

A MISSIONAL RESPONSE TO CHURCH PLANTING IN THE WEST

By Glenn Smith

The training and coaching that we offer through NCI is based on a missional mindset. We do not believe that the common traditional or modern approaches to church planting are appropriate in a culture of diverse worldviews (see our previous article “The Challenge of Three Worldviews”). Church planting leaders in the U.S. must learn to think differently. They must learn to think like missionaries. No single model is going to reach a diverse culture. Church planters must prayerfully think and design a unique, missional approach to whatever community or people group they are trying to reach. I want to offer a few principles that can help the church planter think missionally and thus be more effective in the work of church planting. These are some of the principles around which we are building our training system.

First, the church planter must realize that the church is not a place or just an organization, but it is a community of Christ-followers on mission (Guder, 1998:80). We should be very cautious about employing business models and approaches that feed American consumerism. We must not measure success by the institutional measurements of bodies, budgets, and buildings. We must realize that we are not creating “volunteer” organizations but a band of selfless missionaries who will change the world (Guder, 1998:84). We must see ourselves as creating communities of people who reflect the missionary nature of God (Van Engen, 1991:27). We must see the end goal not as a financially stable and secure institution but as the manifestation of God’s Kingdom, His rule and reign on earth. The church planter must think critically and carefully about his ecclesiology. We must realize that mission is not one of the functions of the church but is the very essence of the church. Church Planters must develop a missiological ecclesiology (Van Gelder, 2000:30-32).

Second, church planters must not rely solely on an attractional approach to ministry but must engage in incarnational ministry (Frost & Hirsch, 2003:12). We must follow the Biblical example of Jesus and “dwell among them” (John 1:14). Church planters must engage in conversations with the un-reached and un-churched. This is the most effective way to discover the worldview of those who we are trying to reach. Trying to create “attractional” events before we thoroughly know the worldview of the community can be very costly, both from an economic standpoint and a credibility standpoint. By listening and building relational bridges we can discover inroads into the hearts and souls of people. By serving them and demonstrating the love of Christ we can gain a hearing. By prayerfully reflecting on our interactions and relationships we can develop culturally appropriate ways to share the gospel, ways that will make sense and be meaningful to the hearer.

Finally, we must develop a strategy that takes into account the gifts and experiences of the church planter, the worldview and context of the people who we are attempting to reach, and the supernatural working of God within a community. This is not a franchised or cookie cutter approach to church planting. By doing this, every strategy will look somewhat different. However, it will be founded on solid Biblical and missiological

principles. While we can learn from the experiences and models of others, we must create our own unique missiological expression of the church. Every context will reflect its own uniqueness, and every planter will reflect his own uniqueness as well.

My observation is that church planters commonly make one of three mistakes. First, they operate on “autopilot” and just reproduce whatever they have known and experienced in the past. Unaware of the dynamics within themselves or the worldview of the people in their community, they simply replicate the kind of church from which they came. This is usually ineffective. Second, they react to the church from which they came and chose to do things differently without any real purpose or direction. They think that effectiveness is found by not doing things the way they did in the past. This is sometimes effective but usually only after a prolonged period of trial and error. Third, they simply try to copy a success model. They see a church that appears to be numerically successful and they try to do everything the same way. The biggest problem with this approach is that they are not the same person who pastors the “successful” church and they are not planting it in the same context. This approach usually does not succeed. However, when it does, it generally falls short of hopes and expectations. A much better approach would be to think missionally and to develop a personalized, contextualized strategy. This is what I call a missional response.

In conclusion, we must realize that the gospel never fits properly within a culture. The missionary path is to find the way between the two dangers of irrelevance and syncretism (Stetzer, 2003:15). Western culture is more diverse and more resistant to the gospel than ever before. However, a missional church is radically and lovingly engaging the culture with the truths of the gospel. As Western culture becomes more complex, church planters must become better missionaries. They must also train their congregations to live like missionaries, like aliens in a strange land. By doing this I believe we will discover greater effectiveness in church planting. This is what we are attempting to accomplish through the training of NCI.

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