



Organic Church Planting

by David T. Olson

In 1988 Chemlawn, the Columbus, Ohio-based lawn-care company, settled a lawsuit in which New York state alleged its advertising was false and misleading. Chemlawn agreed to no longer advertise its lawn-care applications as "safe" or "non-toxic," under the agreement with the New York Attorney General. "Lawns treated with chemical fertilizers are like drug addicts," said Kathleen Mills, a horticulturist with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. The "good guys" such as earthworms, microbes, bacteria and other organisms are killed by the regular use of synthetic fertilizers, making the lawn unable to green-up on its own. Once the fertilizers are stopped, the soil can take three years to recover, she said.

According to a 1992 article in the Philadelphia Inquirer, lawn-care companies are jumping on the environmental bandwagon by offering natural and organic fertilizers. New companies such as Nature's Way and NaturaLawn hope to take away business from traditional lawn-care companies such as ChemLawn. NaturaLawn and services similar to it wean lawns from the synthetic fertilizers. Bill Englehart, CEO of NaturaLawn, says they use an organic-based fertilizer that can range from 25 percent organic matter to 100 percent, "depending on how badly chemically abused the lawn is," said Englehart. "As we thicken the lawn, we take the percentage of natural organic chemicals and increase it."

Definitions

Organic Church Planting

focuses on people resources and natural growth processes to start a new church. It builds off of strengths in quality people, visionary ideas and flexible structures. New churches based on this model use these resources to grow naturally through the intrinsic strength and motivation of a new endeavor.

Inorganic Church Planting

focuses on inert physical assets to start a new church. It believes the crucial issues lay in the external and institutional factors of a church plant. These tend to be the fixed assets that an organization tries to leverage for growth, specifically money, land and buildings.



Just as the organic - inorganic controversy rages in the lawncare business, it also provides a significant distinction for competing models of church planting. There is a huge paradigmic difference between “inorganic” church planting and “organic” church planting. Once the old paradigm is cast off, a whole new vista presents itself, with new and productive ways to look at personnel selection, developmental stages and growth processes.

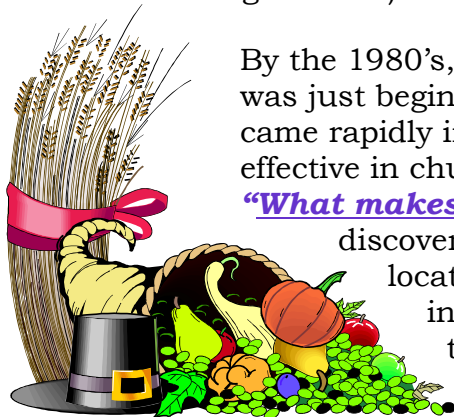
Here’s how the old paradigm of inorganic church planting worked. From the 1950’s into the 1980’s, the dominant theory of church planting was based on what might be called the demographics of location. Notice what the key factors in church planting were:

*finding the right demographic growth in an emerging suburban community;
securing the right piece of property upon which to build a facility;
starting in a location sufficiently distant from any other church of the denomination;
providing substantial financing until the new church was self-supporting (as long as 10 years or more).*

Although it worked well in very homogeneous Anglo suburbs, by the early 1980’s its effectiveness even there was diminishing. And all along, an astute observer would have noticed these very significant weaknesses:

*It did not work well in urban or ethnic settings;
(Interestingly, denominations instinctually understood this, but had no interest in applying the inorganic method of church planting to ethnic or urban populations. Instead, they were willing to start ethnic churches in poor locations, targeting marginalized groups with undertrained and underpaid pastors, never noticing the inconsistencies of their position!)*
*It did not work well in poor or rural environments;
It did not work well in the global environment of overseas missions;
It did not work well in settings experiencing fast-paced cultural and societal change.*

Why then did the inorganic model last so long, and indeed is still the gospel truth in many settings? The answer is that there were always just enough success stories among those homogeneous Anglo suburban church plants to keep people from questioning their hypotheses. (In many of these cases, the reality was that the success happened because they accidentally used organic church planting principles, but the power of the dominant model kept that from being noticed.)



By the 1980’s, the present church planting movement was just beginning to develop. With its development came rapidly increasing knowledge of how to be more effective in church planting. In answer to the question, **“What makes a church plant succeed?”**, research discovered that while demographics and site location were valuable secondary pieces of information, they did not adequately explain the reasons for the growth or failure of a church plant.

The root cause of the failure of the old model was that it was based on an inorganic model of church planting. It posited that the crucial issues lay in the external and institutional factors of a church plant. These tended to be the fixed assets that an organization tried to leverage for growth, specifically

money, land and buildings. The failure of using this model in church planting can be illustrated by two examples from the business world.

First, the use of fixed assets to leverage growth occasionally works with mature companies, but usually is of little consequence in the initial phases of high growth businesses. For example, in a 1992 *Inc.* magazine list of the 500 top growth companies, 34% were launched with less than \$10,000, 59% were launched with less than \$50,000 and 75% with less

than \$100,000! New companies succeed because of innovative ideas that outperform the competition and leaders who use force of character and hard work to create a significant market niche. These ideas, products and leadership then cause venture capital to become available.

In the business and the church world, institutional structures have always been poorly equipped to begin startup endeavors. One of the startling facts of church

planting is that the growth rate of a new church is in inverse proportion to the money it receives from outside sources! Denominations that invest the largest amounts of capital per church plant have the lowest new church growth rates.



Spiritual Dynamics

Inorganic Church Planting unintentionally abrogates a number of very important principles related to spiritual dynamics:

- ◆ *It depends on the collection of human resources for its strength rather than the call and power of a creative God;*
- ◆ *It helps reinforce the demon of territorialism - the theory that within our denomination God has given a church the exclusive rights to a selected geographical territory;*
- ◆ *It elevates to leadership people who are good, likable managers of ministry, rather than identifying true apostolic leaders.*

The Three Keys

The Right Church Planter

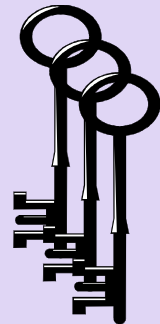
A godly and gifted individual who excels in leadership and communication gifts.

The Right Core Group

A group of 30 to 50 committed Christians who have a passion for reaching people in their community.

The Right Networks

A community where the church planter and core group either have or can develop networks of contacts within that

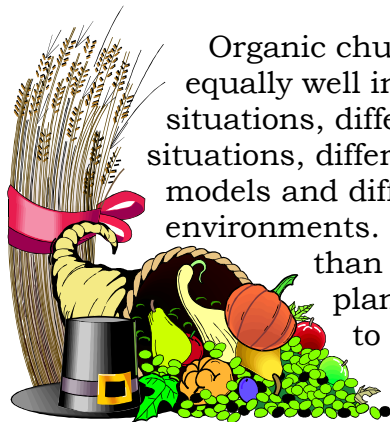


Second, business leaders are beginning to talk about another type of asset called intellectual capital. Intellectual capital is the company's non-physical resources, such as personnel, ideas, customer base, experience and efficiency. In a new business, much of the value of the company lies in these areas rather than in the more traditional asset-based areas of measurement. In new churches, dynamic growth occurs best when it is the intellectual capital that is leveraged.

A much healthier paradigm for the starting of new churches is organic church planting. The theological base for this type of church planting is in the parables of Jesus about seeds and plant growth. Whether Jesus is talking about the parable of the soil types (Mark 4:1-20), the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32) or the seed that must die (John 12:24), each one illustrates that when a planted seed is properly cared for, it can geometrically grow in quantity and productivity. This model operates on the theory 'think big, but start small and let natural and supernatural growth processes produce a miracle.'

Or consider II Corinthians 9:6-11. The law of sowing and reaping is called upon by Paul to illustrate the multiplicative effect when we give something away. The organic law of growth comes into play so that the store of seed will be increased and enlarged.

Rather than focusing on fixed (and limited) resources, organic church planting builds off of strengths in quality people, visionary ideas and flexible structures. New churches based on this model use these resources to grow naturally through the intrinsic strength and motivation of a new endeavor. It could be called 'growing the old fashioned way.'



Organic church planting works equally well in different ethnic situations, different economic situations, different developmental models and different global environments. It is more productive than inorganic church planting, cost much less to implement and is usually immune to the

Capital Resources Available to Churches

I. Spiritual Resources (God's Capital)

Is God's activity abundantly apparent in the formation and life of this church? Is the Holy Spirit relied upon in all aspects of the work? Have the resources of prayer been marshaled for this project?

II. Individual Skills (Human Capital)

What are the gifts and skills of the church planter, pastor or staff? What productive ability does the core leadership team bring to the church?

III. Organizational Resources (Structural Capital)

Is the church organized around efficient ministry structures? What are the systems that will allow lay people to minister effectively? How can the structure keep focused on the church's vision and passion?

IV. Franchise Resources (Customer Capital)

Is the church working the networks that people in the church have? Is the church creating loyalty and ownership among new attenders? Is the church creating a positive reputation in the community? Is a network of other geographically-close, similarly-modeled church plants being created?

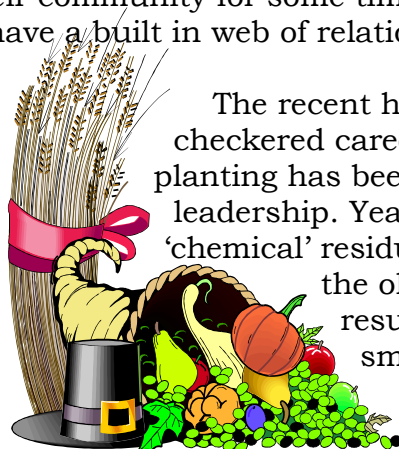
changes caused by cultural and societal change.

Organic church planting focuses on three key areas that most often accompany success in church planting: the right church planter, the right core group and the right networks in the community.

If the three most important words in real estate are location, location and location, then the three most important words in church planting are personnel, personnel, personnel. Most unsuccessful situations have their primary root mistake in the wrong person in the wrong situation.

Correct personnel selection is not that difficult. Unfortunately, it often does not happen because those responsible for hiring do not understand either how crucial the choice is or what character and giftedness qualities embody the truly exceptional church planter. Often the selection problem can be summed up by saying that bureaucrats do not understand the crucial role of the barbarian in church planting. A concise description of the ideal church planter is a godly person with good relational skills, who excels in leadership and communication, and has a passion for reaching the unchurched and producing disciples.

The two other keys are interrelated. The right core group encompasses a minimum of 30 committed adults who have a passion for creating a new church that both reaches the unchurched and meets the spiritual needs of Christians. The core group should have a contagious personality that combines spiritual intensity with equal parts of fun and laughter. The third key states that it is critical that the church planter and/or the core group have excellent networks in the community. If not, developing those as quickly as possible is essential. Most of the best church planters have lived in their community for some time, understand the pulse of the population and have a built in web of relationships they can develop.



The recent history of church planting has had a checkered career. The transition to organic church planting has been a difficult one for many in denominational leadership. Years of inorganic church planting have left 'chemical' residue that often takes years to flush out! When the old model is used in the 1990's, it usually results in Anglo congregations that remain small, and ethnic congregations that remain

The Key to Networking

Networking happens best in a new church when 3 types of potential core group members are identified:

- 1. The Gatherers** - key Christians who are doing ministry and have many contacts with people in general and new Christians in particular.
- 2. The Bringers** - New believers who have no church affiliation yet and lots of non-Christian friends.
- 3. The Comers** - People who simply come because they have been invited by a Gatherer or a Bringer. They can be either seekers or unchurched Christians.

(adapted from an article by Dr. Tim Keller)

consistently weak. In a stereotypical American denomination, the average Sunday attendance of a 5 year old church is 60. The failure rate is often 33 percent or higher. Many new churches take 10 years or more to become self-supporting. The production rate is only one new church per one hundred existing churches. New churches can cost as much as half a million dollars each! Something has gone wrong with the harvest!

Yet God's kingdom field is increasingly seeing strains of seed that produce effective, efficient and strong new churches. Often it has been independent or pentecostal church planting movements that have intuitively understood this new paradigm (actually the original paradigm of the early church). Overseas and third world missions have understood this for over a generation. Ironically, it has often been the financial resources and the bureaucratic bent of many denominations that have kept them from adopting this more natural and productive model.



Just as our world has changed dramatically in the last generation, in the last 10 years the shift of power in church planting is rapidly flowing toward the organic model. In our diverse, postmodern society, the need for vital new churches that are reaching the whole spectrum of people groups is great. As organic church planting takes root, healthy new church plants will be springing up all over!

An Organic Development Process

Stage 1

Core Group Gathering - Hold Gathering Events that Coalesce a Committed Core that will dedicate themselves to starting this new church. The goal is at least 30 committed Christians.

Stage 2

Preview Services - Turbo-charge the Core group size through once a month services. The strong focus is growth through word of mouth. The goal is to double the size of the gathering stage group through Preview Services.

Stage 3

Preparatory Worship - Meet on Sunday mornings, developing excellence in each primary area of ministry and encouraging word of mouth contacts. The goal is to double the size of the core group development stage.

Stage 4

Grand Opening - Use multiple strategies to attract a large crowd of receptive people. The goal is to double the size of preparatory worship.