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Book Review: Leading Church Multiplication: Locally, Regionally, Nationally by Tom Nebel and Steve Pike

David Yetter
Converge PacWest

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BOOK REVIEWS

Nebel, Tom and Steve Pike. *Leading Church Multiplication: Locally, Regionally, Nationally*. Saint Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2014. 262 pp. \$20.00.

Reviewed by David Yetter, Executive Minister for Converge PacWest (formerly Northern California Baptist Conference). David received a B.S. in Christian Education from Biola University and an M.A. in Biblical Studies from Dallas Theological Seminary. His ministry career has included senior and associate pastorates in varied and diverse communities and churches in California and Texas. He gives his ministry energies to starting and strengthening Jesus-loving, gospel-sharing, life-giving, world-changing churches.

Leading Church Multiplication by Tom Nebel and Steve Pike is an abundantly practical handbook for church planting practitioners at different institutional levels. Though not an exhaustive guidebook on church planting, it is chock-full of wisdom garnered from frontline leaders who have helped propel church planting networks forward. They share helpfully and refreshingly from failures and successes.

Steve Pike founded, and for eight years directed, the Church Multiplication Network (CMN), which is the church planting arm of the Assemblies of God, USA. CMN helped plant more than 1,800 new congregations since its inception in 2008. Steve has planted, parented, and led church planting at the regional and national level. He and his wife are now leading The Urban Islands Project, a new urban church planting initiative.

Tom Nebel served as local church planter, regional director, and National Church Planting Director of Converge Worldwide. He assisted the start of nearly 800 new congregations. Tom is the author of *Big Dreams in Small Places*, *Church Planting Landmines*, and *Parent Church Landmines*. Tom continues to be a church planting consultant and provocateur.

Leading Church Multiplication addresses three parts of the church planting conversation: Part One, “Foundations for a Church Planting Culture”; Part Two, “Essential Systems and What to Do with Them”; and Part Three, “Leader Strategies, Landmines, and Booby Traps.”

Part One covers eight areas of an organization’s church planting culture. Nebel and Pike’s gold standard model for church planting, and the only model fully discussed, is a partnership model. This model is well illustrated by the interstate highway system of the United States. “For the interstate system to succeed, each sphere of government had to do what it does best and let the other spheres do what they do best” (20). This gives way to “family planting,” in which churches reproduce churches in partnership and with guidance and support from regional and national entities. It is touted as superior to “homeless plants,” also known as parachute drops or “orphan plants,” which are started by regional networks and then supported by churches (25–28). Racial bias in a denominational culture is confronted in Part One when Nebel applies Cornelius’ story (Acts 10) to challenge organizational blinders (31–35). Further critical topics include intra-organizational communication; event-driven training, recruiting, and momentum generation; finding and focusing on vision and mission; and learning from church planting movements outside the United States (68–71).

Church planting systems and implementation are tackled in Part Two. After imploring church planting leaders to ground all systems in God through prayer and spiritual expectancy, the meat and potatoes of Nebel and Pike’s church planting systems are explained. Building a church planter farm system, identifying potential church planters, utilizing church planter quality controls, and funding planters and plants make up the core of the book. Most often, the recruiting process of many churches and denominations is their “weakest link” (112). The promotion of churches planting churches along with an assortment of suggestions, ideas, principles, and striking observations—“I have observed many churches with less than 200 attendees multiply very effectively” (161)—conclude Part Two.

Part Three explores leadership challenges and how to sidestep common mistakes to be a good steward of opportunities. For any who, like the authors, “don’t like to repeat mistakes” (226), this part addresses a leader’s personal health, the importance of operating with wisdom and according to the law, how to get the most value out of a workforce, the value of recording agreements on paper, and utilizing a scorecard for managing a potential

planter's environmental risks. Intriguingly, the final chapter boasts a risk management tool that increases church planting success that also saves time and money (243, 249).

Unmistakably, drawing from an impressive depth of knowledge gained over several decades of experimentation, implementation, and collaboration with church planting world practitioners, Nebel and Pike wrote *Leading Church Multiplication* for church planting leaders and learners. Specifically, their audience is anyone "leading a church multiplication movement: locally, regionally, nationally" (12). As the title suggests, this is not targeting someone merely curious or new to church planting, nor is it well suited for church planters determined to work independent of a parent church or network. The intended message is that church planting is best done in partnership and "doesn't need to be complicated to be effective" (12).

Reading like a how-to manual, the book spends next to no time offering philosophical or theological apologetics for church planting. Nor does it spend much time supporting suppositions, believing "there are books and articles and blogs and webinars and conferences and t-shirts to reinforce these" (131). The emphasis is "*how to get started*" (emphasis added, 131).

What the book lacks in answering why, it more than makes up for in addressing how. Nebel and Pike's strengths are undeniable and possibly unparalleled in chapters 11, 12, and 22. These rich, practical pages pack wisdom, warnings, and tools for engaging and evaluating potential planters: "These are time-tested drawings I've used hundreds of times," Nebel says of four napkin charts imploring pastors to consider planting for personal and kingdom-based benefit (126). The authors include relevant outlines, acrostics, and diagrams for planter assessment, coaching, and training: "As you learn [coaching] techniques, you'll be positioned to use this [WAIT] methodology in a variety of settings: at home, at work, in ministry... everywhere!" (137). They outline a risk assessment tool that increases planter success while decreasing risk, expense, and grief: "When I've shown this tool to denominational leaders, I've often said, 'I'm about to save you \$100,000'" (243). This eight-question tool purportedly raised the planting success rate from 80% to 90% in one denomination. These three chapters should be required reading for all church and denominational leaders as they build and evaluate church planting systems.

Throughout the entire volume, church planting maxims abound, especially for the denominational leader. "Begin with the assumption that the people around you are trying to do the right thing for the right reason" (233). "When coaching, try to have 75% of what comes out of your mouth in the form of a question" (138). "The bottom line when it comes to money and church planting is that money does not guarantee success" (144). "Plan and scale your structures and systems to exceed what you believe is needed

to make the preferred future a reality” (94). “Everything will take longer than you think” (234). “Size is not a significant determining factor of a church’s readiness to plant” (161). These ministry tidbits are relevant and noteworthy.

“Learning from the World,” chapter 6, proves inspirational and educational as lessons from international church planting movements are collected for use in the United States. Rapidly multiplying, and indigenous church plants are prolific in parts of Asia, Africa, Great Britain, and Latin America. While aspects of these movements will be unique to developing world experience and God’s unique and sovereign plan, taking note of foreign leaders’ prayer life, faith, and multiplication free of organizational impediments would be prudent (68–71).

A truly unique chapter, “Leading from the Second Chair,” addresses a specialized niche. Here regional church planting leaders in church networks are encouraged and instructed to elevate the value and activity of church planting through “leading up.” This is because “a church organization that does not prioritize the starting of new faith communities will lose its ability to be on mission with Christ because it will cease to exist as an organization” (206). The chapter is a gift to second-chair leaders from men who have served well from the second seat.

Overall, the book’s narrative reads unevenly. Though each chapter offers applicable elements for local, then regional, and finally national leaders, the chapters themselves—and the paragraphs within chapters—alternate intended audiences without warning. Neither does the “argument” of the content necessarily build linearly, with the “Maintaining Momentum” chapter and the risk management chapter fitting more reasonably in the systems discussion of Part Two, rather than their respective Parts One and Three. Further, the chapter “Spiritual Dependence” lacked the vitality and ingenuity found throughout the rest of the book. Its most riveting story, a girl in Kenya’s divine power encounter, was borrowed from the book, *Prayer-walking*. Having assisted in starting more than 2,000 churches in the United States, it seems odd Nebel and Pike did not draw from a notable illustration of spiritual dependence closer to home.

The book set the context for most of what Converge Worldwide, Tom Nebel’s and my denominational network, does in church planting. As a regional leader, I now better understand and can endorse how Converge leads churches to plant churches with systems and standards guided and guarded by the regional and national offices. *Leading Church Multiplication: Locally, Regionally, Nationally* fills my toolbox so I can better support church planting effectively and enthusiastically.

With all the insight gained and know-how gathered, however, a final proverb is apropos: “church planting is one part strategy and one part miracle” (251).