

Elders and Church Planting

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What happens when elders are faced with sending out their best spiritual sons and daughters? Since the heart of every healthy elder is to give a double “portion” to spiritual children, elders should expect their sons and daughters to go far beyond them in the Lord!

Steve’s son, Marc, is a born drummer. They have pictures of him at age two playing drums on pots and pans with wooden spoons. His first drum set was a cartoon character toy set from his grandparents. Marc beat those drums until they fell to pieces. As a young man, Steve was also a drummer, and he would have to be a blind and deaf father not to realize his son’s potential as a drummer.

Steve recalls, “We started with a practice pad and finally a single snare drum. Marc learned the basics of drumming on those two instruments. He begged me for a ‘real’ drum set, but the time had not yet come.” Sometimes as spiritual fathers, we want our children to go from pots and pans to the whole set almost instantly, but it is premature.

Eventually, when the basics became second nature to Marc, Steve passed on to Marc his vintage drum set. Marc was ready for lessons that took him beyond a single snare drum.

Today, Marc has far surpassed Steve in drumming. If Steve had tried to hold him back to his own level, he would be a selfish, insecure parent. Secure parents release children, encouraging their sons or daughters to excel to greater heights than they ever did.

Talented young leaders in the church will want to pave their own way in the world. Lead elders should expect some of their best elders, worship leaders, small group leaders, and other leaders to eventually leave in order to pioneer new things on their own.

Will we release them?

Elders must regard their spiritual sons and daughters as the Lord's and be willing to release them into their calling as they come to maturity. Only a dysfunctional parent would try to keep sons or daughters at home so they can help the parents fulfill their own vision.

Brian played baseball in tenth grade in high school. But in the eleventh grade, he was cut from the team. When Brian had sons of his own, he didn't force them to play baseball and in this way fulfill his own unfulfilled dreams of being a great baseball player. No, he encouraged them to play the sport they were interested in. He encouraged them to fulfill whatever dreams they had in their hearts. Proverbs 22:6 states, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."

The emphasis here is on the way *he* should go, not the way *his father or mother thinks* he should go. Of course, children need training in areas of morality and character. But when it comes to personal vision and calling, a parent's job is to find out what God has put in their children's hearts. The same is true for elders who are parenting spiritual sons and daughters.

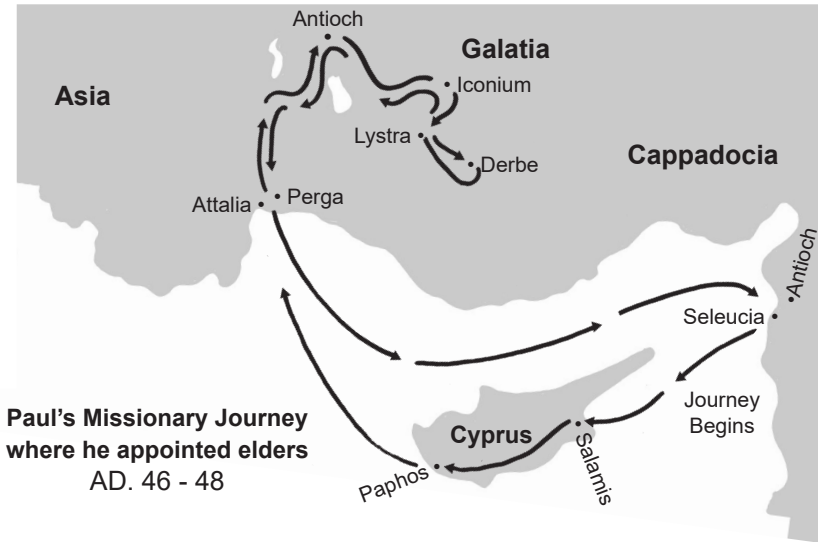
Healthy parents desire to send out their sons and daughters to start their own homes. This is why small groups multiply and this is why churches need to multiply and plant new churches. Parents desire to see their children grow up and have their own homes and families.

Elders in church planting

Although in the Old Testament the term for *elder* translates "older in age," we do not see in the New Testament that old age was required for one to be an elder. Paul and others would plant a new church and then come back in a short time to discern and install the elders in the church—those who had matured spiritually.

In Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas set out on their first missionary trip to Derbe. After having a revival at Derbe, they traveled

back through Lystra, Iconium and Antioch on their return trip and appointed elders. Notice they had just preached the gospel in these cities on their way to Derbe so the elders were saved at the same time as the rest of the congregation. The elders appointed were those who had matured spiritually.



These scriptures do not say whether they were old or young in natural age. However, the elders who were placed in these leadership positions—both Jews and Gentiles—must have been relatively young believers. They apparently did not fit the traditional Old Testament model of aged, gray-haired, Jewish elders.

Rick Joyner wisely points out it is not old, gray-haired men and women who have children. It is usually young men and women, perhaps in their twenties and thirties, that conceive and give birth to children in the natural realm. Rick spoke prophetically when he warned the church not to “sterilize” or “neuter” the young stallions, referring to the young leaders that God is anointing and giving to a body of believers. The local church must release them to serve as leaders in the local churches. We cannot overlook them when considering who should be elders.

In Kampala, Uganda, we see a great example of raising and releasing younger leaders. Philip Mugabi joined the church as a young man and began serving in various leadership roles: worship, youth, small group and Sunday morning Bible studies. His gifts were both utilized and refined over ten years of serving under the lead elder and apostolic leader, Ephraim Tumusiime.

Ephraim recognized a call to lead eldership in Philip's life. After a discernment process both in the local congregation and with apostolic overseers, Philip was commissioned as lead elder in DOVE Kampala. This transfer of leadership allowed Ephraim and his wife to put more focus on church planting and apostolic work throughout Uganda.

Church planting—the goal

The ultimate success for local church elders is for them to see the church come full circle and plant a new church. The long-term vision of every local church should be to multiply and plant new churches. We are commanded to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. As we look at the world around us, everything with life will multiply. The examples of this in nature are endless...plants, animals and humans. Believers also multiply by leading others to Christ. Small groups multiply. Churches multiply. Anything that is healthy and has life will reproduce and multiply.

Church planting is the New Testament pattern

The New Testament church was a church planting movement. In Acts 2:37-47, the Jerusalem church was planted. In Acts 8:1-25, the Samaritan church was birthed. In Acts 9:20-22, the Damascus church came to life. Acts 9:31 reports churches throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria. In Acts 19:9, we find out about a church planting school Paul held in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. The churches the Apostle John wrote to in Revelation are believed to have been started by students from this school. The list goes on—Joppa, Caesarea, Antioch. The book of Acts reads like a church planting manual.

Planting different kinds of churches

We should not be afraid to plant churches with different visions, missions and goals in mind. Churches led by biblical eldership come in many kinds, sizes and shapes. Before continuing, we need to briefly clarify what the different types of churches are. This will help us understand how God uses multiple models to build, and that He has a purpose for each one.

We could categorize, by size and structure, three main types of churches in the current landscape. We will call them:

- community churches
- megachurches
- micro church (or house church) networks

The community church (a church of approximately twenty-five to nine hundred) and megachurch (generally a church of over one thousand) are probably the most familiar to us. A community church reaches out to its local community and is like the community store in your neighborhood: the store serves the local area. The megachurch reaches a wider area and is like the “Walmart superstore.” People will travel for a longer distance to shop at a Walmart because they like the low prices, the large inventory of consumer products, and the fact that they can find everything they need to buy in one store. A megachurch is large and offers an abundance of services to the churchgoer.

Sometimes larger community churches and megachurches adopt a mother church model, whereby many smaller churches relate to the larger mother church. They look to this larger church for oversight, resources and guidance.

At other times the larger community church or megachurch utilizes a multi-site model; one church meeting at various locations. This has become more common due to advances in communication technology. A multi-site church is one local church with one leadership structure that meets physically in several different locations.

In previous decades, nearly every church in America was a community church. Then, American Christians and pastors started hearing reports about massive churches in places like Seoul, Korea. Dr. Yonggi Cho, pastor of the world's largest church in Seoul, taught American church leaders to obey the voice of the Holy Spirit to release more of the ministry of the church to trained and gifted lay leaders. Many churches, especially those in large metropolitan areas, experienced rapid multiplication and growth. This new approach to the meaning and application of what a church can be led to a wave of megachurches growing across America. Many of these churches implemented small group ministry to facilitate this growth.

Most community churches and megachurches meet in a facility on Sunday mornings or at another convenient time over the weekends. There are many styles and flavors with each of these church models. There is the Methodist flavor, the Baptist flavor, the Congregational flavor, the Episcopal flavor, the Presbyterian flavor, the Vineyard flavor, the Assembly of God flavor, the Hillsong flavor, and the list goes on. Although these churches are different in their styles, most meet in church buildings every Sunday morning and function within the traditional church structure of having either a salaried pastor or a bi-vocational pastor as the main leader of the church.

The micro churches, however, have a unique structure that requires us to think about church in a different way. Believers in micro churches do not focus on growing larger as the other church models often do. They promote growth by starting new micro churches through multiplication. Micro churches are like the stores in a shopping mall. If the average store found in a shopping mall was left to stand on its own, it most likely would not be in business a year later. The smallest store in a shopping mall needs the others to survive. Each specialized store flourishes within the cluster of the others. Yet, each store is fully a store in its own right, despite being situated in a mall. Micro churches function in a way that is similar

to shopping mall stores. They are individual and specialized, yet they flourish as they network together with other micro churches.

Each micro church is a church in itself with its own leadership. Each meets in a home or another location that does not require constructing buildings in order to accommodate a larger group. Many of these non-traditional churches are already utilizing the New Testament mode of church eldership, having elders who lead and protect the church. Discipline A Whole Nation (DAWN) Ministries, a church planting movement, describes this kind of church and its leadership like this:

[The micro church's] responsibility structure is very simple and effective: individual churches are fathered by elders, who in turn are equipped by itinerant servants like those in the fivefold ministry. They often relate to a regional spiritual father-figure, who, through his humble apostolic passion and vision, often becomes something like a "pillar of the church," an anchor-place for a regional movement that fills its cities and villages with the presence of Christ.²

Each kind of church has its strengths and weaknesses as it empowers people for ministry. As we follow the path the Lord has laid out for our church, and honor what God is doing through others, we can walk in unity with others in the body of Christ. Each kind of church should be about the business of multiplying people. A healthy church family will train its members and expect their spiritual children to grow up and start new ventures of their own.

Church planting develops new leadership

Church planting provides the opportunity for new and young leaders to stretch their wings and fly. As parents have children, each child may have a different room in the house to call their own bedroom. But there will come a time when just a room in their parent's house is not enough. They will want their own house.

Healthy elders are willing to release their leaders to move out on their own. It is a stretching, learning experience for the spiritual children, but church planting allows them to reach a new level of maturity which they would not reach if they continued to live in the house where they grew up. As leaders, we must be prepared to send out our best leaders. We must be kingdom-minded and make decisions based upon the advancement of the kingdom—not on the expansion of our own perceived empire.

Church planting prevents church splits

Could one of the reasons churches split be because the next generation of leaders is not released and sent out to establish their own churches? Insecure spiritual leaders frustrate developing leaders by not releasing them. Insecure spiritual leaders wonder about what would happen if the new church plant grew to be larger than the sending church. Frustrated by a glass ceiling, sometimes young leaders eventually leave disgruntled and take people with them.

When the local church sends out a new small group leader, they cannot always be sure the leader is entirely ready. This will also be the case with church planters. That is why it is important for some kind of apostolic oversight to be in place. Apostolic spiritual oversight helps the young leader make wise decisions and yet releases them to obey the Lord.

The truth is the new leader may not be fully ready, but the challenges involved in church planting could be the very thing that will help grow them into the next level of leadership. If you are an elder, remember someone believed in you before you began serving in that capacity.

Church planting is effective

C. Peter Wagner stated, “There is no more practical or cost effective way of bringing unbelievers to Christ in a given geographic area than planting new churches.” This profound statement is the result of Wagner’s extensive research and analysis of church growth

around the world. Church planting provides the infrastructure to support and maintain the fruit that is coming forth.

A German church growth researcher, Christian Schwarz, reports that statistically, small churches are sixteen times more effective at winning new members than megachurches. For example, two churches of two hundred generally win twice as many people for Jesus as a single four hundred-member church.³

Planting new churches gives the opportunity for more people to come to faith in Christ. Fuller Theological Seminary reports similar findings in a study revealing if a church is ten or more years old, it takes eighty-five people to lead one person to Christ. If the church is four to seven years old, it takes seven people to lead one to Christ. If a church is less than three years old, it takes only three people to lead one to Christ (see table below):⁴

Age of church	People/salvation ratio
10 years and older	85:1
4-7 years old	7:1
3 years and under	3:1

So let's not be mesmerized into thinking that every church needs to have thousands of people, or that larger churches are more effective than smaller ones. Some churches may be destined to grow to around two hundred people (addition) and then start planting new churches (multiplication).

Church planting reaches Christians not part of a church

In almost any community in the western world, there are many Christians who have not grown in their spiritual lives. They are not contributing to the kingdom of God simply because they do not fit into the existing churches in their area. What they really need is a new church where they can feel at home. A new church can often provide an entry point for people not connected to a church.

Church planting provides options

As long as there are unsaved people in our communities who are not being reached, there is a need for new churches. New churches provide more options for the unchurched. They are a key to outreach and statistically they generally grow faster than old churches. Simply stated, it is easier to have a baby than to raise the dead. This is not to say that existing churches are dead. It is just to point out that the maternity ward in the hospital represents more exciting potential for growth than the wards that merely heal the wounded.

Cross-cultural mission for every local church

Every local church is called by the Lord to help fulfill the Great Commission. The lead elder and elder team are responsible to be sure the local church they oversee is involved in helping to reach the unreached in the nations of the world rather than focusing solely on themselves.

Very few churches have the expertise or the resources to properly train and equip missionaries for cross cultural missions without some “outside” help. This is why partnering with a mission agency that honors the local church is usually the best way to help missionaries from local churches find proper training and oversight. Some churches have a mission committee or mission awareness team within the local church. This team serves in a deacon-type role and its members are in touch with the Lord’s heart for cross-cultural missions. This team is given oversight by the elders.

In the DOVE International family of churches, clusters of churches in several regions have formed “Centers of Mission.” These are made up of mission specialists who can serve the local churches in their region by helping with recruiting, training, sending, overseeing, and caring for missionaries. They also are committed to help missionaries re-enter active church life after the Lord calls them home from the mission field.

The lead elder of the church and the elder team are responsible to make sure money is budgeted each year from the local church to sow into missions. Church leadership also leads the way by encouraging faith promises for missionaries and mission ministries they are supporting as a local church. It is healthy to have missionaries, church leaders from other nations, or missionary leaders speak to the local church regularly to raise mission awareness.

In Acts 15, the church in Jerusalem was encouraged by Paul and Barnabas when they gave a firsthand report of what the Lord was doing in the new mission churches that had sprung up among the Gentiles. Obviously, the lead elder and elder team are responsible to open the door for these missionaries to speak in the local church.

All churches will be healthier and grow more quickly when we look outside ourselves and serve others, be it in our community or in the larger spectrum of cross cultural missions.

Questions for discussion

1. What happens if we do not release new leaders in our churches?
2. Discuss why church planting needs to be a goal for every church.
3. Why is missions involvement important for every local church?

¹ For a more thorough understanding of house church networks (micro churches), read Larry Kreider's book, *House Church Networks: A Church for a New Generation*, (Lititz, PA: House to House Publications, 2001).

² DAWN Report, "The Church Comes Home," August 1999, p.1.

³ Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996).

⁴ "Enlarging Our Borders," Report presented to the Executive Presbytery, January 1999.