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THE ACTS WAY: RETURNING TO THE ORIGINAL PLAN A OF CHURCH PLANTING

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Abstract

This article examines the question: *Is there a way to plant gospel-centered churches faster?* Building off of Donald McGavran's homogeneous unit theory, this article explores the biblical basis, the varied methodologies, and the successful implementation of a micro-church planting strategy in the Colorado Rockies. It evaluates the validity of micro-church planting alongside our current methods of church planting. The article calls for consideration to return to the Acts model of church planting through disciple-making that will help the Church go deep and reach wide.

INTRODUCTION

There are times when we experience something that changes our whole perspective on life: the first time our spouse said, "I love you," the first time our child called out "mommy" or "daddy," our first double-double at In-N-Out Burger, or the first time our dad let us drive. These are moments that we remember, and they stay in our minds forever.

I had a moment like this not long ago. I was meeting with a mentor of

mine, and he told me about the Exponential Conference he just attended. In that conversation, he told me two statistics that caused me to be concerned for the church. The first was that by 2025, there would be approximately 5,000 churches closing a year. The second was that population growth in America is like that of a plane, it is rising quickly, and the current church planting model is trying to catch the jet with a tricycle. The church in America is not producing and reproducing enough churches to keep up with population growth. Needless to say, these two revelations sent my head spinning and my heart searching.

I remember this conversation because it sent me on a journey to try and solve a problem. The problem begs the question: *Is there a way to plant gospel-centered churches faster?* I believe that the answer isn't found in some futuristic, far-off, science-fictionesque strategy. I believe that we can answer the question by looking back to the past and by looking around at the present.

We must rethink our church planting models and let go of our traditional views of the church. We must make room for another model, plan, and strategy within our already crowded, programmatic, church culture. Despite some of the challenges, we can find revitalization in a tried-and-true "Plan A" version of church planting found in the book of Acts.

DISCOVERY

While attending a conference in Cheyenne Wyoming, I saw a display for The Timothy Initiative (TTI). The display intrigued me because the cost of planting a church was \$333. Being a former church planter myself, I thought, what did we miss when we planted? The amount we needed was more like \$333,000. Francis Chan says, "From surveys I have studied, it costs on average approximately \$1,000 per person annually to attend a church in America" (Chan, 2018, 187).

After reading the material, I realized how the use of TTI could keep that cost down. Instead of having a building, lights, sound equipment, screens, and most of the luxuries of American church plants, TTI's strategy was to simply train and launch church planters to start churches in homes, laundry mats, parks, and other areas that were not traditionally looked at

as churches. These churches were called micro-churches.

Intrigued by the micro-church idea, my wife Sara and I were soon raising money to go to the Philippines and check out a micro-church planting (MCP) movement. The purpose of the trip was threefold. First, we wanted to see the micro-church model in practice. Second, we were going to train forty pastors, both men and women, to plant and lead micro-churches in the Philippines. Third, we wanted to pray and assess if the micro-church model would work in the Rocky Mountain region where we serve.

Our trip to the Philippines would lead us to the Island of Mindanao. While on the island, we traveled to see some of the micro-churches that were planted on the island. We saw micro-churches that ranged from twenty to eighty people. Some had children's ministries while others did not. Some had drums and speakers while others had no technology or musical equipment. There was a wide variety of churches that were planted in a wide variety of areas. We saw churches in homes, in clay buildings, on the side of mountains, and in well-constructed pavilions with pews.

Despite the varied styles, meeting spaces, and sizes of the congregations, they each had one thing in common. Each micro-church had been planted in an area that was overrun with pagan religions. Most of the people, including the pastors and their families, were new converts to Christ and had been led to the Lord by native Christians. Each of these congregations had a heart for evangelism and a vision to see every unreached people group on the island come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord.

After returning to the states, I found myself in New Jersey in February of 2019. I was sitting at a micro-church summit. At the event, I was invited to attend a micro-church meeting in a Dunkin' Donuts. As I was sitting there, surrounded by five homeless people and a lay pastor, I was mesmerized by the knowledge, engagement, and obedience of those involved in the micro-church. Yes, all who attended were homeless. Yes, all who attended were disciple-makers. Yes, all who attended returned from the previous week, one bringing a new believer whom he had led to the Lord the previous week, having been obedient to what he felt God was leading him to do that week. There were no Greek or Hebrew words used. There were no "experts" around the table. However, there were plenty of insights, understanding, and practical takeaways that I walked away with. That meeting, coupled

with the experience from the Philippines, compelled me to not only begin the same process in Bailey, Colorado, but also to believe that the Lord could move through individuals who made themselves available to Him.

The journey to learn about micro-churches led me to the following discoveries. First, a micro-church is an intentional gathering of disciples that occurs outside the traditional or official church building. Micro-churches meet regularly using biblically qualified leaders to worship the Lord, study and communicate God's Word, pray and fellowship, observe the ordinances (baptism and communion), and share Christ with the lost world. Micro-churches are planted with the vision of reproducing themselves through making disciples of unbelievers through the social networks of those in the micro-church fellowship. Each church is responsible for its own government, giving, and reproduction. There is no formal connection to the sending church other than the "Paul and Timothy" relationship between the training pastor and the planting pastor.

Second, micro-churches follow many of the church growth principles that have remained consistent for over 1,000 years and in multiple contexts. The church growth principles are as follows. Churches grow when they plan strategically in prayer, when they learn to communicate the gospel in culturally relevant ways, when they minister to felt needs, when they multiply unity, when they reach people who are receptive, and when they utilize social networks of believers (McMahan, 2017).

Finally, the overeducation of the church slows the process of making disciples, raising leaders, and planting churches. The reason is that an overemphasis on education moves the accessibility of the Scriptures and their power from the layperson to the "expert." When an "expert" is needed, it slows the movement and the growth of the Kingdom.

For some, there may be a bit of skepticism of this model. After all, the leaders haven't been to seminary, and how could they possibly handle the Scriptures well? Outside of our preconceived notions of the education of a leader, one thing remains; in the beginning of the church, it was its leaders who trained future leaders and church planters. One only has to go back to the book of Acts to see this truth.

BIBLICAL BASIS

When looking at micro-church planting, it is best to look at it under the umbrella of many church growth and church planting movement strategies that emphasize disciple-making. Many of these movements return to the Acts pattern of kingdom growth rather than church growth principles. Church Planting Movement trainer Mike Shipman writes, “Viewing the Great Commission through the lens of Acts, rather than our traditional lens is the key to discipling both the established church and the newly planted ones” (Shipman, 2012, 12).

Christ’s plan is a worldwide plan that disciplined the first-century people groups. Understanding the full scope of Christ’s command and how the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples in Acts to carry out the plan can give the church a vision for how we can use the same plan and power to disciple the world in the twenty-first century.

Jesus gave one great command, “Go in the world and make disciples of all ethnic groups.” This is a universal command given to twelve but applicable for all who follow Him. There are three tasks associated with the command. Mike Shipman describes these three tasks:

Going implies sharing the gospel with everyone (e.g. Mark 16:15) as the first step toward discipleship. Baptizing is immersing new believers in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to picture their profession of faith in Christ. Baptism also initiates them into the body of Christ. Teaching them to obey all of Christ’s commands reveals the task of training each new believer to participate in the core command, “Make disciples of all the nations” while obeying all of the other commands of Christ as well. How the three parallel tasks of the Great Commission are applied often differentiates the Acts church (which is similar to modern CPMs), from the modern established church. (Shipman, 2012, 12-13).

Jesus gave a 30,000-foot view of the mission of the church for all time. Those who were closest to Jesus, the twelve apostles, took all that Jesus taught them and all that He empowered them with to advance His kingdom in Acts. Essentially, we see the practical advancement of the mission Jesus gave, which I would argue gives the biblical basis for how

the church should function and advance today.

Micro-church planting (MCP) uses the evangelistic potential of each new convert to maximize the *going* part of Jesus' command. In an MCP movement, new believers are immediately trained to share their faith. The way that this is successful is that the method of sharing the faith is a simplistic and reproducible evangelism method. At the same time, this method is easy enough to be shared by new converts, and new converts are encouraged to share their faith immediately. This is very similar to Paul, who immediately after his conversion began sharing his faith in the synagogues (Acts 9:20).

In the book of Acts, *baptizing* illustrated the believer's new faith in Christ. It was a way to introduce someone to the body of Christ. The MCP strategies take advantage of the zeal of new believers and use *baptizing* as a way to show that profession of faith and *baptizing* are inseparable as was exemplified in the church in Acts. The MCP practitioner uses baptisms to form churches instead of sending people to established churches. When converts were made in Samaria, the new converts were not sent back to the church in Jerusalem. Instead, they formed their own churches, which led to kingdom multiplication.

Finally, the teaching aspect of MCP is important. The MCP practitioners utilize effective yet reproducible teaching to train and equip those involved in MCPs. MCP practitioners have learned that quick transfer of authority along with accountability and ongoing training is effective in making new converts partners in the command Jesus gave. Active discipleship that hinges on obedience to Christ's commands both inwardly and outwardly equips new converts to obey and teach Christ's commands. The church in Acts used this model as well. When Paul writes to Timothy not to let others disregard him because of his youth (1 Tim 4:12), it is clear that Paul didn't wait for Timothy to master everything before he gave him authority and responsibility. Not only that, but Peter and Paul did not plant and strengthen churches alone. History shows that other people played key roles in the advancement of the Kingdom (e.g., Acts 9:31, 15:3, 21:3-14).

MCP movements revolve around the emphasis on evangelism, the excitement of baptism, and the establishment of future leaders. Each of these components is central to Christ's command in Matthew 28:18-20.

When we survey the actions of Jesus followers in Acts, we find a very clear biblical basis for MCPs.

MCGAVRAN AND HOMOGENEOUS UNITS

The micro-church planting strategy has a natural tie-in with Donald McGavran's writings on the homogeneous unit principle (HUP). McGavran describes HUPs in *Understanding Church Growth*: "Some are linguistically, some ethnically, some economically, and some educationally different from the others. The term homogenous unit is very elastic" (McGavran, 1990, 165). The basic premise of the principle is that "[p]eople like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers" (McGavran, 1990, 163). For example, an English-speaking Anglo-American is not likely to become a Christian in a Spanish or Japanese-speaking congregation. Likewise, upper-class citizens are unlikely to join a church with a predominantly lower to middle-class population and vice versa.

The beauty of micro-church planting strategy is that it teaches disciples to utilize their homogeneous units (social networks) to share the gospel and bring people to Christ. The MCP strategies adopt McGavran's principle and leverage it to remove the racial, linguistic, and class barriers to see more people come to know Jesus. For example, we have planted a micro-church in a neighborhood in our area called Harris Park. The way this came about is that I trained Michelle who went and found two other women who live in Harris Park. After Michelle had trained the two women, one of them grabbed eight friends and began training them. Out of that training, those nine brought in their spouses and started a micro-church. The barriers were broken down. Each person had the same ethnicity, spoke the same language, and shared the same economic status. What the micro-church in Harris Park confirms is that McGavran's homogeneous principle works in practice and that it helps the gospel spread faster through common homogeneous circles. The micro-church in Harris Park was formed within three months of the initial training. Using the homogeneous approach helped fast-track more disciples being made and a micro-church being planted. There are now plans for another micro-church in the Harris Park area.

McGavran reminds us that “many factors contribute to church growth” (McGavran, 1990, 178). The HUP is simply a tried and true principle and is not to be a substitute for the work of the Holy Spirit and humble dependence on the Lord. This principle has a range of applicability in the world, but it is God alone who brings people to Himself and causes church growth.

VARIETIES OF METHODOLOGY

The Timothy Initiative methodology is not the only way to plant micro-churches. The varieties mimic what Paul says the body looks like in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone” (1 Corinthians 12:4-6, ESV). Within the worldwide micro-church movement, there are a variety of organizations and a variety of structures of micro-churches, but all are of the same Spirit, are serving the same Lord, and are empowered by the same God. Below, I will reference different organizations that champion micro-church planting.

No Place Left (<https://noplacelleft.net>) is an organization that is a “movement of movements aimed at getting to no place left where Christ is not made known in our generation” (accessed February 2020). No Place Left uses a discipleship strategy to reproduce disciples, churches, and leaders in every people group, ethnicity, and segment of lostness in the world. Their strategy has four fields, all with the goal of reproduction. Field one is an entry plan. Field two is a gospel spreading plan. Field three is a growing discipleship plan, and field four is a harvest church planting plan. The goal of this process is to start and release healthy churches. (<https://noplacelleft.net/four-fields/>, accessed February 2020).

Another organization that uses a disciple-making strategy is Real Life Ministries (www.reallifeministries.com). Real Life calls their process a “discipleshift,” where they invite interested persons to a two-day conference that will facilitate training on “living out relational discipleship” and in which attendees will learn from those leading thriving disciple-making processes (<https://www.reallifeministries.com/page/1992>, accessed April 7, 2020).

The conference I am a part of, Converge, is also exploring this model. Specifically, Converge Rocky Mountain (CRM) (www.convergerockymountain.org) is exploring the micro-church model. The vision for CRM is to plant 100 churches in 10 years. This vision includes all types of church plants including micro-churches. To this date, I and CHBC are the only ones in CRM that have successfully planted a micro-church. However, other pastors, specifically Ty DesEnfants of Prairie Hills Community Church in Lusk, Wyoming, are also exploring the same micro-church strategy. CRM is a part of the larger Converge network which has also recognized micro-churches as churches, and CRM is currently using The Timothy Initiative as the primary curriculum and process for planting micro-churches.

The Timothy Initiative is another disciple-making movement that hopes to “get the Gospel to everyone, everywhere” (<https://www.ttionline.org>). The TTI model is based on 2 Timothy 2:2 which says, “And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2 ESV). TTI partners with local leaders to reach their nations for Christ. Their method is “Disciples Making Disciples. Churches Planting Churches. Leaders Developing Leaders” (<https://www.ttionline.org/the-work/>, accessed February 2020).

While these organizations have different vision statements and methods, they all have the same strategy. They are all seeking to reach the lost with the Gospel, reproduce disciples, and reproduce churches. Each is impacting the world for Christ as more and more people come to know Jesus through them and more and more churches are being planted in places where there are no churches.

WINS AND THE FUTURE

The strategy that I have implemented at Crow Hill Bible Church has seen many wins and has also given us a future vision. Many of the wins we have seen have been in the spiritual growth of people whether they became a new believer or whether they have grown in their relationship with Christ. In addition, as we have gone down the micro-church process, the Lord has given us a couple of futuristic visions that I will outline as

well.

In January of 2019, eight people began meeting to get trained as disciple-makers using TTI, Level 1 curriculum. We began praying and fasting, seeking others we could disciple after the class was over, and we began praying for God to reveal if He would have us plant a micro-church. After a couple of months in our first training center, called “LEAD,” not only did God lead everyone to a person to disciple, but He also laid it on one man’s heart to plant a micro-church.

In April of 2019 came our final LEAD class for round one. The fruit we have seen since has been astonishing. Each of the eight people in the class has made at least one disciple, and some have made more than three disciples. We saw seven new salvations in the first nine months. From the original eight people, we have seen three other training centers birthed, including a youth training center. We have seen the number of disciples move from eight to over fifty-five. We have also seen three micro-churches planted with two more in the works. Two of the micro-churches meet regularly in homes. The other micro-church meets every other Sunday in a local retirement home. One of the two micro-churches we are praying about will meet in another home in a local area. We are praying to start a micro-church in a local jail.

The wins have been amazing. Not only have we seen salvations, new disciples, and micro-churches, but the spiritual growth of those in the training centers has been amazing. In the training centers, we focus on obedience-based discipleship over educational-based discipleship. What that means is that we do not move forward in our curriculum until each person in the class obeys what God, through the Holy Spirit, has led them to do from the previous week. Four of my best disciples—Michelle, Roy, Tanna, and Aaron—have moved from level 1 of TTI to level 2, along with three other disciples. These seven will continue on to level 3, which will be heavy in theology and equip each one to be more familiar with more challenging biblical and theological concepts.

Despite the amazing fruit and wins, there is still much to do in the future. One of the ideas we are praying through is to see the micro-churches move to the fourth generation. We have seen the discipleship move to the fourth generation. However, we are wanting to see the same multiplication with

the micro-churches. We are currently working on a strategy and leadership development to see multiplication in our micro-churches and to see a church in our area for every ninety people.

Another futuristic idea we are praying through and experimenting with is training future leaders in churches through the TTI curriculum. CHBC is part of Converge Rocky Mountain (CRM). Once my disciples go through TTI level 3, we are wanting to see if CRM will license and ordain those that have completed level 3. We are trying to get back to doing what the first-century church did to train and raise up its leaders from within. Out of this idea, we would then create a training school for lay leaders in the church, future church pastors, and church planters.

I am convinced that a disciple-making and micro-church strategy can and will work in America. One thing I realize is that micro-church planting is the new frontier. It is risky, and there is no guarantee of success. However, it is worth exploring because our current church planting strategy is not keeping up with population growth.

CONCLUSION

Winston Churchill's strategy for fighting the Nazis during the bombing of London from September of 1940 through May of 1941 is instructive. At the time, Britain had what was considered the best navy in the world. However, they did not have a strong air force. Germany had a robust air force with massive bombers that they used strategically to wound their enemies. Instead of trying to build massive bombers to counter the Nazis, Churchill elected to mass-produce smaller, more agile fighter planes. Those fighter planes were able to defeat the larger bombers and end the bombing of London.

We have to have a strategy for planting churches that complements our current strategy in America. In the same way that Churchill deployed many smaller and agile fighter planes to defeat the Nazi air force, the church could take up a similar strategy with micro-churches. We should not throw out the church planting model we have now; rather, we should add a more agile, easily reproducible type of church plant to those we already have. Not only could every church, no matter its size, have a vision for planting micro-churches in hard-to-reach rural areas, but also we could

have a strategy to help us catch up to population growth in America.

We are at a time in our history where our culture is changing. The Church's past strategies for reaching people are becoming less and less effective and less reproducible. I believe the time is now not only to launch a micro-church planting strategy but also to perfect one.

It is time for us to think of church as not only a building with screens, lights, coffee, and loud and colorful kids' ministry. I'm not opposed to any of those, by the way. However, church should look like a group of people seeking to follow Christ, praying to lead others to do the same, worshipping with joy and gladness, encouraging one another in fellowship, and observing communion together. These are the basics of the New Testament church, and these are the basics that can be done without a budget, a seminary-trained pastor, or a building. These are the basics that make up a church and can be observed in houses, coffee shops, breakrooms, gymnasiums, space under trees, and parks. The MCP strategies can thrive in rural communities where buildings are sparse. They can be a part of an apartment or dorm ministry. They can thrive in various city neighborhoods that are specific to a certain ethnic group. The MCP strategies can be a part of a grander strategy of mega, medium, and small-church pastors who desperately want to reach the lost for Christ by making a time-tested strategy relevant again. The possibilities and the reach of MCP are endless!

Before leaving for heaven, Jesus shared his most important message with His closest friends when he said in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8, ESV). I believe it is our responsibility to lean on the Holy Spirit's power to help us return to the Acts way of planting churches.

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About the Author

Joshua has served as lead pastor of Crow Hill Bible Church in Bailey, Colorado, since December 2015. During his tenure, CHBC has grown from 60 in average Sunday attendance to over 400 in average attendance including a consistent audience of 100 or more online. He has been a catalyst leader behind a discipleship and micro-church planting strategy in the Colorado foothills that has seen over forty new disciples made and four micro-churches planted with plans for three more in 2020. He is currently pursuing a Doctor of Ministry degree from Talbot School of Theology at Biola University. He earned a Master of Theology from Dallas Theological Seminary. Joshua and his wife Sara have three sons named Caleb, Micah, and Ethan, who love eating popcorn, jumping on trampolines, and waking up their mommy and daddy at all hours of the night.

