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THEOLOGY IN THE NEWS

The End of Church Planting?

A look at whether churches should expand through a missionary model rather than relying on professional entrepreneurial pastors to plant churches.

Jason B. Hood | posted 7/15/2011 09:55AM

Next year marks the one hundredth anniversary of Roland Allen's small book *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* In that landmark text in mission studies, Allen argued that Western missionary methods had little in common with Paul's missionary practices in the New Testament. The apostle and his partners did not establish large, permanent institutions, nor did they stay in one place for a decade or a career.

Allen wrote during the height of Western optimism, paternalism, and colonialism, and it took time for his ideas to gain traction. Yet the book eventually grew in influence and helped spur the shift toward contextualization and indigenization in world mission.

David Fitch wants to do something similar for North American missions and church planting. Fitch is Lindner Professor of Evangelical Theology at Northern Seminary and the author of several books, most recently *The End of Evangelicalism* (not the first doom-casting attempt in recent years).

In a recent [blog post](#) that is [attracting attention](#) around the web, Fitch encourages church expansion via a missionary team model, rather relying on professional entrepreneurial pastors to plant churches. The latter model has become common in recent decades ([Rick Warren](#) is a leading example). Fitch proposes that churches, denominations, and missions organizations send out teams consisting of three or four leaders or "lead couples" who could operate as a team in under-churched contexts.

Rather than emphasizing biblical practice as Allen did, Fitch argues pragmatically and fiscally. (His approach echoes that of Allen's predecessor, Henry Venn, General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society; Venn proposed indigenization in the 19th century in response to lack of funds and warm bodies.) Money is a perennial issue, and not just for the planting organization; Jerry Bowyer recently blogged at Forbes on [money problems for seminarians](#), mixing opinion and statistics. [Fitch argues](#) that such problems are addressed by his model.

The "lost and hurting" need not wait on financial windfalls, Fitch notes. Fitch would like us to "have three to four leader/leader couples" funded by full-time jobs, which would leave each couple "15 hours of labor (a week) to work together to organize and form a gospel expression ... in their context." They would plant themselves in a context for 10 years, and their careers would fund and fuel ministry to a small local group. Institutionalization and massive growth—typified by recent "suburban" church plants and the sort of large institutions opposed by Allen in 1912—would be avoided at all costs.

Mission methods that do not depend on massive finances certainly deserve consideration, and not just for the reasons Fitch cites. In the first instance, expensive church planting models are not well-suited for many contexts. In poorer locations, teams prepared to minister bi-vocationally could serve for the long-term in communities where churches have little or no chance of producing a minister's salary. Fitch's strategy also has value for those who desire to work in expensive under-churched contexts, many of which are cited by

experts as locations in need of more gospel witness.

Secondly, seminary graduates increasingly struggle to find employment in ministry, thanks to the economic recession and over-saturation of the market with young seminary graduates. Joel Hathaway serves as Director of Alumni & Career Services at Covenant Seminary in St. Louis and is regularly involved in placement consultation for churches and students. When open positions are publicly posted, Hathaway sees an average of fifty and as many as 70 applicants per position.

Many opportunities exist for young graduates willing to raise funds. But freedom from a life of ongoing, time-consuming fundraising can be liberating for students who adopt a profession that supports a life of ministry. One decades-old study indicated that both churches and pastors benefited "when a minister moved from being under-employed as the full-time pastor of a small church, to a forty-hour secular job, with a twenty-hour-a-week assignment to serve that church as pastor." One can imagine less-vital aspects of a church planter's day falling by the wayside without much loss, including time spent raising funds or connecting with like-minded souls on social media.

Third, church planting organizations often require candidates to complete a detailed church planting assessment designed to determine readiness and aptitude. In a team approach, no one person or couple needs to excel in every area. Everyone involved could provide *some* of the necessary skills and labor. Fitch's model—reflected in some existing models—would broaden the number of useful candidates for church planting.

Finally, many church plants thrive on transfer growth from existing churches and draw members from a wide geographical area. But the model Fitch sketches certainly seems to be focused more on particular neighborhoods and the unreached.

Fitch overreaches when he calls for a total rejection or overhaul of the way in which church planting is done. Church planting efforts are growing in virtually every sphere of evangelicalism. Many traditional plants serve a purpose that more than justifies their expense. Asbury Seminary President Timothy Tennent cites church planting as a crucial mission trend in 21st century Christianity, and made church planting one of four planks for the seminary's vision in his recent inaugural address.

Given such momentum, models like Fitch's are more likely to augment church planting than to eclipse it. Tim Morey, pastor of a church plant and church planting leader in the Evangelical Covenant Church, acknowledges the need for experimentation while noting many of the relative strengths of current models. In the comments at Scot McKnight's Jesus Creed blog, Morey cites the good work being done through church planting. "Some contexts are going to work better with bivocational leadership, some contexts won't." And even in some contexts where bivocational ministry works well, "it will make sense at some point to hire one or more leaders away from their day jobs so they can give more of their time to equipping the saints for ministry."

While some aspects of Fitch's model are currently in use with some success, similar efforts in earlier generations failed to establish a lasting local gospel witness. A blend of alternative and traditional frameworks could help create stability and sustainability, and church leadership is one area where old models could serve newer models. Paul's "servant hierarchy" approach to church expansion suggests that some traditional models of leadership offset the weaknesses inherent in teams of young, energetic laborers.

One can envision a bishop or presbytery over several missional groups facilitating church duplication, growth, discipline, and leadership training. Thanks to iTunesU, YouTube, and ministries like Third Millennium that freely provide content, many aspects of theological education can be absorbed "on-the-job" under the guidance of more experienced leaders. Even with hierarchy in place, newer churches create new leaders more quickly than older established churches, a fact often cited by Tim Keller and other church

planting experts.

Paul's own method for ministry was a message: his gospel (1 Cor. 15:1–4; Rom. 1:1–4) and his gospel-shaped way of life (1 Cor. 4:8–17). This message impacted Paul's method of ministry. He did not choose a tent-making approach to ministry for pragmatic or financial reasons, but for *pastoral* reasons. He used his lifestyle to model the sacrifice and service required of every Christian (Acts 20:33–35; 1 Thess. 2:9–12, compared with 1 Thess. 4:9–11; 2 Thess. 3:6–12; and a point also made in the middle of 1 Cor. 8:1–11:1). While there is more than one way to see that message take root in every neighborhood in North America, not all of them are created equal. Fitch flags an oft-neglected approach that is worthy of consideration, adaptation, and application.

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