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Ever since C. Peter Wagner declared church planting as the greatest strategy for the spread the gospel around the world (1990), church planters have taken up the banner of what is no doubt one of the most obvious results of making disciples in the book of Acts. Indeed, Tim Keller writes, “The continual planting of new congregations is the most crucial strategy for the growth of the body of Christ” (2012). Pick up any church planting text these days and you’ll hear similar remarks. In fact, Ed Stezter and Daniel Im go so as far as to say, “We are most like Christ when we join him in the mission of reaching the unchurched by planting new churches” (2011, 26).

Recent data draws into question the notion that church planting is in fact the most effective evangelistic methodology for fulfilling the Great Commission. The decline of church membership and average attendance in the US church juxtaposed to the increase number of churches and population since 2000 suggest a US church lacking in evangelism and discipleship. This essay will examine data from 1950 to 2020 that seem to lead to a conclusion which does not support the long-standing maxim claimed by Wagner, Keller, and others. The article concludes with a call to a path forward in rethinking church planting. Among the considerations are new church planting metrics, de-emphasizing Sunday morning, and a shift to movemental ecclesiology.

The Birth of Modern Church Planting

In 1990, Wagner boldly declared in his *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest: A Comprehensive Guide* that research from 1960-1990 clearly indicated that church planting is “the single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven” (1990, 11). Wagner identified 12 “good ways” to plant churches which he claimed resulted in a greater harvest. He divided them into models of modality and sodality. Modality models were the result of one church planting another church. The models Wagner believed worked were: hiving off, colonization, adoption, and accidental parenthood. These four models ultimately gain autonomy from the parent church. Additionally, satellite model,

multi-congregational churches, and multiple campus model were models which continue in relationship with the parent church. Sodality models were the result of outside organizations planting churches, either denominational or parachurch organizations. Sodality models included: mission team, catalytic church planter, founding pastor, independent church planter, and apostolic church planter (Wagner 1990, 59-74). Space does not permit a fair treatment of these models. Nevertheless, Wagner did not commend one over the other. Rather, taking a pragmatic approach, he agreed with a Rick Warren aphorism, “If you’re getting the job done, I like the way you’re doing it” (Wagner 1990, 59).

Wagner, coming from Fuller’s School of World Mission (1971-2001), no doubt built on the work and observations of Donald McGavran, the father of the church growth movement. In 1970, McGavran identified three types of church growth. First, biological growth results from the birth of children in Christian families. Second, transfer growth results from demographic shift of Christians from one church to another. Finally, conversion growth results from non-Christians placing their faith in Jesus Christ and are added to the number of the church. He concludes that conversion growth is the only form of church growth which can spread across all segments of society (1970, 87-88).

While McGavran might be most remembered for the principles of people movements, homogenous unit principle, and harvest principle (see Ott and Wilson 2011, 71), it was his commitment to understanding church growth that inspired him to hope for more people to obey the Great Commission, study the sociological factors affecting growth, and to expect a harvest of new believers. He writes:

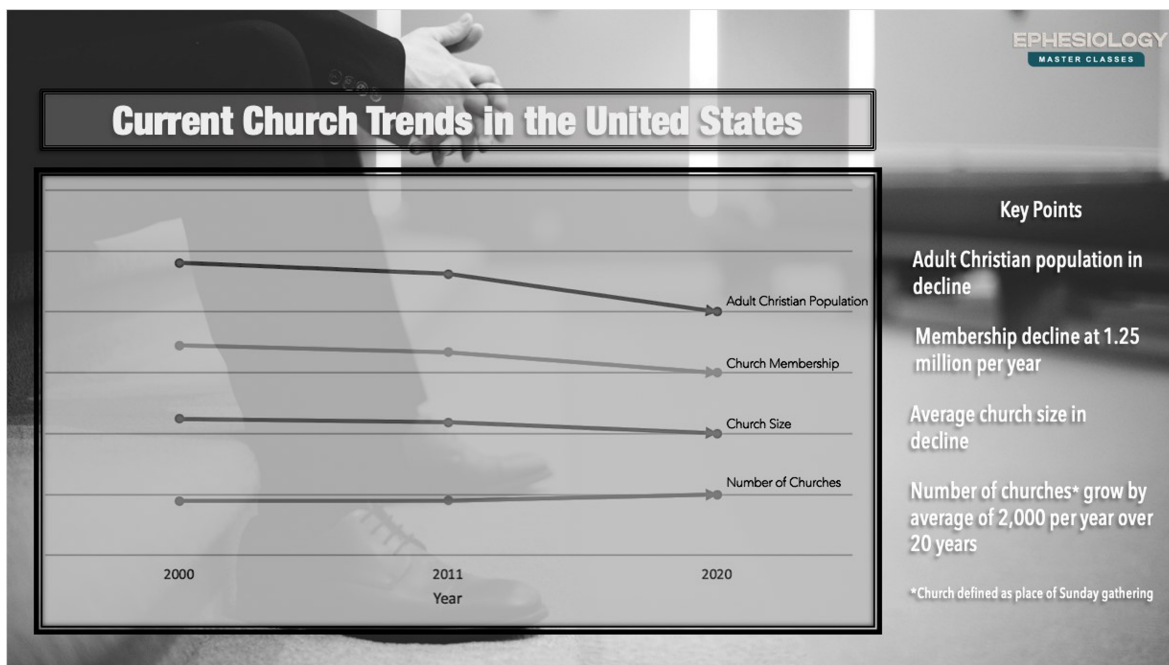
Let us face the fact that the world is open to belief in Christ as widespread as is our power to proclaim Him. The Church can move forward mightily. It is God’s will that she do so. His power will bless us as we devote ourselves with heart, mind and will to the multiplying of churches from earth’s one end to the other (McGavran 1970, 370).

As Craig Ott and Gene Wilson point out, the church growth movement suffered harsh criticism for being “overly pragmatic, theologically shallow, and methodologically reductionistic” (2011, 71); criticism similar to those we hear today about church planting movements and disciple making movements.

Since McGavran, Wagner, and others like Win Arn, Lyle Schaller, Aubrey Malphurs, and Ed Stetzer, there has been no lapse of books on church planting growth and strategies. Most continue to claim the special position of church planting as the biblical

model. Others recognize, like J.D. Payne, that, “nowhere in the Bible is the church commanded to plant churches” (2015, 114). No matter the view of the biblical nature of church planting, the data seem to suggest a different perspective on the claim to its evangelistic effectiveness in the United States (see Infographic 1).

Infographic 1: Church Trends in the United States



A Look at the Data¹

In the second edition of their popular book, *Planting Missional Churches*, Stetzer and Im provide data to suggest that the only way we will reach North America with the gospel is by planting more churches. They write:

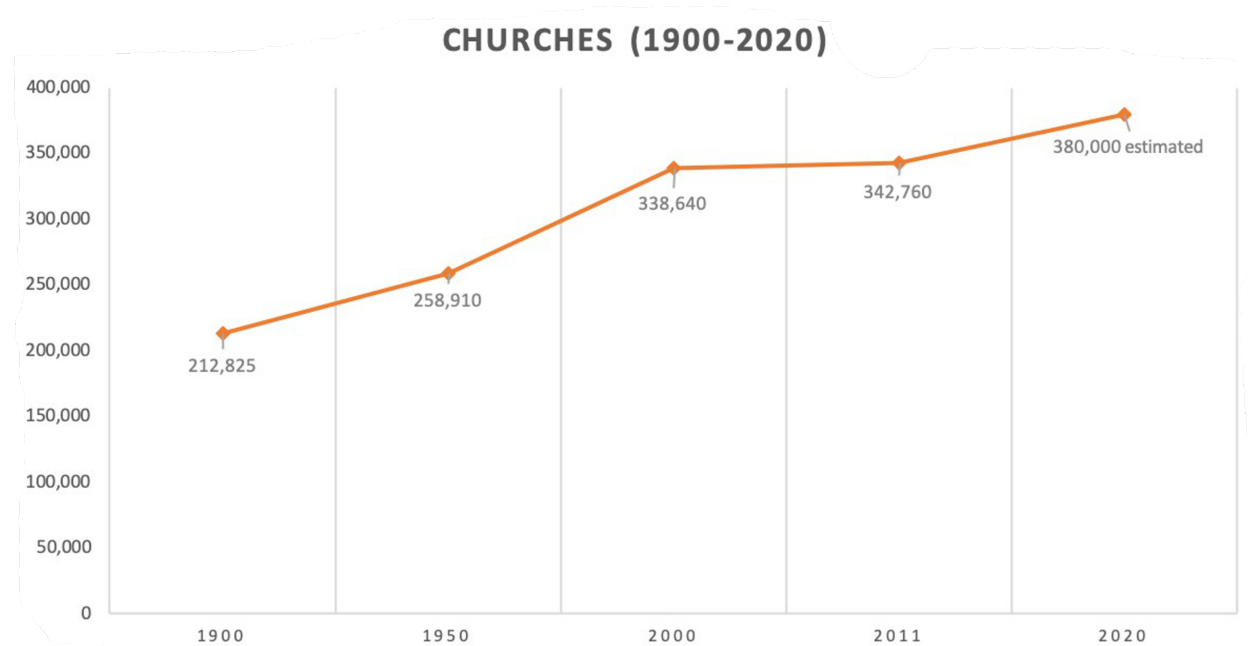
- In 1900, there were twenty-eight churches for every 10,000 Americans
- In 1950, there were seventeen churches for every 10,000 Americans
- In 2000, there were twelve churches for every 10,000 Americans
- In 2011, the latest year available, there were eleven churches for every 10,000 Americans (Stetzer and Im, 2016, 8)².

¹ Population data from the US Census Bureau (<https://www.census.gov>); Church membership data from Gallup (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>); Church growth data from Stetzer and Im (2016). Note: Stetzer and Im provide no detailed reference for their data; only a citation noting that the statistics are from Rich Stanley and Paulette Villarreal who work at the Center for Missional Research at the North American Mission Board (Stetzer and Im, 2016, p. 377).

² Here I am using a simple formula to determine the number of churches corresponding to Stetzer and Im’s claims – (US Census Bureau Population Data/10,000) * NAMB Data = Estimated number of churches. For example, the US population in 1950 was 152,300,000/10,000 = 15,230 * 17 churches per 10,000 people = 258,910 churches.

If Stetzer and Im are correct in their assessment, clearly the church to population ratio has contracted over the 110-year period of their data indicating the absence of effective evangelism and discipleship in the US church. However, and most interestingly in spite of the contraction, the total number of churches continued to grow suggesting the apparent success of church planting (see graph 1). Later in their book, Stetzer and Im optimistically declare that, “Between 1980 and 2000, more than 50,000 churches were planted in North America” (2016, 14), amounting to an average of 2,500 new churches per year. In as strong a manner as possible, Stetzer and Im claim, “Without church planting, we will not fulfill the Great Commission” (2016, 14). So, in hopes to “inform, to clarify, to encourage, and to persuade evangelicals to embrace church planting” (2016, 14) they spend the next 350 pages putting forward their understanding of missional church planting; a book, by the way, I highly recommend.

Graph 1: US Churches between 1900-2020



Extrapolating Stetzer and Im’s data, we clearly see a growth trajectory of the number of churches started since 1900; ostensibly, the number of new church plants. In 1900, there were an estimated 212,825 churches. By 1950, the number grew to 258,910 for an average of 921 new churches per year. In another 50 years, the number of churches reached 338,640 and by 2011 we were seeing approximately 1,374 new churches per year over a sixty-one year period. Growth accelerated in 2020 when estimates placed the number of churches at 380,000 (Brauer, 2017; Goshay, 2020) for an unprecedented

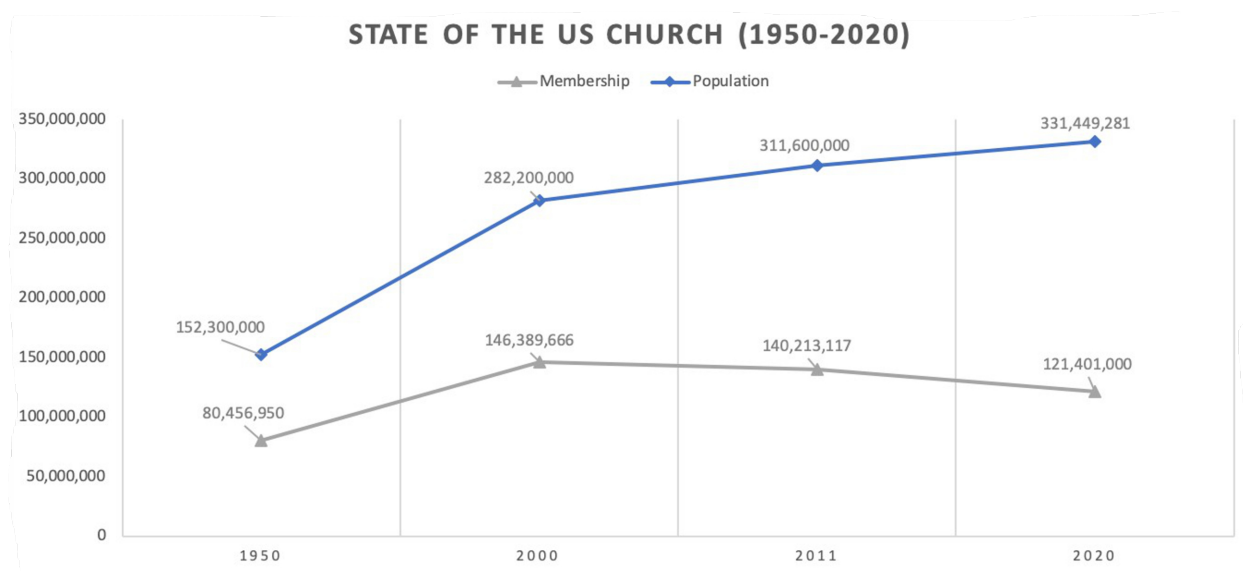
nine-year average of over 4,000 new churches annually. Granted, there is a good chance that 2020 did not see 380,000 total churches primarily due to COVID-19. For example, Lifeway Research estimated that the number of church closures in 2019 outpaced the number of church openings (Earls, 2021a). Indeed, regarding the longitudinal Faith Communities Today (FACT) study, Earls comments, “In fact, more than half of churches (52%) now say they are declining by at least 5%” (Earls, 2021b; cf. Thumma, 2021).

While it is true that the number of churches in the US has grown since 1950, it is equally true that the number of US adults identifying as members of churches has been in decline since 2000. Between 1950 and 2000, the US saw the number of churches grow at an average annual rate of 0.61. During that same period of time, church membership in the US grew at an annual rate of about 1.64 while the general population of the country grew at about a rate of 1.79 annually. Despite the addition of 80,000 churches, during that 50-year period, the signs of decline in relation to population growth were present as church membership appeared to fall behind even though more churches were being started.

The National Congregations Study (Chavez and Anderson, 2014) confirms the decline of the median size of churches. In its first two waves of studies in 1998 and 2006, the median size of congregations of people who self-identified in any manner with a local church was 150. In 2012, the median number dropped to 135. When the data are narrowed to those who regularly attended the main worship service of a congregation, the median in 1998 was 70, 65 in 2006, and 60 in 2012. However, when the NCS examined responses from the perspective of congregational attendees, the data revealed that people were experiencing larger churches. Mark Chavez and Shawna Anderson note:

The median of regularly participating adults in the average person’s congregation increased from 275 in 1998 to 280 in 2006, and increased again to 301 in 2012. The median attendance at all weekend worship services at the average person’s congregation increased from 325 in 2006 to 400 in 2012. (2012, 684; see graph 3)

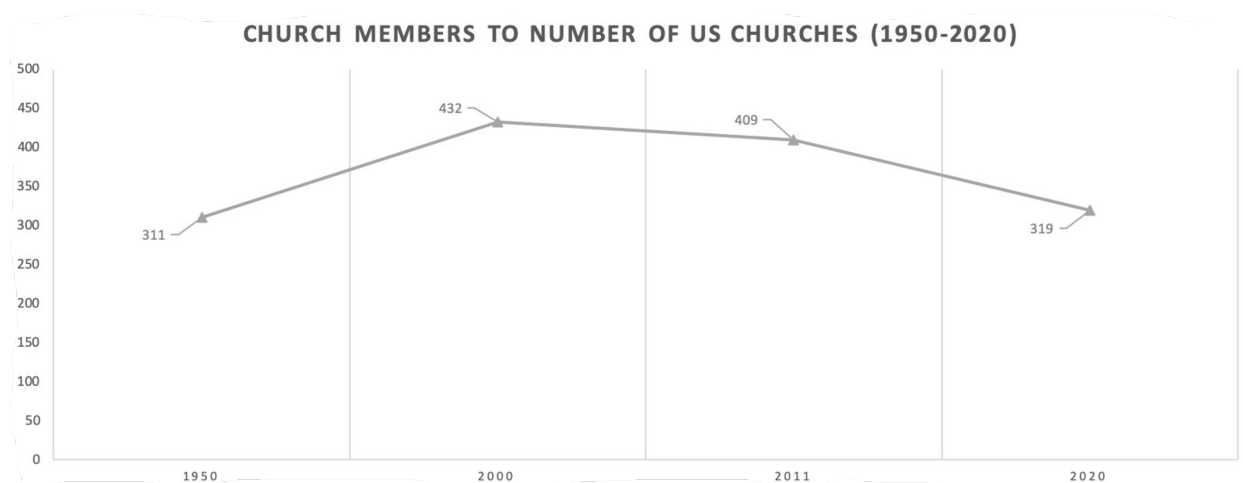
Graph 2: State of the US Church between 1950-2020



Continuing to examine Stetzer and Im's data from NAMB and estimates presented by Goshay (2020) between 2011 and 2020, the number of churches began increasing significantly at a rate of growth of 1.21. Compared to 1950-2000, it is clear that church planting saw an illusory success with the addition of more than 4,000 churches annually. However, during the same time period (2011-2020), church membership declined at an average annual rate of -1.49. Population growth hovered right around 0.96 as it outpaced the growth of church membership by about two times. What this seems to suggest is that in spite of claims by Keller, Wagner, and others, church planting does not appear to be a strategic evangelistic method. There are clearly more churches; however, there are fewer people attending those churches. In fact, the ratio of self-identified church members to church in 2020 is nearly the same as in 1950 (see graph 3). In the meantime, the population ballooned from 152 million (1950) to 331 million (2020) further increasing the gap between population and church membership.

No doubt some might criticize the usefulness of church membership as a data point. There are certainly other Christians who do not identify as church members yet are just as faithful to attend a service on a regular basis. As Ryan Burge recently reported, nearly 25 percent of non-church members in their 1,000-respondent survey attend church once a year. His study also found that one in 10 non-church members are regular attenders of a weekly worship service (Burge, 2021). Still, church membership has long been an indicator of church health and continues to have merit.

Graph 3: Self-Identified Church Members to Number of US Churches between 1950-2020



Though many build a case for the biblical priority of church planting and argue for its strategic nature, Stewart Murray states, church planting:

[M]ay be a significant means of advancing the mission of God. It may facilitate evangelism, peace-making, action for justice, environmental concern, community development, social involvement and many other mission ventures. But it is likely to function in this way only if it is set within the right framework. Church planting seen as an end in itself, or simply as an evangelistic methodology, may fall short of its potential and distort our understanding of God's mission and the nature of God's kingdom. (2001, 26)

Now more than 20 years later, Murray seems to be correct. Church planting as an evangelistic methodology just has not held up to the accolades of the experts.

A Path Forward

It seems clear that to move beyond the decline of Christianity in the United States, we need a shift in the manner in which we think about church planting. Continued claims of it as an evangelistic methodology also need further examination. The data discussed in this essay seems to indicate that, even though there are certainly more churches, there are fewer people attending those churches. While we might maintain the practice of church planting, here are a few considerations that could help justify it as the most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven.

First, we need new metrics. Church growth cannot be measured by the number of new churches planted. Nor can it be measured simply by church membership as that definition changes from church to church and, often, those numbers are Christians shifting to new congregations. Instead, church growth should be measured by the number of new Christians. Indeed, Ott and Wilson assert, “A mere numerical proliferation of small, competing, and struggling churches will not necessarily advance God’s kingdom purposes” (2011, 28).

Additionally, tracking church multiplication as a result of evangelism is critical in order to achieve gospel saturation of an area. So, not only should our metric include new Christians, but also Christians sent to the harvest field. In other words, how many church members are actually participating in evangelism and discipleship, for you cannot have one without the other. Paul did not encourage Timothy to multiply churches. Instead, “What you have heard from me ... entrust to *faithful people* who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2; emphasis added). As Jeff Christopherson notes, when church becomes the goal, it becomes an idolatrous pursuit (2012).

Second, a shift in thinking about church planting. Church planting is not about a Sunday morning service. It is about gathering together believers in Jesus Christ resulting from evangelistic activities in the community. Stetzer and Im state, “In church planting the goal isn’t to plant the coolest church or do things that have never been done before, but it’s always to reach people, be on mission, and be about the kingdom of God” (2016, 1). Similarly, church planting should be thought of in terms of multiplication of disciples rather than adding an additional church in a city. To get to multiplication will take movement thinkers committed to entrusting disciples to equip, empower, and inspire others to make more disciples (2 Tim 2:2). These movement thinkers will have to be analytic, catalytic, and cathartic in the manner in which they church plant (see figure 1). That is, they will need to study culture, mobilize and equip human resources, and care for the communities they engage (see Cooper, 2020).

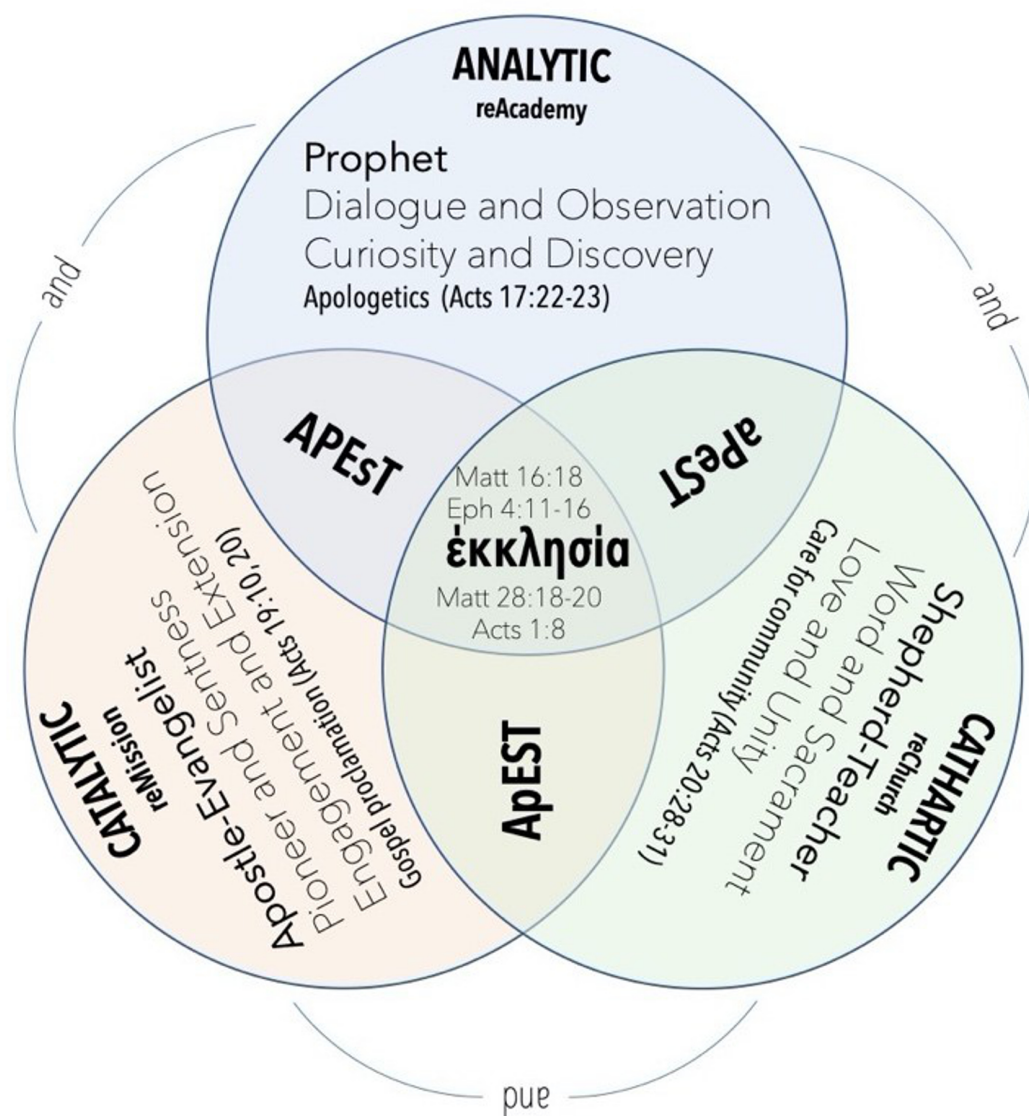


Figure 1: A Charodic Collaborative (Ephesiology)

Third, an emphasis on the transformational nature of the church. A church in a community should impact the community on the deepest level. First, the impact must be personal and at times communal. From such transformation emanates a complete societal transformation: economic, political, educational, healthcare, and religious. In other words, it will have what Alan Hirsch (2016) calls a *movemental ecclesiology*; that is, churches shaped by Jesus and his mission. Warrick Farah and Alan Hirsch (2021) suggest the following as a comparison between a typical ecclesiology and a *movemental* on

Table 1: A Paradigm Shift in Church Mindset (Farah and Hirsch, 2021)

Typical Ecclesiology	Movemental Ecclesiology
• Inherited from Christendom • Led by a Pastor (Top-Down Authority) • Professionals do the ministry • Pulpit Teaching • Program-Oriented, Events • Centered around a building • Structure is Static/Hierarchical • Reproduction is Expensive and Slow • Power and Attraction • Enlargement (Megachurch)	• Emerging from Christology • Led by APEST, Eph 4:11 (Equipping) • Everyone, according to roles and responsibility • Participatory Learning • Disciple-Making Orientation, Relationships • Centered around an Oikos Network • Structure is Organic/Flat • Any Part can Reproduce the Whole • Vulnerability and Service • Multiplication (Church planting)

Fourth, a de-emphasis on Sunday morning and re-orientation to Jesus. If you define church as a place of worship, you fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the body of Christ. Interestingly enough, when Jesus wrote to the seven churches of Asia Minor, none of his expectations for the church focused on Sunday. In fact, to be the church in the community meant to be present at all times. After all, was that not typical of our Savior? Consider for yourself Jesus' list of expectations for the 7-day per week church:

- Listens to the Holy Spirit (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29, 3:6, 13, 22)
- Confronts false teaching (Rev 2:2)
- Proclaims God's glory (Rev 2:4-5) – the works of your first love
- Stands up for the marginalized (Rev 2:6)
- Stands firm in the faith (Rev 2:13)
- Goes beyond the work of love, faith, service, endurance (Rev 2:19)
- Endures hardship (Rev 3:11)
- Keeps sound doctrine (Rev 3:3, 8, 10)

These are not Sunday morning events or programs. These are the daily opportunities to be the church in the community and they demand a re-orientation to the way of Jesus.

Fifth, we need to understand the difference between correlation and causation. There is little doubt that those involved in a new church plant are more likely to see new growth from evangelism than those in a legacy church (Ott and Wilson, 2011, 29). However, such growth is only a correlation with the new church plant, not the result of the new church plant. Gifted *people* plant churches. Ideally, those people are motivated to disciple-making. The result of people doing evangelism and discipleship is new growth. To say that a church plant is causing the growth is to misunderstand the nature of the priesthood of believers and leads to claims that church planting is the greatest evangelistic tool under heaven (Wagner, 1990).

The new church plant certainly is a factor among many correlating factors for growth, but it does not cause the growth. Given similar circumstances, a legacy church can see growth if they are able to activate people skilled in evangelism and discipleship. To reduce effective evangelism to church planting marginalizes the legacy church and gives her an excuse to not participate in evangelizing her community. Peyton Jones is correct, “Church planting is not the *cause* of anything in the New Testament, but rather the *effect* of carrying out the Great Commission” (2021, 14).

Sixth, a renewed respect for the conjunctions. Two small Greek conjunctions make all the difference in church planting: *καί* and *δέ*. In Acts 1:8, *καί* links the geographical breadth of the mission of the church. When the Holy Spirit would come upon His disciples, Jesus said, “And [*καί*] you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and [*καί*] in all Judea and [*καί*] Samaria and [*καί*] to the ends of earth” (Acts 1:8; see Leston, forthcoming). It was not a progressive mission, but rather a simultaneous one. This mission is a vital part of the DNA of church planting and must be present at its beginning. Otherwise, a church plant risks becoming insular and will not multiply where there is no church. Additionally, Paul relates the means by which Jesus has equipped the church to engage every part of the world, “And [*καί*] He gave on the one hand the apostles also [*δέ*] the prophets also [*δέ*] the evangelists also [*δέ*] the shepherds and [*καί*] teachers for the equipping of the saints for works of ministry to the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph 4:11-12). This APEST team works together in honor, respect, and deference to one another as they recognize Jesus as the only head of the church, not a pastor or church planter.

Seventh, a rediscovery of what it means to adapt to culture. In many places, church planter training as been reduced to a methodology. The method which has proven successful in producing numbers of people in church on Sunday’s often becomes the model for other church plants. Rather than doing the hard work of cultural study—observation and dialogue—with a community, church planting methods become

captivated by the pragmatism of social media advertising, attractional methods to persuade people to come to church, or simply shuffling sheep from one congregation to another.

Conversely, adaptive ecclesiology recognizes the ongoing work of God among people to draw them to himself. In the missionary or church planter's work, adaptive ecclesiology sees God creating spaces for community in preparation for people joining the ἐκκλησία. Recognizing God's activity of creating spaces, adaptive ecclesiology takes what God is already doing in a community and incorporates them into the life and form of the church. Adaptive ecclesiology is naturally theocentric as it relies upon the Holy Spirit's leading in discovery God's activity in context. It is animated by the fact that God continues his active role in culture. Only in this way can the ἐκκλησία become properly incarnated as the body of Christ in a community.

Table 2: Ecclesiological Forms

Adaptive Ecclesiology	Captive Ecclesiology
• Sees what God is doing in a culture to create community • Schools and neighborhoods • Sports and Entertainment • Voluntary organizations • Social media • Adapts culturally appropriate practices as a bridge to ἐκκλησία • an ongoing process of cultural observation, dialogue, adaptation • incarnates into the community • Preserves the purposes of ἐκκλησία • teaching, prayer, worship, fellowship, mission	• Starts off adapting cultural forms of a community • ex. Saddleback, Willowcreek • Moves to become controlled by those forms • Performance orientation • Volunteers serve the form • Sunday-centric • Building-centric • Ultimately views the forms as sacrosanct • ex. Worship wars, appropriate clothing ("Sunday best"), church programs • Church becomes captivated by itself

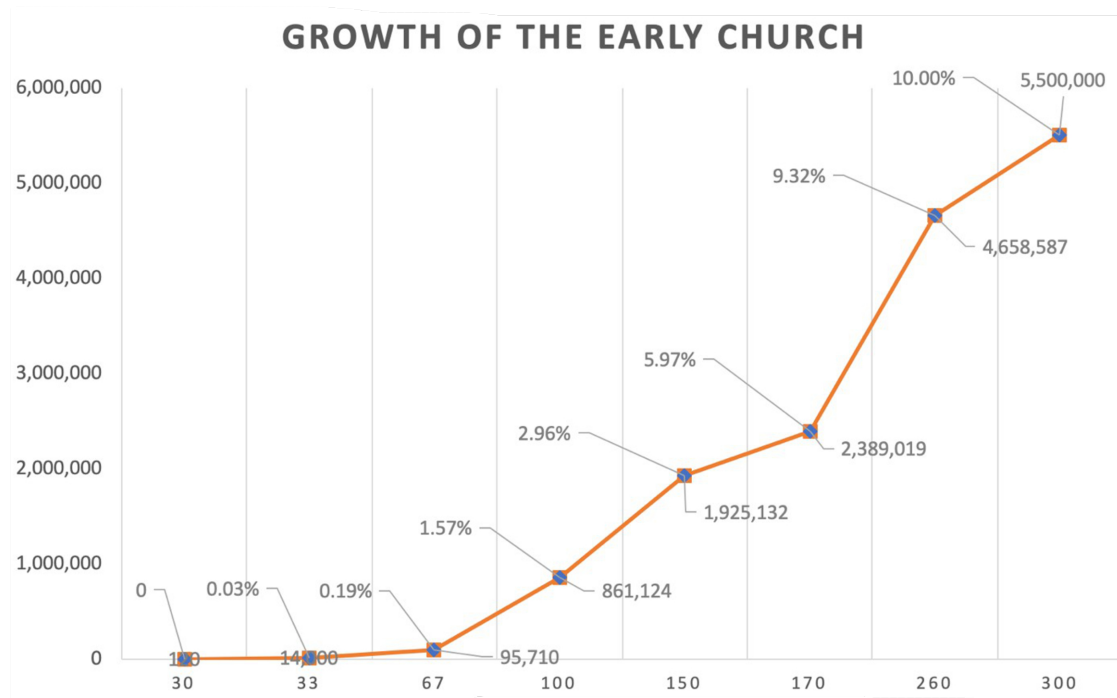
Finally, a new training focused on analytic, catalytic, and cathartic church planters (figure 1). Seminaries have been great in preparing pastors, but preparing church planters is altogether different. A training that builds on and complements seminary is essential. Such a program will engage the head, heart, and hands of the church planter. It will equip church planters to analyze and adapt to culture, catalyze overlapping gospel movements (Christopherson, 2021), and care for the least of these in the community (Cooper and Moulder, 2011; Bhatia and Cooper, 2021).

A Concluding Thought

In 1992, Malphurs predicted that “The twenty-first century church will not look the same as the typical, traditional church of the twentieth century. What has worked in the past will not work in the future” (1992, 15). Unfortunately, the reality is that the twenty-first century church looks like a nineteenth-century congregation applying an ecclesiology from the sixteenth century in a context that is increasingly like the first century (Christopherson 2019). For all practical purposes, the church in general has not significantly changed in 1,700 years. Even the multiplying of new churches between 2000-2020 demonstrates that there is a serious lack of creativity in the church which has largely rendered it ineffective in her engagement of contemporary culture. Malphurs is absolutely correct when he asserts, “If a church desires to reach its generation in its culture, it must adapt its practices (not its faith) to that culture” (1992, 15).

Church planting can be an effective methodology to engage our communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The New Testament witness is clear. After the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost, a future event that Jesus had predicted (Matt 16:18), God’s instrument to declare the manifold wisdom to the principalities and authorities (Eph 3:10) marched to the order of making disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18-20).

Graph 4: Growth of Christianity from 30-300AD



In such an astronomical trajectory of growth (see graph 4), the church was planted in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the utter most ends of the world in four decades. Eusebius, preserving a fragment from Origen's commentary on Genesis, notes:

Meanwhile the holy apostles and disciples of our Saviour were dispersed throughout the world. Parthia, according to tradition, was allotted to Thomas as his field of labor, Scythia to Andrew, and Asia to John, who, after he had lived some time there, died at Ephesus. Peter appears to have preached in Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia to the Jews of the dispersion. And at last, having come to Rome, he was crucified head-downwards; for he had requested that he might suffer in this way. What do we need to say concerning Paul, who preached the Gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to Illyricum, and afterwards suffered martyrdom in Rome under Nero? These facts are related by Origen in the third volume of his Commentary on Genesis. (*Church History* 3.1.1)

No doubt many others followed in the footsteps of the Apostles and made disciples who congregated in churches where there was no gospel witness. And this can still happen. The Holy Spirit who empowered the disciples to be witnesses to the ends of the earth continues to empower us for the same purpose (Acts 1:8).

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