church grew, many were added to the number who had never seen Jesus face to face, but they too had been changed by Christ's words as they were spread, person to person and from town to town.

In this book, Joel highlights the benefits of the simple models of churches that can rapidly expand through cell or house church networks. His insights on reproducing churches will encourage those engaged in church planting to consider the benefits of moving from a call and a vision to the creation of small groups where leaders can be identified and trained, so that they might create and lead new small groups that will continue multiplying into more leaders and more small groups. Eventually the multiplication of small groups and leaders could lead the church planter to move the church to begin holding regular worship gatherings where all the small groups or house churches would join together for celebration. The ultimate goal of this new faith community would be to impact still more unchurched communities through the multiplication of the small groups into the creation of other new churches which would continue the whole process until Christ returns for his bride.

Grounded in Experience, Holding Forth God's Word

Comiskey's approach isn't theoretical. As he lays out in this book, thousands of simple churches are multiplying all over the world and, increasingly, here in North America we are seeing this simple church philosophy multiply into the creation of an expanding base of cell

churches that, I believe, could greatly impact the lostness throughout major cities across North America.

Even if you are not called to lead in a cell church or house church context, you will find a set of transferable principles laid out in this book which will challenge and inspire you in the areas of small groups, leadership training, networking, evangelism, fund raising, and multiplication. Regardless of the model of church planting you have been called to, there are timeless lessons you can learn to assist you in your journey, and many of these principles are addressed in this book.

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of this book is the way Joel links the Bible to real life in the church planting world. As Joel lays out in this book, the early New Testament Church looked radically different from most of today's North American churches.

I believe somewhere along the way we have become confused in thinking that it is our methods, marketing, programs, staff, and facilities that will grow the church. We've somehow forgotten the impact of God working through the Spirit of God to complete his intentions for the Word of God to serve as a catalyst for transforming lost sinners into becoming the redeemed people of God.

I'm sure that as you read Joel's words you will be challenged to lead your church or church plant to become more biblical in its approach to the lost and unchurched. What will that look like for you and your church? Though I can't know the specific details, I do know that the results of seeking to be more biblical in our approach to ministry will be far reaching as we seek to win the lost to faith in Jesus Christ.

Held by God's Hand

Finally, as fellow labors in the fields that are white and ready to be harvested, I would like to encourage you as Joel does. Church planting is tough. The church planter in Quebec may dream of an easier planting experience in Louisiana, while the church planter in Oregon may believe their journey would have been easier if only they were church planting in North Carolina or Texas. As one who

has planted in New York, Pennsylvania, and now in Georgia, I can tell you from experience that church planting is hard work, anywhere. I've met with 1000's of church planters and pastors throughout the world who tell me the same.

Be faithful to the call God has given you. Preach the Word. Stay on your knees. Cherish your family. Love the people God has led you to reach and keep serving the King, Christ Jesus. Joel has some great comments about your King's desires for you and for those you seek to reach through church planting. As you read Joel's words, remember that you are not alone. Though there will be times you may feel abandoned and uncared for, hold to the God who is holding you. The babe in the manger who gave himself up for you on the Cross and rose again on day 3 is proof enough that God has his best plans in play for you.

Thanks Joel, for all that you continue to do for church planting and the growth of Christ's Kingdom.

Ed Stetzer, Ph.D.

Author, *Lost and Found* and *Planting Missional Churches*

www.newchurches.com

Introduction

Jim Montgomery, the founder of a church planting movement called DAWN, told about a meeting with Donald McGavran, the founder of the church growth movement. Montgomery writes:

During the last months of Mary McGavran's illness, my wife Lyn would frequently spend time with her. Donald McGavran would be there, too, disregarding his own painful cancer while taking care of his beloved Mary. Lyn said to Donald McGavran, "You can be sure Jim and I will continue our commitment to church growth after you're gone," McGavran snapped back, "Don't call it church growth anymore, call it church multiplication! The only way we will get the job of the Great Commission done is to plant a church in every community in the world."¹

Somewhere along the way, the church growth movement became associated with growing one church as large as possible. Donald McGavran perceived that problem and gave church growth a richer meaning: church multiplication.

Church multiplication is biblical. Jesus Christ Himself revealed a multiplication strategy when He raised up men and women who were willing to scatter and spread the seeds of faith all over the Roman Empire. They were willing to die for their beliefs in the face of incredible odds. These Christ followers planted churches to make new disciples and spread the faith.

To plant a church in every nation of the world requires a simple, reproducible strategy. It's not about growing a few churches larger and larger. Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom, in their book *The Starfish and the Spider*, point out that growing companies have a simple strategy that possesses the DNA of reproduction. If you

cut off a starfish's leg, it grows a new one, and that leg can grow into an entirely new starfish. Decentralized, simple church planting operates like the starfish. It can grow and multiply any place in the world. It's not dependent on councils, committees, buildings, or money. Simple church planting offers the exciting possibility of new churches springing up everywhere. And indeed this is exactly what's happening all over the world.

In North America, there's been a flood of books promoting a simple understanding of the church of Jesus Christ. Neil Cole's book, *Organic Church*; George Barna's *Revolution*; and Thom Rainer's *Simple Church* all point to a yearning in the church today for simple structures that multiply. The question that various authors are trying to answer is, "How can we have a church planting movement in the twenty-first century?"

Church planting has been my life for the last twenty-five years. I started a church in downtown Long Beach, California from my home in 1983. In 1984, I listened to David Cho speak at Fuller Seminary. I was so impressed that I bought both his entire tape series and his new book and began to teach my leaders about the home group system. The church did grow and continues its ministry in downtown Long Beach to this day; as I look back, however, I now realize that God was primarily teaching me about simpler, more reproducible church planting strategies.

In 1994, four years into my first term as a missionary in Ecuador, we planted a church in Quito, Ecuador (along with a national lead pastor and another missionary couple). We took 150 people from the mother church, along with ten home groups. The church grew quickly and within six years had 280 cells and 1300 worshippers. My main role was guiding the small group infrastructure.

In September 2003, as a family we started a church in my home in Moreno Valley, CA called Wellspring. We multiplied the first home group many times and eventually gathered those groups together for celebration. I was the lead pastor for the first four and a half years. In June 2008, I became the church planting pastor of Wellspring, having turned the lead pastor role over to Eric Glover. Our goal from

the beginning was to keep the church simple and reproducible—and for it to eventually become a church planting movement.

Church planting is not easy. Someone has said that it's like drinking from a fire hose—fast and furious. Throughout this book I hope to share the pain, struggles, and breakthroughs of my own church planting journey. More importantly, we'll look at biblical and practical principles that will help you, the church planter, lay a strong foundation to start simple, reproducible churches.

Planting Churches that Reproduce

Section **One**

Simple Church Foundations



Life in the Desert

In the summer of 2008, our family drove through the hot, dry desert of California and Arizona on our way to Colorado. I witnessed mile after mile of dry wasteland. At times I spotted an old sign that marked the failed attempt of a restaurant, gas station, or motel.

The desert has special meaning to me because I live in one. Moreno Valley, where I live, would be one of those run-down ghost towns if it weren't for the constant fight of humans to push back the desert realities.

In Moreno Valley, it's common for the temperature to soar to 105+ degrees. The hot, dry air not only affects people negatively, it does weird things to plant life. I've noticed every imaginable type of weed coming out of nowhere. Trying to keep real grass on my lawn takes persistent effort. Many homeowners have decided to just water the weeds, giving up trying to maintain real grass. Each fall, I've come to accept the fact that I'll have to replant entire swaths of grass. I've often compared my weed problem in Moreno Valley to Christ's church.

Churches also live in a hostile environment. The world, the flesh, and the devil pound against Christ's church, seeking to annihilate it. Without fresh leadership and evangelistic outreach, the natural tendency is stagnation, decline, and eventual death.

Church planting also keeps churches healthy and strong. Birthing new churches pushes back the encroaching desert and forms an oasis in the dryness. To stay healthy and fresh, churches need to plant churches that plant churches.

Plant or perish

God has blessed America with the gospel since the English Puritans emigrated in the early seventeenth century. Since those initial seeds, churches have blossomed, and many call America a Christian nation. The tendency of many is to think, “The church is already established in America. Why would we need to plant more churches?”

The fact is that Christianity is rapidly declining in America.

David Olson, a cutting edge researcher, wrote the book *The Crisis of the American Church* (2008). He used data of actual church attendance to show that 17.7% of the American population attended church on any given weekend in 2004 and that established churches showed zero percent growth. The one bright spot was church planting. Church plants added an increase of 7.8%. Olson explains that at no time in American history has the need for new churches been more critical. New church planters are needed now to scale back the decline and death of existing churches.¹ In order to survive, Christ’s church must be replanted in every generation.

Whenever I minister in Europe, I see where America is headed: secularism gone astray and church buildings without the pulsating life of vibrant congregations. The story of the church in Europe over many centuries can best be understood as successive waves of ecclesiastical renewal, followed by periods of stagnation. Church planting movements were frequently the catalysts of renewal, but church planting was generally resisted by existing churches or regarded as extraordinary.²

When will a church be ready to plant a daughter? Most likely the church will never feel ready. The perception among most churches is that they’re not big enough at their present size, no matter what it is. This same mindset affects the church in other areas as well. A church doesn’t have quite enough finances to start a new church this year, so it decides to wait until next year or the year after. Decades later church planting becomes the great idea back then. The reality is that the ideal number of people and finances will always be perceived as being larger than what the church presently has.

Instead of waiting for that perfect day to arrive, churches need to change their priorities now! Multiplication is high on God's desire list—the multiplication of leaders, groups, and churches. The bursting forth of God's Spirit can't be contained. The Spirit often hovers over churches that convert intention into reality. One such example is Dove Christian Fellowship.

Larry Kreider never intended to start Dove Christian Fellowship. Back in the late 70s, Kreider figured he'd fill up the existing churches with the vanloads of young people he and others had won to Christ. Yet the young people never felt integrated in those existing churches. Kreider yielded to God's call on his life and in 1980 started DOVE (acronym for "Declaring Our Victory Emmanuel").

From a small, humble beginning the church grew to 2000 people in ten years. The congregation spread itself over a seven-county area of Pennsylvania.

Leading a megachurch would be a dream come true for most pastors. Kreider, however, realized that his megachurch was too

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complicated and cumbersome. It needed an injection of simplicity and reproducibility. It wasn't nimble enough to adjust quickly and raise up new generations of leaders. Kreider writes:

If we wanted to build the church . . . we would have to give the church away. . . therefore, that is exactly what we did with our church. Giving our church away better suited our vision of a cell-based church planting movement intent on training a new generation of church planters and leaders. Our church in south central Pennsylvania became eight individual churches, each with its own eldership team. We formed an Apostolic Council to give

oversight to all the churches of DCFI. Then we gave each of the eight celebrations the freedom to become autonomous—they had the option of joining with the DCFI family of churches or connecting to another part of the body of Christ.³

The church has been giving itself away ever since. DOVE's commitment to simple, reproducible church planting is evident in its new openness to planting house church networks. Kreider's new book, *Starting a House Church*, reflects his innovative, forward-looking thinking. DOVE continues to plant cell-based churches and has now planted approximately 100 churches.

Growing to survive

Cactus is a staple of the desert. It flourishes in a dry, hot environment. Cactus, unlike other plant life, can absorb up to 800 gallons of water in just a few days. Only two hours after rain the formation of new roots help absorb large quantities of water.

Unless church plants organize around evangelism, no one will show up. After all, most Christians would rather worship in a full-service church where their needs are met.

Because of this innate ability, cactus can survive and flourish in the suffocating desert heat.

Church plants, like cactus, learn to survive in desolate environments. They learn to adjust their strategies to overcome harsh realities. Many larger churches don't have this same earnestness. Bob Roberts Jr., senior pastor of Northwood Church in Texas, has planted 100 some churches. In his book *The Multiplying Church*, he writes:

On more than one occasion, I've found myself in a group of mega-church pastors who make a statement like this: 'We need to partner to start some significant churches—we

don't need to waste our time on these little churches of a hundred or two hundred.' They don't get it! I try to educate them, but, more often than not, to no avail. When they make a statement like that, they miss two things. First, they don't know their history. Where faith has exploded, it has never been because of the multiplication of mega-churches, but of smaller churches from 50 to 200. . . Second, they don't understand the nature of movements. Movements are personal and viral. Where movements have emerged, it hasn't been because of the large, but because of the small.⁴

Church plants need new people, new ideas, and new vision if they are going to emerge out of the darkness into the sunlight. Established churches tend to be more concerned about building upkeep, the personality of the new preacher, who's on the board, and the program schedule for the upcoming year. Established agendas and traditions shield long-established churches from realizing they too live in the desert. Often when desert realities sink in, it's too late.

Church plants are completely stripped of all illusions. Do or die. Reach out or close the doors. Invite or implode. Church planters are desperate for growth. Without growth, the church folds. This reality keeps church planters on their knees, crying out to God.

Unless church plants organize around evangelism, no one will show up. After all, most Christians would rather worship in a full-service church where their needs are met. Few modern-day Christians with families are willing to join a new church where programmed ministries don't exist.

In survival mode, church plants must exercise their muscles, and as a result, they become healthy and vibrant. Christian Schwarz in *Natural Church Development* reveals that church plants are more effective in every area (leading people to become Christ-followers, baptizing members, and ministering to needs). He writes:

If instead of a single church with 2,856 in worship we had 56 churches, each with 51 worshippers, these churches would, statistically win 1,792 new people within five years—16

times the number the megachurch would win. Thus we can conclude that the evangelistic effectiveness of minichurches is statistically 1,600 percent greater than that of megachurches!⁵

Struggling to start a church does wonders for church planters. They are developed and honed in the crucible of church planting. Church planting has helped me to grow in my relationship with Jesus more than any other ministry I've been involved in.

I look back at my first church plant in 1983. I was a single pastor, fresh out of seminary and looking for my first senior pastorate. My ultimate goal was to be a career missionary with the Christian and Missionary Alliance. I had something to prove.

Struggling to start a church does wonders for church planters. They are developed and honed in the crucible of church planting.

The CMA asks potential career missionaries to test themselves at home before ministering overseas. As a general rule, they know from experience that those who aren't fruitful "here" won't make it "over there." Crossing an ocean doesn't change ministry effectiveness.

At that time I was tired from learning about ministry in school. I had also spent several years as an "intern" and "associate pastor." The CMA probably would have approved an associate position but deep down inside I would have been bored. I needed a new challenge. I had to get out of the classroom and the church building. What did I believe? What was my ministry philosophy? I could repeat the philosophies of other great ministers and get an A on the exam, but I had not created my own ministry from scratch.

I took the leap and decided to plant a church.

At that time the CMA was reclaiming the inner cities of America for Jesus. They even offered some money for church planting in the inner city. I volunteered to plant a church that I called Hope Alliance in the heart of downtown Long Beach.

The two words that best describe my five-year church planting experience in downtown Long Beach are “total engagement.” Another phrase might be “stretched beyond measure.” As a single pastor, I had to marry, bury, and everything else. Hope Alliance Church didn’t exist. I had to discover those who would be part of it. The meeting place didn’t exist. I had to find it. My ministry method was unknown. I had to determine it.

My relationship with God grew to new heights because I was so totally dependent on God’s guidance for every step of the journey. My seminary knowledge faded quickly in the dark realities of inner-city life. I felt like the token white person among an ethnic sea. Most of my parishioners had drug backgrounds, which tempted them to fall away when government checks were issued at the end of the month.

I met my wife, Celyce, four years into the plant, and we were married on February 13, 1988. We returned from honeymooning in Hawaii and settled into our rented house, which was grand central station for the church plant. That same night we received a 3 a.m. phone call from one of the members, demanding urgent counseling. Welcome back.

As I struggled to plant Hope Alliance Church in downtown Long Beach, God molded and shaped me more than I had the church. He showed me that He truly was faithful. Out of the doubt and discouragement, He was able to grow something lovely. He also prepared me for the cultural rigors of missionary life in Ecuador.

Making room for leadership

Dave Coopersmith was “associated” with a huge church near Moreno Valley but was never involved. None of the pastors knew him. If he drifted spiritually, no one would recognize it. Dave longed for more. Our paths crossed, and we became friends. I asked Dave if he’d like to join me in planting Wellspring, and he jumped at the opportunity.

When we launched the church in my home in September 2003, Dave was there. And in eight months, Dave had launched his

own life group. Leading a group motivated Dave to get to know his neighbors, pastor people, and prepare a lesson. He eventually multiplied the group and learned additional skills. Church planting thrust Dave into a leadership position—far different than attending a large, even exciting church. Dave has said repeatedly, “This church plant has forced me to get involved. I’ve grown spiritually as I’ve participated in ministry, and this is what I like best.”

Leadership is always needed, desired, and welcomed in church plants. Jamey Miller, founder and senior pastor of Christ Fellowship, is a great example of how to raise up new leadership through church planting. CF started with the goal of church planting. Jamey Miller led the first group in his home in 1993. Jamey multiplied the group, which became a network of cells and eventually turned into CF, located in Fort Worth, Texas. CF has now multiplied into twelve church plants. There’s always a need for new leadership—both at the cell level and for church planting. The mother church is large at 300 in worship attendance and twenty-five cell groups.

Miller’s strategy is simple. Start small groups and then look for potential church planters from among those who can both lead a group and multiply it. Miller’s church-planting emphasis flows from his understanding of Scripture that God’s plan for glory on earth is connected to reproduction. “Living things multiply,” Jamey told me. This kingdom principle is central to Miller’s church planting strategy. He believes we should expect to see reproduction in all facets of church life—from disciples reproducing, to cell groups, to churches, and even movements of churches.

Christ’s living presence is the key. Groups multiply through Christ’s living presence, and then Christ continues to reach out through church planting. Miller said, “There’s nothing like group life to raise up future leaders and cultivate a readiness for church planting.” Future church planters need to start at the small group level to understand the church planting process—since the small group is a microcosm of the future church plant. Not all small group leaders will become church planters, but those who show potential in effectively leading a group, multiplying it, and then coaching the new multiplications have the basic ingredients for church planting effectiveness.

Jamey models what he believes. Fifteen years after launching the movement, he said to me, “I’m once again leading a group in my own neighborhood because I think it’s essential to stay in the battle.”

During the first five years at Christ Fellowship, all the church plants succeeded. Then, like all church planting movements, they started having false starts and failures—mainly because of leadership and character issues. The failures gave them insight into the nuances of leadership effectiveness—why some succeed and others fail. Jamey admitted, “I’m still trying to figure out what makes an effective church planter. I have come to realize that some people are only called to be leaders of tens while others will lead hundreds. Some probably aren’t called to the demanding task of planting a new church.”

I asked Jamey about the core requirements for future church planters. He said,

Our basic expectations are that potential church planters are in a small group (leading and multiplying it) and are working out the core values of loving God and one another, as well as reaching those who don’t know Christ. And yes, they must have a burning call to go and start a community of believers. Those basic things provide the grid for seeing how someone is progressing and helps the rest of the church give the “amen” when it’s time to send the person on a church planting assignment.⁶

The harvest is what stirs Jamey to look beyond the comforts of his own church towards the fields. Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9: 37-38). Church planting at Christ Fellowship has provided the means for new leaders to reap the harvest.

Sharing brings life

Moreno Valley was once a dusty ghost town. It’s now a thriving city because people came together to share water, energy, and services. Lone rangers rarely survive in the desert. Lone restaurants

or hotels usually last a few months or might scrape by for a few years, but they soon become desert museums, curious spectacles of an entrepreneurial spirit that couldn't make it alone.

New churches add spiritual strength and vitality to existing ones. They stimulate a spiritual atmosphere that benefits everyone. Abe Huber, founder and lead pastor of the *Igreja de Paz* movement, plants churches on the doorstep of the mother church in northern Brazil. The strength of additional churches benefits everyone in the city.

I stayed at Abe's home in 2002 while doing a conference at his church. I found Abe to act more Brazilian in culture than American. After each evening service, for example, he preferred to hang out with fellow Brazilians into the wee hours of the morning. "That's just Abe," his coworkers told me.

Now Abe leads a church-planting movement that is winning and discipling thousands for Jesus in Manaus, a city of 1.6 million residents located on the north bank of the Rio Negro. Abe has integrated one-on-one discipleship into the church's training process. Each person who comes to a celebration service or a cell group is assigned a one-on-one mentor. The mentor and mentored meet weekly for encouragement and accountability. The mentor guides the new person to participate in additional training classes and to attend spiritual retreats that are part of the equipping process—called MDA (Micro Discipleship Strategy).

The goal is for each person in the church to plant an evangelistic cell group, to multiply it, and to eventually plant an *Igreja da Paz* church. This effort has resulted in planting hundreds of churches throughout Brazil. I was amazed to see many *Igreja da Paz* churches located just a few minutes from the 15,000-member mother church. Most of these local churches follow the MDA strategy, but it's not a requirement. Each church is self-governing, has their own place to meet, and maintains a fraternal relationship with the *Igreja da Paz* movement.

Huber is a gifted leader, able to guide the large mother church, but he realizes that many leaders don't have those same gifts. They will pastor much smaller churches. The key is reproduction—which starts one-on-one and continues out to the masses.

God might want your church to become a multiplication center—making disciples who eventually plant churches. You don't have to worry that planting a new church will damage the mother church. Huber's example shows that new churches do not hinder the mother church, but are a great help to its own growth and spirituality.

Satan promotes the fallacy that new churches will drive out the existing ones and hurt their attendance. Peter Wagner writes:

A new church in the community tends to raise the religious interest of the people in general and if handled properly can be a benefit to existing churches. That which blesses the kingdom of God as a whole also blesses the churches that truly are a part of the Kingdom.⁷

Springs in the desert

Palm Springs is about a one hour drive away from where I live. Palm Springs, like Moreno Valley, is a desert community. The difference is that Palm Springs has natural tree-lined canyons. Why? Bubbling hot springs are part of its geography. God is able to create springs in the desert. He said in Isaiah 43:19-21:

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.

The good news for the church planter is that the God who created the desert is also the God who created the oasis. He's able to make springs abound in dry, difficult places. He's the God of the impossible and delights in making something out of nothing. No matter how dry and desert-like the situation, He loves to provide living water that brings life instead of death.