

By Robert E. Logan

abstract

This paper is a synopsis of Logan's journey in the development of a multi-ethnic network of house churches in the Los Angeles area and beyond. It is in this missional expression of faith communities that the necessary blending of the Great Commandment with the Great Commission are lived out. This multiplying network of churches is ViaCordis (Latin for "way of the heart"). A variety of church models are explored as to their methodology of living out Christ in their community. The 12 Life Commitments of leadership are shared along with 12 lessons learned to date in this process of ViaCordis implementation.

About a year ago, I began the process of launching a network of missional house churches in the Los Angeles area. We are seeking to blend the Great Commission and the Great Commandment; together those two passages form the mission of ViaCordis. A few of us began praying together in late January 2008, and at one year out, we now have two house gatherings. Here we'll share some of the experiences we've had so far, as well as some of the principles we've learned along the way.

First, let's define what we mean by a network of house churches. Although

structures vary, in our case this means that individual gatherings in homes take place across our city, but with connected leadership. At no point do all members gather for corporate worship together. Worship takes place in the smaller settings in homes, as well as out in the world as we serve. But the leaders of each house church gather once a month for support, oversight, accountability, and connection. We are one, but many.

ViaCordis, which means “way of the heart” in Latin, is a multiplying network of missional, incarnational house churches that focuses on raising up the next generation of leaders from various ethnic groups. Based in the greater Los Angeles area, we desire to serve the world around us as the hands and feet of Jesus, living out Christ in our communities.

By way of illustration, let’s look at models for three different types of churches.

general stores and trader joe’s

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Small congregations are like general stores—a little bit of all the basics but not a huge selection. They’re like Trader Joe’s—they have some specialties, and they may have a particular flavor or style that you like, but you can’t get everything there.

Small churches can be great. Often they have good pastoral care, the people feel known and supported, and there’s a sense of belonging. Small churches are also more likely to be healthier than larger churches.

supertarget

Large churches are like megastores—like a SuperTarget with many options. They may not have really niche, artsy items, but you can get all the expected essentials there.

Often larger churches have the resources to undertake large-scale services and outreach programs, such as an initiative to reach one percent of the population of a big city. Their big programs stem from the values they’ve considered and embraced, and they mobilize many people for ministry.

farmers’ market

House church networks are more like a farmers’ market. Each stand is run by a separate vendor. They each stand alone, but they’re interconnected. They all show up at the same time on the same day because they know they’re stronger together.

You can often find unique items at a farmers' market, and the produce tends to be fresh, organic, and natural.

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I've worked in all three of those kinds of churches, and I value them all. There's nothing inherently good or bad about any of these models. The incarnational, missional life of Jesus can be expressed regardless of the form or size of a church. They are simply different ways of accomplishing the same ends: the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

They do, however, represent different organizing principles for getting there. If our organizing principle is a congregation, that colors how we go about it. If our organizing principle is connection among the leaders, that also colors how we go about it. The structure we're aiming for determines our approach and strategic priorities. By looking first at the roots of an organization, we can then better understand why it takes the shape it does.

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The first time I planted a church, I went door to door, and we started a service. Starting out as a Trader Joe's, we eventually became a SuperTarget-style church. This time I'm planting a farmers' market-style church. My ultimate goals haven't changed; just the way to get there has changed.

My own motivation for planting a network of house churches this time around is that I wanted to use a leadership development system as the core organizing principle. Networks of house churches strip away other structural components, creating a cleaner laboratory for leadership development.

the history of viacordis

As far back as the mid to late 80s, my wife had a vision of me leading a movement of multicultural church leaders. Eleven years ago over dinner, some friends asked me, "What will you do when you retire?" Without even stopping to think, I responded, "Plant a church." I had not discussed this possibility with my wife, Janet, who was sitting next to me, but she did not seem surprised.

Then in spring 2007, I felt God leading me into a season of transition. After the accomplishment of some major goals, my coach asked me, "What's next?" A casual acquaintance asked me the same question soon after. Meanwhile, time spent in prayer and reflection resulted in a desire to plant a network of missional house churches, led by multi-ethnic leaders. When I look around at the world, I see the vastly untapped potential of reproduction at the micro level. It's happening in

other parts of the world. Why not here? ViaCordis reflects my desire to address that question. So in many ways I've wanted to be a part of starting something like this for a long time, but only recently have I felt God leading me in the timing.

ViaCordis is definitely a movement birthed in prayer. Janet and I did not recruit anyone to be a part of this new church plant. We prayed that God would bring the right people. Through a mutual friend, we met Jon Van Bruggen and his wife Taylor. We began dialoguing about the idea, praying over it together, and discussing possibilities. They felt God leading them toward starting a network of house churches, too, and we became partners. This would be a network of house churches, just also a bridge organization to help existing churches move toward more missional, incarnation ministry. This all took place in the fall of 2007.

As we prayed, we prayed specifically for God to bring us the right people: seekers, new believers, and leaders from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. He answered that prayer, and several people heard about us by word of mouth and began meeting with us to pray in January of 2008. We started being church together, and more began coming.

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Here are the stories of just a few of the people God has sent:

Allen and Sum Yu Ho, a Chinese couple originally from Hong Kong, discovered ViaCordis because of a leaky faucet. They called a plumber named Art. Art is a Latino man I knew from a previous ministry. As they talked during the repair, they discovered a mutual acquaintance: the Logans. Art gave them the update: "Bob and Janet are starting house churches now." Allen and Sum Yu asked, "Can we come?" They have a vision for evangelizing their Asian community in a relationally-based way.

Eleven years ago, Lena Giron was helping me by taking notes on a consultation I was doing at the time. At that gathering, the Lord told her, "You're going to be involved in church planting in ten years." She hadn't even heard of church planting; this consultation I was doing was her first exposure to the idea. The ten-year mark was January or February of 2008. As that date approached, Lena began counting down. It was at that point that Janet and I announced our transition to starting a network of multiplying house churches, and Lena felt clearly called by God to be a part of it.

shaping the dna

As a community, ViaCordis has been intentional about adopting the vision, values, and organizational principles that we want as part of our long-term DNA.

ViaCordis: a network of

- missional
- incarnational
- multi-ethnic leaders
- multiplying
- house churches

mission:

- 1) To serve as the hands and feet of Jesus to the world around us in obedience to the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:35–40)
- 2) To share the gospel and make disciples in obedience to the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20)

methodology:

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- grassroots reproduction of leaders
- all pastors and leaders are bi-vocational and self-supporting
- every individual coaching and being coached (leadership development)
- monthly leadership gatherings to connect the leaders to one another
- the replication of these smaller units provides leadership for new house gatherings as we grow

the twelve life commitments

Whenever I'm coaching church leaders, they will invariably ask about developing leaders. I always ask what kinds of leaders they want to develop. What do they want these leaders to be able to do? What qualities do they want these leaders to exhibit? After all, we have to know where we're trying to go before we start out trying to get there.

In ViaCordis, we've developed twelve life commitments we want to develop in our leaders. If our leaders exemplify these qualities—no matter their specific role—we'll consider ourselves successful in incorporating the right DNA. Beginning with the three categories present in our mission—love God, love others, make disciples—we've attempted here to define in a behavioral way what the missional life of following Jesus looks like:

LOVE GOD

- *Relationship*: deepening our experience of God
- *Transformation*: becoming more like Jesus
- *Responsiveness*: following the guidance of Holy Spirit

LOVE OTHERS

- *Authenticity*: being genuine and honest in all areas of our lives
- *Respect*: valuing people wherever they are
- *Involvement*: engaging relationally with those around us
- *Service*: being the hands and feet of Jesus

MAKE DISCIPLES

- *Discern*: discovering in whom God is working
- *Explore*: having purposeful conversations about the gospel
- *Invite*: encouraging people to become followers of Jesus
- *Establish*: baptize and teach loving obedience to Jesus
- *Multiply*: help new followers make more followers

lessons from the grassroots

In our November 2008 presentation to the *American Society for Church Growth*, Lena, Jon and I shared the following insights based upon our experience as a church so far. It's still early, but here are some of the key lessons we've been learning. I'm certain that as God continues to be at work, we'll continue to learn from what He is doing.

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1. prayer

We need prayer, especially prayer for workers. Early on we prayed for multi-ethnic leaders, and God has answered that prayer. ViaCordis was birthed in prayer, and we pray that it will continue to grow and multiply in prayer.

2. speed

Church planting usually doesn't happen fast. This is especially true if the church plant is multicultural (more opportunity for misunderstandings and miscommunication) or a house church (more need for people to rethink their paradigm of church). One couple from ViaCordis was asked by some friends to explain what exactly ViaCordis was and what it looked like, but they found themselves at a loss for words. Although they had an understanding of it, they were unable to articulate it on the spot in a way that made sense to their friends.

Foundations must be laid to build a house, and there are no shortcuts for that. Taking a shortcut when laying the foundation will result in structural problems

down the line. We've found we've needed to spend a good deal of time laying a clear foundation of where we want to go, why, and how. We need to clarify again and again what that will look like.

3. deconstruction

With new churches, there's often a lot of deconstruction that needs to take place. This is one of the issues that limits the speed at which we can move forward. Even among those who are on board with the vision, there is a lot of baggage that Christians bring with them about how church is supposed to be (programs, children's church, etc.). Even among people who say they want something different, it's surprisingly easy to fall back into old patterns. A lot of deconstruction is needed regarding what the essentials of church are.

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4. opposition

This way of living and doing church is not glamorous, nor is it profitable. It does not meet the traditional expectations of what church is. We've found that the greatest source of opposition is other churches and other pastors. If you're doing something different, expect opposition from unexpected places.

5. planting with non-followers

Because of all the deconstruction needed regarding previously held beliefs about what church is and what it looks like, we've found that it's much easier to plant a new church with non-followers of Jesus than it is with followers. We (people with previous church experience) often have set ideas of what church should look like.

For example, we try to divide our time spent together between worship/prayer, sharing what God is doing in our lives, edification, and sending. However, because we all have previous church experience, we default to edification, which was our primary activity in previous church services, classes, and small groups. We have to be on guard that—over the course of a month—we divide our time evenly between these activities.

As we start additional house church gatherings, we want to increasingly do so from the harvest. Our second house gathering, which takes place on Tuesday nights, was started with non-followers of Christ, and that has gone much more smoothly.

6. vision casting and re-vision casting

Because of the various issues we've been talking about, we've found that we need to cast and recast the vision repeatedly. We need to continue to lay that vision in front of people because it's so easy to move back into our default understanding of what church is. As a result, we try to spend some time each week casting and recasting vision. That's the "sending" portion of our time spent together. Imagine a circle of people holding hands, but facing outward, being commissioned to reach others. That's what we mean by sending.

7. teaming together

We are sent, but we are sent to minister in teams or partners, not in isolation. For example, two of us from ViaCordis—Lena and my wife Janet—are working at the Salvation Army teaching anger management classes. We've found that having each other along as we minister together helps us reflect more intentionally on what we're doing. It also helps us model the life of Christ in the way we treat one another—by the way we interact, by the care we provide, by the way we show forgiveness and loving acceptance to one another. Speaking in grace demonstrates Christ to others. Being together also provides much-needed encouragement along the way.

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8. fostering connectedness

Fostering a sense of connectedness among leaders is crucial. We need a support system for encouragement, because ministry is messy. When you have a corporate service time, it's easy to assume connectedness—after all, everyone is together. But when the outward structures are taken away, you can really see the connectedness—or the absence of it.

A grove of Aspen trees is actually *one* organism. The whole grove is connected. Above the ground, they all look distinct and individual, but beneath the ground they share a common root structure. The root structure serves to connect and nourish each of the trees. Like a grove of Aspen trees, ViaCordis will have many different house church gatherings that will all look separate. But underneath the surface, our shared root system includes two critical pieces: coaching for every leader and a monthly leadership gathering. These two items are what connects and nourishes us.

9. discernment and trust

We need to discern where God is moving and trust that He is at work—not only in us but in other. We need to trust that He is actively guiding us and that each of us can hear His voice. One of our core team members lives in an outlying area. Another team member’s sister also lives in that area, and they’ve begun talking about a possible partnership for starting a house gathering there. The three of them wanted to get together to talk about possibilities, so they emailed me and asked, “What should we do when we gather?” I wrote back a one-line response: “I’m very confident in your ability to follow the guidance of the Spirit.” They are empowered, they are leaders, and they will be able to listen and discern God’s voice.

That story underscores an additional principle as well: our need to follow migration patterns. As the church, we need to follow people as they move.

262 Wherever they go, there are opportunities for the church to emerge in new forms. God may have in mind a new church sprouting as a result of someone’s move. Just as it was in the early church, our churches need to be itinerant—especially in an increasingly nomadic society such as ours.

10. reproducible processes

If we want to multiply we *must* have reproducible resources and processes. *Everything* must be reproducible: the way we do coaching and discipling, the resources we use, and the way we lead house church gatherings. Take, for example, the way we approach Scripture in our house church gathering. We’ve come up with a few simple questions that we ask of every Scripture passage we study. In this way the leader models a simple way of facilitating so that anyone else can just follow the pattern by asking the same questions. We don’t need to be the A team players. In fact, doing lots of extra research and planning only serves to make the experience less empowering for others who don’t share our theological training and background.

The challenge, we’ve discovered, is for Christians to trust that God will work through these simple questions and that they will be enough to get people profoundly interacting over the Scripture. We need to trust that God is at work, and we don’t need to make it complicated. For the most part, making things complicated only serves to get in God’s way. In all things, we try to keep every element of our movement simple and reproducible.

11. learning from multiple sources

We also want to be constantly learning from others . . . and from everyone. It's our understanding that the kingdom is bigger than the church. Therefore, we seek to engage others in conversation, even if they do not claim to follow Jesus. We can learn from non-followers of Jesus. We can learn from secular books. We are constantly asking the question, "Who else can I learn from?"

12. two-track approach: social justice and discipleship

We have come to understand the need for two tracks: social justice and disciple-making/church-planting. These are separate but on parallel paths. They need to be separate so that we are freed to follow the Great Commandment, loving others with no strings attached and no expectations, just because we care.

Of course, this relational demonstration of the gospel positions us to discern where God is working as He engages those relationships, and some people decide to become followers of Christ. It's in this sense that the two tracks are parallel—they influence one another. In the interest of keeping those elements somewhat separate, yet parallel, we want to partner with other organizations to minister compassion. We minister through the Salvation Army and through Harambee Ministries, which is a low-income school in one of our neighborhoods.

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joining god in what he is already doing

We are moving forward in faith, even though we don't know exactly where God is leading.

"By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore." (Hebrews 11:8–12)

That's what we're talking about: stepping out in faith and trusting that—even though we may not be able to see the whole road ahead of us—God is up to

something, and He will multiply His descendants. May God be at work in your churches as well, and may we all be able to learn from each other.

Dr. Bob Logan is President of CoachNet International Ministries. An internationally recognized authority in church planting, church growth, and leadership development, Bob develops innovative strategies to cultivate healthy, reproducing church movements worldwide. You can reach him at boblogan@coachnet.org or www.coachnet.org.