

The Survival of the Species: Why the Multiplication of Churches is Critical for Your Denomination By David T. Olson

Our friend Ruth knocked on our door last spring and exclaimed in an excited voice, “Do you see what I see across the street?” My wife Shelly and I dash outside and scan the trees in the nature preserve across the road. Not more than 100 yards away is a bald eagle sitting on the top branch of a tree. We have seen eagles in Alaska, Canada, and northern Minnesota, but never in our Minneapolis neighborhood. The eagle is huge, with broad shoulders and regal bearing. It peers down at us and seems to say, “I am the most magnificent bird in America.”

Before the first European settlers arrived, bald eagles in the United States may have numbered half a million. As settlers expanded westward, they destroyed the eagles’ natural habitat, causing the population of bald eagles to decline sharply. In 1940, the United States Congress passed the Bald Eagle Act, reducing harassment by humans, and eagle populations began to recover. However, a few years later, DDT and other pesticides began to make their way up the food chain, causing eagles to lay eggs with paper-thin shells. Those eggs failed to hatch and the numbers of eagles plummeted.

Extinction. The word creates a feeling of deep sadness, of tragic loss. Why does extinction occur? Extinction happens most often when a species faces a crisis or a change in its environment and is unable to adapt. As a species begins to be threatened, these stresses produce a low reproduction rate. The survival of the species comes down to simple math: the number of births must outnumber the number of deaths, or the species will be in danger of extinction.

The American church lives in an ecosystem and in its own right we can call it a species. We can evaluate the long-term health of any denomination by two simple standards: the number of new churches born each year that survive and prosper; and the vigor and reproductive rate of its established or *adult* churches.

In the American church today, some denominations are thriving, while others are on the road to extinction. We mark declining denominations by striking similarities—their members are getting older, their congregations are declining in size, and they start few new churches. On the other hand, thriving denominations have a much younger demographic. Their churches are full of children, teenagers, and young adults, with many people becoming new Christians each year. In addition, growing denominations start at least three new churches per 100 existing churches each year. To adequately replace their closed churches and to keep up with population growth, we need to attain three standards: 1) These new churches need to be launched with at least 75 in attendance; 2) They should continue to grow yearly; 3) At least 75 percent should survive. In short, thriving denominations create life-giving systems, while declining denominations drift into decay and diminishment. Eventually these declining denominations will become extinct unless they dramatically change their values and behaviors.

Even numerically growing denominations face these challenges. From 2003-07, the Assemblies of God started an average of 290 new churches each year (2.4 new churches for every 100 churches, less than the above-mentioned standard). During the same period, they closed 244 churches each year, creating a yearly gain of only 46 churches. However, for the Assemblies of God to keep up with population growth, it needed a net gain of 124 churches each year. As a result, Assemblies of God worship attendance did not keep up with population growth during this period. If it does not plant at least 80 more churches each year, its attendance share will continue to decline.

DO WE NEED NEW CHURCHES?

As I speak throughout the country, I find that most Christians do not understand why we need to plant new churches. They ask: Why do we need more churches? Don’t we have enough already? Wouldn’t it be better to fill up the empty churches we already have?

There is a simple reason why we need new churches. Established churches (those over 20 years old) decline by 2 percent per year.

Every year, established evangelical congregations decline by over 1/2 million people in attendance, while the U.S. population grows by 3 million people each year. Without new churches, the percentage of

the United States population that attends church will decline by 30 percent in the next 10 years. Without new churches, Christ's church is destined to become extinct, while the population continues to surge.

While on vacation in New England last year, one evening our family visited a Shaker village in Canterbury, New Hampshire. They had closed the village for the day, but we walked its grounds and viewed some of the buildings that remained open. We visited the carpenter shop where the Shakers fashioned their simple furniture, peeked into the windows of the creamery and schoolhouse, and admired the large, well-kept flower and vegetable gardens.

The Shakers were a communal, utopian religious group known for their unusual, unorthodox beliefs and worship practices. Yet Shaker culture has left behind the lasting legacy of a strong work ethic, simple timeless crafts, and lovely spirituals and ballads. At their height, there were over 6,000 Shakers living in 19 communities.

Unfortunately, the group adopted two strategies that guaranteed their eventual demise. The first was their practice of a celibate lifestyle. They officially adopted their second lethal strategy in 1965, allowing no new members into their group. As a result, there are only three Shakers left in the United States today—two brothers and a sister—living their remaining years in the Sabbath day Shaker Community in Maine. With their deaths, the more than 200-year-old Shaker denomination will cease to exist.

Could this happen to your church? Could this happen to your denomination? I find that most Christian leaders do not understand how critical new churches are to the health of the American church.

While most established churches can recite their proud history, few of their present members ever consider the fact their congregation was once a new church. The thought of church planting is usually foreign to them, even though their own place of worship exists because pioneering Christians founded it.

How was your church started? What vision, passion, and need caused a small group to begin the adventure of faith that became your church? What are the stories of your church's pioneers? Why did they begin their new church? I have asked these questions to hundreds of established churches. Every time their answer reveals a fascinating story of the founders' love for God, concern for their neighbors, and willingness to venture outside their safety zone. Usually they were ordinary, faith-filled people driven by an extraordinary dream from God.

To help the congregation further appreciate what God has done in their midst and to comprehend the critical role of church planting, I ask another set of questions:

- How many people have become Christians throughout the life of your church?
- How many children and teenagers has your church ministered to since it began?
- How many baptisms, marriages, and funerals have been performed?
- How many broken hearts, shattered lives, and divided families have been mended through your church's ministries?

Congregations have never considered the scope of these questions and are unsure how to proceed. I ask the group to guess how many people became Christians each year throughout their history. After hearing a number of suggestions, we settle on a yearly estimate. Then on the whiteboard, we multiply that number times the age of the church. It always produces an impressively large number. We multiply the cumulative numbers for children and teenagers ministered to by the church, and the number of baptisms, marriages, and funerals, by the age of the church. I write them on the whiteboard. By this time, the light in their eyes begins to flicker on as if to say, "Our church *has had* an incredible influence for Christ over the years." Then I go back to the first question: "How was your church started and why?" Then they begin to make the connection. All of this ministry fruit occurred because visionary people stepped out in faith and founded their church. Without the founding of their church, the loss to the kingdom of God would be enormous. One final question remains for me to ask: "Have you ever considered that your church could replicate your own incredible story by planting a new church?"

FACTS OF NEW CHURCHES

New churches are critical to the health and vitality of the American church in general and your denomination in particular. Thriving denominations stimulate vitality by making planting new churches a priority. So what are the basic facts we need to consider about the present state of church planting?

1. 4,000 new churches are started every year in the United States. Unfortunately, 3,700 churches close each year, producing a net gain of only 300 churches per year. To keep up with population growth, an additional 2,900 new churches need to be started each year.

2. 75 percent of new churches survive the first 10 years. Unfortunately, the majority of them remain small and have limited impact.

3. The average new church has 55 in attendance after one year, with the median attendance of 36.

4. The yearly growth rate of new churches for their second to seventh year is 7 percent per year. New churches see strong growth in their first decade, compared to established churches, which decline by 2 percent each year.

Two methods of church reproduction divide evangelical denominations into two distinct camps. As is true in the biological world, there are reptilian denominations and mammalian denominations.

Some denominations start new churches in the same manner as reptiles reproduce: they lay as many “eggs” (churches) as possible, but they essentially leave them on their own and say, “Good luck, God bless, we hope you survive.” Just as most reptile babies perish, most of these new churches do not survive to reproducing adulthood. As our culture becomes more challenging for Christian ministry, reptilian church planting will become less and less fruitful.

Other denominations replicate the reproduction of mammals. They birth a smaller number of offspring, but they create processes that help as many of their new churches survive and develop into healthy, reproductive churches. Mammalian denominations invest energy and resources in leadership development, training, coaching, and securing parenting churches. The ideal goal is to start as many new churches as possible, while maintaining high standards for each church-planting project (this ideal is called turbocharged mammalian church planting).

These new churches unite human and divine efforts to build strong congregations. The Spirit of God calls the planter, confirms that call through the larger church, inspires the parent church to plant, provides the vision, and creates the people flow. Church planters and their lay leaders follow the leading of the Holy Spirit to do the work of the ministry by gathering people and building them together into a new church.

Many churches and denominations have effectively planted new churches over the last 20 years and have created a large base of research on effective church planting. How can your denomination learn from this information to start more and stronger churches? The research shows that the church planter is the most critical component. Demographics, money, strategy, and buildings are secondary. The church planter needs to be *a godly and gifted pastor, one who knows how to gather and lead people*. These planters have a call from God to start a church, but an extensive screening procedure helps the larger church confirm that call.

The most successful planting denominations use assessment centers to process who should plant a church. These are multiday intensive events for church-planting candidates and their spouses, where they can clarify their call while trained pastors, planters, and lay leaders evaluate their strengths and growth areas.

Research also indicates that a second critical factor in a movement of new churches is *parenting churches*. This means that an established church takes a major role in helping start a new congregation, known as a daughter church. They provide funding and pledge a tithe of their attendees. While the first instinct of a church is to plant far away from their location, parenting is most fruitful when the church plants a new church within 5 to 10 miles of its own facility. Territorialism, defined as the fear that other churches will intrude on their God-given geographic birthright, is the primary inhibitor to a church deciding to parent. However, research shows that this is an unfounded fear and does not bring about the blessing of God.

Studies show that when a church plants a daughter church, both the new church and the parent church benefit. As an example from horticulture, when growing perennials, the more you divide them, the quicker they will grow. Congregations that parent new churches grow faster than congregations that do not parent. This is because the traits that cause a church to plant a new church (such as a desire to evangelize and minister to their community) are the same traits that will cause the parent church to grow.

The third building block for a new church is an *effective launch process and training program*. The most common launch process used in recent years is the Four Stage Launch Process. This process allows new churches to grow and develop in a sequential manner, gradually building on a foundation of strength. Four stages help the new church develop from birth to a critical mass of people, with each lasting 4 months. Those four stages are: 1) Gathering the launch team; 2) Monthly preview services, to add to and strengthen the launch team; 3) The beginning of weekly worship, with an emphasis on ministry development; 4) Launch stage, where the new church is ready to do expansive ministry in its community. The goal is that when the new church completes the fourth stage, they will have at least 75 to 100 worshipers each Sunday and then continue to build on that solid foundation. Thousands of new churches from multiple denominations have used this process in the first 12 to 16 months to establish a strong foundation and a vibrant ministry.

The final building block is *coaching*. New churches do best when a trained coach meets monthly with the church planter, talking through challenges, keeping the focus clear, and finding ways to produce a healthy and growing ministry. My research shows that when a church planter has a trained and gifted coach, the new church grows twice as fast.

ETHNICITY AND SYNERGY

Church planting has changed considerably since the 1990s. As the oldest of the baby boomer generation approach retirement, the emerging generation and the growing non-Anglo populations require new and creative church-planting models.

Multiethnicity is the most important and challenging growth edge in church planting. Over the last 15 years, many denominations have been actively engaged in planting new churches in a variety of ethnic communities. Because the future will bring increased diversity in America, planting more first-generation (new immigrant) and second-generation (the English-speaking children of immigrants) churches will be crucial. Many denominations are also beginning to plant intentional multiethnic (made up of two or more ethnicities) congregations. These convey a crucial image to our culture that the gospel breaks down the barriers of race, class, and gender (Galatians 3:28)—issues that are important issues to younger Christians for both theological and practical reasons.

Growing denominations also understand the synergy created between new churches and established churches. Research shows that denominations that plant many strong churches have a higher percentage of healthier, growing, established churches than those who plant few churches. Just as children create vitality and energy within families and society, so new churches create vitality and energy for the whole church.

Church plants pioneer many of the best ministry ideas. New churches are a great development setting for young pastors and underutilized lay leaders. Typically, new churches have three to four times the conversion rate of established churches. These churches also allow the younger generation to speak the gospel with their own cultural values and communication style.

Established churches enrich new churches as well by teaching them the importance of history, tradition, and stability within a church. They often are excellent models to young churches of the value of multigenerational ministry, patience, love, and an interconnected community.

REFLECTION

What happened to the tailspin trajectory of the bald eagle? On July 4, 1976, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officially listed the bald eagle as a national endangered species. Because of the banning of DDT and the restoration of habitat, birthrates increased and the eagle population began making a remarkable recovery. On June 28, 2007, by an Act of Congress, the Department of Interior and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officially removed the American bald eagle from the endangered species list. Bald eagles are thriving again in North America.

Two factors will determine the future of the American church species. The first is the health and growth of its established churches—whether they thrive and reproduce or diminish and die. The second is

the fertility rate of the American church—whether they will nurture new offspring, survive and flourish, replacing closed churches as well as providing new churches for the new Americans.

What about your church or denomination? Will it perish or will it flourish? Will declining churches and denominations learn reinvigorating habits of health and growth? These are vital questions to ponder.

Churches and denominations can make dramatic and unexpected comebacks. Will this be the story of the American church in the next decade? Will there be a comeback? Will we follow the example of Joshua, Deborah, David, Ezra, and Paul in leading the people of God to restoration? Will we allow the message and mission of Jesus to return the American church to a renewed vitality? Will God pour out the Holy Spirit on our land again, creating a movement of God in our time and in our midst?

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