

Foundations for Evangelization in a Rural Context of America©

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We will examine some of the methods and models and deduct some principles on which a successful conversion growth strategy may be implemented in a rural venue of America. The discussion will be divided into four sections that relate to this subject: Theological reflections, sociological reflections, ecclesiological reflections, and spiritual foundation reflections, with conclusion.

Theological Foundation: *Missio Dei*

Strategy design and development is on the agenda of everyone today. Much time and discussion is devoted to identifying and defining the purpose or mission of an organization. So it is true with local church development. In this process for a church, the mission is not to be that of self perpetuation but should be a process of aligning its life and action with the divine mission. True Christian mission must be defined primarily as the *Missio Dei* or God's mission. *Missio Dei* is God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, and is his involvement in and with the world. This mission is also the nature and activity of God which embraces both the church and the world. In this the church is privileged to participate with God.¹ Therefore Paul could say, "we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God," and states that God's people have been given "the ministry of reconciliation" and that God "has committed to us the word of reconciliation."² All of this speaks of the task of being aligned with God's active purposes not only in the world at large but in the local setting. The key question that must be asked is, "What is God up to?"

The application of the *Missio Dei* comes into key focus in the planning and implementing of ministry activity. In the planning process ultimate priority must be given first to the practice of biblical principles not simply following the models of others. Christian Swartz keenly alerts us to this issue as he writes,

It appears to me that past discussions have made too little distinction between 'models' (=concepts, with which some church in some part of the world has had a positive experience) and 'principles' (=that which applies to every church everywhere). Thus some models parade as universally valid principles. At the same time, proven principles with universal application are sometimes mistaken for 'one model among many.'³

¹David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 10.

²2 Corinthians 5:18-20 (NKJV)

³Christian A. Schwartz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 16.

Therefore models can be helpful to portray a representative picture of what ones own vision may desire to produce. However, the reproducing of models has a danger in that if the principles that underlie that model are not understood, correct application in a different environment may not be made. Understanding and applying principles avoids marrying a model in one generation and becoming a widow in the next.

In the planning and implementing process, not only the practice of biblical principles is a key application of the understanding of *Missio Dei*, but also Christian workers must have a full commitment to being alert to God's initiatives rather than their own. The truth of being primarily on God's agenda is inherently implied in the Westminster Shorter Catechism that asks, "What is the chief end of man?" It then answers, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever."⁴ God has been at work in his redemptive plan long before we came to the scene, and therefore our chief task is to bring glory to him by aligning our lives and actions with his flow of activity.

God's activity is to be manifested in and through the church. Individual Christians make up the church, but the individualism of Western culture tends to diminish the biblical concept of the corporate activity of the church as the body of Christ on earth in which his life is the functioning dynamic. Henry Blackaby gives precise clarification of this concept for us:

God desires to build a church and shape it for His purposes in order that Christ might have a body through whom he can make a difference in communities across our land. The saving presence of Christ will then be manifest through the church that is willing to be used of God. The key is Christ in us, for He will always fulfill the purposes of His Father. And the Father desires to touch the world and bring them into a relationship with Himself.⁵

Therefore the church is missionary by its very nature. The missionary vocation comes from Christ himself as he calls all to follow him. "Every Christian minister and every Christian layman, in so far as he is called by Christ at all, is called to a world mission, and must be ready for service in any nation or race."⁶

The application of the principle of *Missio Dei* is enormously important for local churches in small towns and in the rural countryside. God is at work in overt as well as unseen ways to bring the reign of the kingdom in the people and cultures of these venues. Christian workers who are involved in the planting and growing of those churches must devote time to discerning the mind and will of the Father and being responsive to the Holy Spirit's initiatives in the process. For every particular community, God has raised up (and will raise up) local fellowships that will be fitted for that setting. The chief priorities of those congregations are first

⁴Richard Owen Roberts, *Revival* (Wheaton, IL: Richard Own Roberts, Publishers, 1991), 9.

⁵Henry T. Blackaby, and Melvin D. Blackaby, *Experiencing God Together: God's Plan to Touch Your World* (Nashville: Boardman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 106.

⁶Geoffrey Allen, *The Theology of Missions* (London: Student Christian Movement Press LTD, 1943), 25.

to accept the mandate from God, and second to be his missionary in that setting. In this task, conversion growth will be more about spiritual foundations and spiritual climatizing than about methods and models that we can devise. This principle is sounded in the Psalms, “No king is saved by the multitude of an army; a mighty man is not delivered by great strength. A horse is a vain hope for safety; neither shall it deliver any by its great strength.” (Psalm 33:17-18 (NKJV)) This does not diminish the use of methods, events, and outreach activities. The necessary balance is stated in the Proverbs, “A man’s heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps,” (Proverbs 16:9 NKJV). and “The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but deliverance is of the Lord” (Proverbs 21:31 NKJV).

Sociological Reflections on Rural Settings

While declining or, at the best, static population exists in vast rural areas of North America, nevertheless, a general trend of growth is evident. Futurists are seeing this growth and are calling it a return to “Mayberry.” This is certainly Leonard Sweet’s take on the issue.

Small towns in the US are growing at a rate of twice that of urban growth—4.9 % per year. One out of 4 US Americans reside in a town of 2,500 people or less. In virtually every category—population, income, jobs, recreation, retirement base—small-town America is on the rise. The long slide of the ‘70’s and ‘80’s is over. People are migrating to small towns and rural areas, especially “recreational counties” with a recreation and retirement base.⁷

Klassen and Koessler see four trends of smaller communities in North America.⁸ These represent enormous change which in turn will call for evaluation of approaches for present and future ministry. First is the decline of the number of people working in agriculture-related fields. The cost of production, land availability, large equipment, water restriction, falling prices, and the cost of living are some of the factors that reduce the number of persons that can be supported. The second trend is that non-farm, small-town population is increasing. This is especially true in what some term micropolitan cities which are places with at least 15,000 population within a surrounding area of at least 40,000. This allows for living in a smaller town setting but then having the ability to be in “striking” distance of the amenities of a larger metropolitan area or small city.⁹

Some of the growth in some Midwestern states is due to the placement of government facilities in these areas, such as prisons. Although the inmate population is not the growth factor,

⁷Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 123.

⁸Ron Klassen, and John Koessler, *No Little Place: The Untapped Potential of the Small-Town Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 55-62.

⁹Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 123.

new employment positions being created are allowing growth from outside the area as well as retaining emerging generations that are coming into the job market.¹⁰

A third trend is that small towns are experiencing demographic changes. Many urbanites, who have been given work flexibility through the use of the computer, internet, and fax machine, are finding some of the best kept secrets in rural America. A businessman who relates to a corporation in New York City that owns Colorado Birdseed, can live and work out of Flagler, Colorado—population of 500—and travel nationwide weekly when needed. He can access a low traffic volume Interstate 70 and within 100 miles have access to two major international airports at Denver and Colorado Springs. Through fiber optics cables or satellite access, he is able to have the same high speed internet service that the business parks have in the major cities. Therefore “professional white-collar people are moving to small towns, transforming them into bedroom communities.”¹¹ Likewise, those who retire, early or on schedule, choose the slower pace of the smaller towns where they can greet daily the “butcher, baker and Fed Ex driver.”¹² Sweet references a survey of readers that if given a choice of a variety of ideal homes from mansions, exclusive lofts, and a simple life of the farm, the choice of the majority was the country farmhouse on a few acres and a pond.¹³

New ideas and new thinking also come with even the smallest numbers of these new residents who come to the small towns. The term “rurban” is now being used for people who are moving into a rural setting yet who have an urban mindset.¹⁴ This phenomenon has the potential to cause creative and helpful change in traditional and static rural settings; but also this movement can be a source of unsettling conflict and power struggle.

A fourth trend is that the new generation of small-town residents shows a decided decline in spiritual and moral values. And with this there are the increasing vices of life that are showing up in the new generations of residents. Postmodern thinking is in small town as well as in the urban setting. While the life out there in small town America is still the simple and pure culture, postmodern values have very much come to ranchland America. The three major mediums by which postmodern values have come to rural America are television, the internet, and the public school. The “dish” is now on almost every farmhouse in the plains or in the “hollers” of America and the ethics of “Friends” is with us. William Brown states it well: “No feature of modern culture so dominates life and thought as does television. The medium heavily influences all but the smallest minority of people, therefore, at no time in history has there existed such a level playing field with regard to information and entertainment. Culturally,

¹⁰An example of this reality is the larger area of the region that includes the case study area of Eastern Colorado. Between the years of 1994 and 2000, three new state prison facilities were opened in Ordway, Limon, and Sterling. Also a private prison was opened in Burlington.

¹¹Klassen, *No Little Places*, 58.

¹²Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 123.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 59. Also see Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 124.

television is the great equalizer.”¹⁵ Likewise the internet is now accessible in every home that has a telephone line and a computer. Finally, public education has had a major influence on every region carrying with it a Christian value-less philosophy.

What does this mean for the climate for evangelism in rural America in this present day? First, values based on modernism, secularism, materialism, and in general, self-preservation, are pervasive even though lifestyles have the appearance of being simpler and idyllic. Therefore the truth of the gospel is needed. Second, the same disillusionment about the empty promises of science, the utopian dream of modernism, with the reality of family disintegration, teen addictions, and violence experienced by urbanities all have become the experience of people in rural settings. Therefore a void in the lives of rural people is waiting to be filled. Third, a quest for spiritual authenticity exists among thinking rural people who are tired of empty religious traditionalism. They are seeking a caring community of people seeking to replace “a low-grade depression of the soul that comes when the church turns out to be just like all the other institutions of man.”¹⁶ Fourth, emerging generations are not being attracted to evangelical Christianity because of the irrelevance of the long-standing traditional churches. An increasing openness to authentic relational witness exists that gives them something worthwhile of which to commit their time and talents. This most likely will come through emerging new churches and those that will boldly live out and declare by word and deed the truth of the gospel of redemption through Jesus Christ.¹⁷

The opportunity for church planting with the focus on conversion growth in rural America is enormous. The mainline Protestant churches are closing their doors partly due to decreasing demographics, but also due to the loss of evangelistic zeal resulting from a materialistic and secular mindset, as well as liberal theological degeneration. Likewise, because most evangelical groups do a minimal number of new church plants in general, they are not prioritizing these rural areas. The “territory is for the taking” for those groups who have the proper strategy to enter or reenter these venues.¹⁸

¹⁵William E. Brown, “Theology in a Postmodern Culture: Implications of a Video-Dependent Society,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 318.

¹⁶Tom Pelton, “Outward-Focused Partnerships: Connecting With Other Churches Beyond Church Walls,” in *Seeing Beyond Church Walls: Action Plans for Touching Your Community*, ed. Steve Sjogren (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, Inc., 2002), 73.

¹⁷For additional insights to ministry in general to rural working class Americans as a foundation see these works by Tex Sample, *Blue-Collar Ministry, Facing Economic and Social Realities of Working People*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1993; *Living With Will Rogers, Uncle Remus, and Minnie Pearl: Ministry in an Oral Culture*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994; and *U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches: A Key to Reaching People in the 90's*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990.

¹⁸The literature is sparse on rural church planting. See Nebel, Tom. *Big Dreams in Small Places: Church Planting in Smaller Communities*. St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2002. His definition of a small town is 2,500 to 15,000 (15). Who will even consider the places 1000 or less? See also Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2001), 246-49; see also the author’s chapter “Starting Churches in Rural North America,” in *Reaching a Nation Through Church Planting*, ed. Richard Harris (Alpharetta, Georgia: North American Mission Board, SBC, 2002) 181-195.

A conversion growth strategy in rural venues must give priority to starting new congregational units of all sizes, shapes, and forms. The key issue is not the model or what it is called, but it is to establish a presence of the gospel in all the pockets of lostness. In order to do this, essential ecclesiological issues need to be addressed.

Ecclesiological Reflections

The Role of the People of God

Who are the people of God? As Jesus faced the Pharisees and the scribes who were the official representatives of Judaism, he said, “Therefore say I unto you, the kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it” (Matthew 21:43, NKJV). An inescapable message to Israel was that the kingdom was to be taken from them and another people were going to be called. They had been called to be a kingdom of priests to announce the reign of God to all peoples of the earth, but they had failed to do so. It was not a failure of having held the “sacred doctrines” of the faith, but a failure to fulfill the purpose for which they were called. So the uniqueness of God’s people is that they are called to a mission of kingdom redemption. This message is not just personal but also social.

The People of God believe that what God is seeking to do in the lives of people and in the world is what is desperately needed. They believe this so deeply and with such commitment that their lives are joyfully given to God as instruments in seeking to cause the will of God to be ‘done on earth as it is in heaven.’ This is the nature of their uniqueness. In living life this way, in losing their lives for the gospel’s sake, they find that Jesus is absolutely correct—in their own lives they begin to find healing, wholeness, meaning, blessings, and life in increasing abundance.¹⁹

We must affirm that all believers are called, gifted, and sent on mission. “There is no question that the Book of Acts describes the church as a people who were on mission with God. It was not merely the apostles or ‘professional staff’ who were doing the work of evangelization and church planting. The people of God were all preaching the good news of the gospel everywhere they went. And the results: they were turning the world upside down.”²⁰ Haney is clear:

“... the hope for renewal lies in *the liberation of the laity*. Call it what you will—the lay ministry, the universal ministry, the equipping ministry—it all means the same: *that every believer is called to be a minister*. Not a “clergyman,” mind you—a “minister.” John R. Mott first introduced the concept in the 1920’s, but somehow it was lost in the shuffle. It was an idea born too soon. But in the 1960’s, after lying forgotten in the Temple for a generation, it was “an idea whose time had come” and, as Victor Hugo taught us, such an idea cannot be stopped by anything. Simultaneously, in 1960-1, without any comparison of notes, three to-be leaders of renewal published books on the theme of renewal *via* the lay

¹⁹ Finley B. Edge, *The Greening of the Church* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1971), 37.

²⁰ Blackaby, *Experiencing God Together*, 215.

ministry: Robert Raines (*New Life in the Church*), Francis O. Ayres (*The Ministry of the Laity*), and Elton Trueblood (*Company of the Committed*).²¹

In popular terms lay people are those that carry no special credentialing for ministry and, most often, do not have formal theological training. In the New Testament, most scholars agree that there is no clear distinction between clergy and laity. Every believer has the common vocation to be people of the new creation in which they hold one common priesthood as the *laos* of God, though they have different and complimentary gifts and ministries (1Peter 2:9ff, 1 Cor. 12).

It is only when individual members of a church are seeking Christ's transformational work in their lives that they are willing to give their lives away to others. We must entrust all of God's people with the work of the kingdom as the Holy Spirit empowers them to participate in transforming their communities with the gospel. Since the church is God's missionary to the world, "God has chosen the church to make known His manifold wisdom in the world" (Eph. 3:10), all of God's people are challenged to be missionary in ministry, evangelism, and also the planting of new churches. We must affirm that all Christians are called, gifted²² and sent to be "on-mission." The real ministry is the ministry in the marketplace. The marketplace ministers are the people of God who go into the workplaces, the political places, the educational places, and the social places of life.

The implication of being salt and light to the world is for "ordinary" Christians, who are immersed in the everyday world especially of work, to reflect the saltiness and light in that setting. The workplace is at times the source of a believer's greatest tension, but with it comes the platform to demonstrate the reality of an authentic walk of faith. This calling God has given to take the message of reconciliation to the marketplace must be both a witness of words and a witness of deeds.²³

Role of Pastors/leaders

If the local church is going to focus on reaching unbelievers, it must be on the heart of the pastor and key leaders of the church. They are the pacesetters. This same truth is seen in the application by Greg Ogden for pastors who will lead their people to be what Elton Trueblood called "The Company of the Committed"²⁴ Ogden states,

²¹ David Haney, *Renew My Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 30.

²²For further study on the subject of God's people as "gifted" see Mallory, Sue. *The Equipping Church: Serving Together to Transform Lives*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001; also Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 144-8; for liberating and equipping all believers, see Mark Mittelberg, *Building a Contagious Church: Revolutionizing the Way We View and Do Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 152-178.

²³Greg Ogden, *The New Reformation: Returning the Ministry to the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 207

²⁴Elton Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers), xiii.

My basic assumption is that the key to unlocking the New Reformation is a transformation of the pastor's posture. A congregation tends to assimilate the personality, stance, and approach of its pastor and reflect that identity as a mirror image. There is a reactive dynamic or interplay between the pastor and congregation. For example, if the pastor's basic approach to God's people is as scholar-teacher, the people will tend to become students-learners. If the pastor views the church and his role as social activist, the church will become a center from which to trumpet causes of justice. If the pastor projects the image of a father-mother, the people will view themselves as dependent children. But if the church is to be a ministering community, the pastor must be an equipper who empowers God's people to fullness of service."²⁵

Not every pastor can make it in the smaller settings. One of the reasons is accepting the myths of the contemporary culture that devaluates the rural and smaller settings. Klassen and Koessler list five of these myths. First is the "Numbers Myth" which says to be significant, a ministry has to be large. Second is the "Big Place Myth" that stresses that significance comes only if the ministry is in a big place. Third is the "Recognition Myth" that links significance to the public recognition that is received for a ministry. Fourth is the "Career Myth" that attributes significance to signs of advancement in one's career. Fifth is the "Cure-for-Inferiority Myth" that says that inferior feelings will be removed if professional success is attained.²⁶

Vision of the potential to reach unbelievers who are most often overlooked in the forgotten and remote areas will come by "rejecting these human standards and replacing them with God's truths." Five principles are suggested in the place of myths of the culture. First, "The Quality Principle" which affirms that God's judgment of a ministry is not by size, but by integrity and quality. Second, "The No-Little-Places Principle" that affirms that any place God assigns is an important place. Third, "The Glory-of-God Principle" that affirms that the key issue in any ministry is to glorify God not the messenger. Fourth, "The Vocational Principle" that views ministry as a calling not a career. Fifth, "The Unconditional Love Principle" which declares that God is pleased not by what is done, but because he is love. Fortified with these truths, anywhere can be a successful ministry. God's assignments are always right, and his love extends to even the most remote of settings. Who will respond to the high calling to these places?²⁷

Contextualization

Because every rural community has its distinct history and culture, it is important to give serious consideration to context in planting a new church and evangelization. An article in SBC Life, November 1994, is entitled "Farley's Lists". These are from Gary Farley, who then was director of the Home Mission Board, SBC office of Town and Country Missions. These thirteen questions inform understanding of the culture of a rural community for equipping the Christian worker in evangelization and church planting.

²⁵Ogden, *The New Reformation*, 85.

²⁶Klassen, *No Small Places*, 20-23.

²⁷Ibid., 23-30.

1. How did the community come to be?
2. What is its focal symbol—Courthouse Square, grain elevator, mine tipple, or some other image of community function?
3. What is/are its chief economic functions(s): farm trade, marketing, government service, reaction/retirement, college, transportation, bedroom community, or institution?
4. Who are the honored, the despised, the loveable characters, and the marginal people of the town?
5. What worldviews, values, and norms inform the everyday life of the residents?
6. What cultural/racial/ethnic groups are present in the community?
7. What are the barriers that separate people/groups of people: race, religion, education, and social status? Are they visible or invisible?
8. What are the sins/hurts of the community: the loss of an industry, a disastrous flood, a lynching?
9. What has become of its sons and daughters?
10. What is the peoples' perception of the place; awareness of other's perception of it?
11. Does the community have distinct "sub-communities"?
12. What seems to be the future of the community—its dreams, who is responsible for dreaming/implementing?
13. In sum, what is the "story" of the community?²⁸

Consider the following revolutionary approach to reaching a new community through evangelization and church planting. During the entire first year the church planter did not hurry in launching worship or developing an organized structure or even pushing for core group formation. Instead, the entire first year was spent building relationships, and taking every opportunity in a non-threatening way to bear a witness with the unbelievers and the unchurched but with concentration on understanding, in the fullest sense of the word, the context of the community. One described his approach of this as spending a lot of time in "having fun." Although this sounds a bit shocking to someone paying the bills and somewhat sacrilegious to most "sober spiritually-minded" church planters, this approach makes a significant point and a needed emphasis in regard to being contextual. As a community is entered, this approach suggests the imperative of listening to the stories, participating in the county fairs, attending ballgames, and spending valuable time at the coffee shop. Church planter Apostle Paul exhorts in Romans 12:15 to "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." There is a principle here: If we do not learn to rejoice with the people in their rejoicing, they will never allow us to weep with them in their times of distress and need. This can be done in every culture without compromising our convictions. The first priority should be to avoid doing something within the first year that would throw up barriers to a continuing relationship. Try not to do something "stupid" that would hinder your work for its entirety was the best advice given to me. Most of us are not humble enough and patient enough and trusting of God enough to have this very debasing and low-key profile. No one is interested in listening to the stories of the newcomer who brings his expert opinion from how it was "done back in Texas." If time will be

²⁸Sited in an article by the author in, "Starting Churches in Rural North America," in *Reaching a Nation Through Church Planting*, ed. Richard Harris (Alpharetta, Georgia: North American Mission Board, SBC, 2002), 189.

taken to listen thoroughly to the stories of the culture, there will be ample opportunity to tell them our story and the story of Jesus.

Ron Klassen gives helpful insights about a cross-cultural approach as vital to successful planting the gospel in a community. In his experience of moving from the city to a rural pastorate he explains:

. . . I was embarking on cross-cultural ministry. I could not be effective in that ministry until I became a student of the culture in which I had come to minister, until I left behind the ways of doing things that I had brought with me from my previous culture, then learned to minister in ways appropriate to my adopted culture.

Though this insight came slowly and painfully for me, it is nothing new. It is the timeless secret of cross-cultural ministry articulated by Paul more than nineteen hundred years ago: “To the Jews I become like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law . . . so as to win those under the law” (I Cor. 9:20). As I learned to become “all things to all people,” I began to win some.²⁹

Incarnational Ministry

In our philosophy for church work we have confused some messages of Jesus. For example, in his call to Peter and Andrew who said to him, “Where do you stay?” he said, “Come and See.” This really was an invitation to them to come and be with him, experience it for themselves, rather than by his telling them about it. Actually, this is the invitation to the Christian life. It is an invitation to come and experience the Lord Jesus Christ in all of his fullness. However, the confusion comes when we try to make this relationship with Jesus’ invitation into a ministry philosophy. And that is just what the present-day church has fairly well accomplished. We are bidding people to come and see what we are doing within our programs, plans, events, and to plug into our agenda.

“Come and See” is a legitimate invitation into a relationship with Jesus Christ. However, notice that when that invitation was accepted by the early disciples, their relationship with Jesus took them into the marketplaces of life—encounters with adulterous women, demon possessed men, the blind, the lame, grieving families, and even into the cemetery to call back one from the dead. Why? Because he had said to them, “Follow me,” and that was where he went. In the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) his last words were, “Going, make disciples . . .” Therefore, if we are to follow Jesus, our strategy and philosophy for ministry is a “go and do” approach. Steve Sjogren tells of his experience of this truth impacting his way of doing church:

"I sensed that God was speaking to me What I heard was something like, ‘What you're doing is nice. You've gathered some friendly people into a cozy group. You've just

²⁹Klassen, *No Little Places*, 50.

got one thing wrong: You're building a 'come and see' church when I want to build a 'go and do' church."³⁰

To “go and do” it will be beneficial to identify the kingdom partners that already exist and to work in cooperation with them where possible.

Cooperation not Castigation

The first week that I moved my family to Limon Colorado to begin planting a church there and to be a catalyst for other new church starts in the immediate region, I felt it was wise to meet the pastors of all the existing churches to let them know first hand who I was and what we were preparing to do. This came from a sincere desire to be a cooperative and contributing member of the community and of the religious community of the town. Although I did not spend time at that point giving each of them my doctrinal statement of faith, I was unapologetic about our distinctiveness and identification with Southern Baptist. Over the next eighteen years, not only in Limon, but also in the various communities that I related to in the region, I sought to be a cooperating member of ministerial and community groups. Interestingly, the only overt negative reaction came from the pastor of the American Baptist Church and one of my own Baptist tribe who had a bad case of territorialism, and later a Methodist Pastor in another town that was in reality a Unitarian/Universalist who reacted to our Biblical stand on homosexuality. The two Baptist pastors actually were protecting their turf. The American Baptist Pastor was concerned that I would “steal his sheep.” I assured him of our integrity to target the unreached in the town (seventy five percent of the population was found to be unchurched). Within time we built good fellowship with that congregation as well as with others.

An essential ideal in perspective is that of keeping in mind the bigger picture of the kingdom where all of God’s servants are needed. My cooperation, rather than a gimmick, was a conviction that it was God’s way as well as a need for my own life to learn from the viewpoints of others. Tom Pelton states this truth:

All kinds of leaders need to be reminded of the bigger picture so they can gain some perspective. Sometimes even the best leaders need to be confronted by someone they respect. The day-to-day relationship with other leaders on a peer level helps bring balance to leaders. They can receive from one another what they often cannot get from those within their congregation. We all need to realize that we need people around us whose different viewpoints help us put things in perspective when we become obsessed with a situation.³¹

Our motto was: “We cannot speak for all other Southern Baptists, but as a local congregation, we will do all we can to be cooperative and gracious without compromising our convictions and

³⁰Steve Sjogren, “How to Build An Outward-Focused Church: Evangelism Beyond Church Walls,” in *Seeing Beyond Church Walls: Action Plans for Touching Your Community*, ed. Steve Sjogren (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, Inc., 2002), 32.

³¹Tom Pelton, “Outward-Focused Partnerships,” 71-2. For more on value of interchurch cooperation see Robert Lewis, *The Church of Irresistible Influence* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 155 & 187; and David W. Shenk, and Ervin R. Stutzman, *Creating Communities of the Kingdom: New Testament Models of Church Planting* (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1988), 180-92.

distinctives.” This cooperative spirit opened doors of opportunities with the community of unbelievers who saw this spirit demonstrated. No one is ever interested in staying around to listen for the good news from someone who, all the while, is pounding them over the head with the bad news.

Out of this atmosphere we were able to be the instigator of local, regional, and even a state wide (Billy Graham Crusade and Promise Keepers) cooperation in evangelistic and church renewal events through which many unbelievers came to Christ. Likewise this was the platform that facilitated a movement across local church denominational lines for introducing the *Experiencing God* studies, and the establishment of two radio translator towers over which a conservative Christian radio station broadcasted twenty-four hours a day. A crowning result occurred in 2002 when the largest gathering in the history of the region for a Christian event was held, as the present pastor of the Hi-Plains Baptist Church, Limon, who was also the high school music teacher, conducted, with an interchurch choir, the *Experiencing God* musical. Many professions of faith were made and a culture of authentic Christianity seems to be growing exponentially throughout the region.

Methodological Reflections

Factors Effecting Evangelistic Approaches

Many of our personal evangelism approaches seem to presuppose that the person being witnessed to is a stranger. Ironically, what we term as personal evangelism is often the most impersonal; for example, giving a stranger a gospel tract could be called “arms-length” evangelism. How do you most effectively bear a witness to those who live next door, work beside, or of the extended family? It seems that this “intimacy factor” is more pronounced in a small-town setting where many people have known each other for years. For example, how strange it seems to work with a fellow teacher in the public school, with no mention of faith and Christianity, and then to show up on his/her doorstep for Monday night visitation hoping to have a “soul-winning encounter?”³² Randy Frazee’s covenant of “seven functions of biblical community” forming an acrostic of SERVICE has relevant application for countering the impersonal approach: spiritual formation, evangelism, reproduction, volunteerism, international missions, care, and extending compassion.³³ Likewise, the principles and projects of Steve Sjogren and Rob Lewin in their book *Community of Kindness: A Refreshing New Approach to Planting and Growing a Church* are extremely insightful and may be creatively applied to rural settings.³⁴ These practical ways bridge the relational gap over which a gospel witness can travel.

³²Gary Farley, “Rural Evangelism” follow the link under “Practical Helps” [on-line], accessed 9 April 2004, available from <http://www.pickens.net/~pba/e-documents.htm>; Internet, 1. This six page PDF article can be downloaded. It may be the best comprehensive statement on the subject.

³³Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 82-3.

³⁴See Sjogren, Steve, and Rob Lewin. *Community of Kindness: A Refreshing New Approach to Planting and Growing a Church*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003. See also Lewis, Robert, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001.

Relational Evangelism

Methods of evangelism must be employed that will give us the hearing of people in the rural setting. In every community where I have planted churches, it was evident that cult groups and other zealous evangelicals had already been “door to door”. In most cases this method could not be utilized because it gave the perception that we were like the others who had come before us. This method was also received as an unnatural offensive intrusion into their lives. While visitation evangelism is still very much effective, it is better received through a prescheduled appointment. Whatever method of evangelism one employs in rural church planting, it cannot be divorced from genuine relationships.

Experiment with “store-to-store” evangelism. In my past experience as I went into a place of business, as I made my purchases, there was the opportunity to introduce myself and to tell about our new church. The same opportunities came in the Post Office, the grocery store, the bank, the utility offices paying my monthly bill (we seldom mailed payments), and everywhere else. Wherever possible we looked for the natural opportunities of personal interaction. It is amazing how often a reason can be found to visit the local school to check on the children’s progress. Instead of mailing a bundle of letters, I made more trips to the Post Office. Within time opportunities came to meet and greet every clerk and every business owner in town. We learned not to buy a weekly bill of groceries; rather, we made daily “visits” to the grocery store. Try this suggestion: take the local weekly newspaper and shop every garage sale listed for the week and after conversing with the owner and the other patrons, always spend fifty cents for a “needed” item. Did these encounters result in a “soul-winning” visit? Seldom did it occur at the time, but these encounters built a relationship that brought many fruitful opportunities at a later time.

Among other evangelistic approaches and emphases that have been useful and relevant in the rural settings and are built off of a relationship base are servant evangelism,³⁵ family evangelism, marketplace evangelism, lifestyle evangelism, lay (church) renewal events, special events, small groups,³⁶ and revival evangelism. Finally, none is more relational, incarnational, and personal than when local congregations extend beyond their walls to plant new congregations.

Church Planting³⁷

³⁵Lawrence Khong, *The Apostolic Cell Church: Practical Strategies for Growth and Outreach* (Singapore: Touch Ministries International, 2000), 125. For further insights on servant leaders see Ebbie Smith, *Growing Healthy Churches: New Directions for Church Growth in the 21st Century* (North Augusta, SC: IICM.net Press, 2003), 301-318.

³⁶See Donahue, Bill, and Russ Robinson. *Building a Church of Small Groups*. Grand Rapids: Zondervon, 2001.

³⁷Many applications can be made for church planting in rural areas from Sanchez, Daniel R., Ebbie C. Smith, and Curtis E. Watke. *Starting Reproducing Congregations*. Cumming, GA: Church Starting Network, 2001.

As stated earlier, a conversion growth strategy can not be divorced from a strategy of church multiplication (see p. 10). C. Peter Wagner writes, “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.”³⁸ He further concludes that “[i]n any given geographical area, the Christian community will grow or decline according to the degree of effort given to planting new churches.”³⁹ He is not an isolated voice coming from the growing evidence of higher percentage conversion growth in the newer churches. Many unbelievers are attracted to new “congregational expressions.” This is a phrase I prefer to use because of the mental baggage, and, in my estimation, misconceptions of the definition of a church. Finding the lowest common denominator and simplest definition allows for greater possibility of multiplication. The definition should be made so simple that every pocket of lostness in rural North America can have a church within its reach, or better said, a church reaching out to it. And if the definition is to become simple, likewise it will require a simple leadership model.

Three leadership models for rural church plants are the bi-vocational model, Mission Service Corps (MSC)⁴⁰ model, and the lay planter model. Some students entering our modern seminaries are doing so with the idea of intentionally becoming a bi-vocational church planter or a pastor.⁴¹ Some have a trade or occupation that will allow the freedom to also be a pastor-leader. Bi-vocational pastors are nothing new. It was the farmer-preacher that facilitated the expansion of Baptist churches on the frontier. Many modern-day Southern Baptist Churches in established areas have a bi-vocational pastor. Leon Wilson of Norman, Oklahoma, who himself was an intentional bi-vocational pastor, is the retired National Missionary for Bi-vocational Ministry with the North American Mission Board, SBC. His chapter entitled “Starting Churches With Bivocational Pastors” expands on this subject.⁴² This speaks of the importance of the bi-vocational planter and pastor for today.

Another model is the lay church planter. Using the word “lay” in our modern day often implies someone who is less trained or less gifted. By no means is this meant of persons in this model. This is a person who responds to God’s call to be a planter or to be part of a planting team, but may or may not see himself as a long-term vocational pastor or planter. If the number of congregations are to be planted that are needed across North America in rural settings, we must call out and equip an army of lay church planters. There is a prevailing cleric professionalism that resists the notion of a high calling of the laity. Those that resist must remember that the original twelve apostles were all businessmen and the founder of the church himself was a layman—Jesus, the carpenter.

³⁸C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1990), 11.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 12

⁴⁰Mission Service Corps is a program of volunteerism of the North American Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention.

⁴¹For example, Todd Benkert PhD candidate at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, 202 Clay St, New Albany, IN 47150, 812-944-0667.

⁴²Leon Wilson, “Starting Churches With Bivocational Pastors,” in *Reaching a Nation Through Church Planting*, ed. Richard Harris (Alpharetta, Georgia: North American Mission Board, SBC, 2002), 197-206.

Spiritual Reflections

No success in reaching the unbelieving world will come without the spiritual foundations of the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through God's people.

Techniques and mechanics find their place in implementing a conversion growth strategy, but can only be effective if they are built on a foundation of spiritual formation and dependence on the Holy Spirit. Now as never before are needed the resources of prayer, faith, and responding in obedience to God's initiatives. First, rather than self-reliance, a lifestyle of trust in God and characterized by prayer, must exist.

The Role of Prayer

The starting point must always be prayer, for prayer changes things. Tom Clegg's exhortation must be heeded: "Pray as you've never prayed before."⁴³ The great stirrings of revival in history depended on it. There was almost no preaching in the "Prayer Meeting Revival" of 1857-59, yet it produced one of the greatest harvests in American history with estimates of one million converts throughout the United States.⁴⁴ Life is a war and "our weakness in prayer is owing largely to our neglect to this truth."⁴⁵ Acts of kindness, relation building, and declaring of the truth through one-on-one and public declaration, must never be neglected; however, as John Guest reminds, the battle will be waged through prayer.

But ultimately our preaching and teaching need to point out two immense truths:

- The battle for the minds of men, women, and young people is a spiritual battle and not merely an intellectual one. Prayer is the God-given spiritual weapon that must accompany a good apologetic.
- The real issue is not intellectual but moral. Those resisting the gospel may use a plethora of intellectual objections to the Christian claims on their lives, but you can pretty much count on it that the apparent intellectual skepticism is a smoke screen to avoid dealing with the immoral lifestyles or ideas they loathe to relinquish or change.⁴⁶

Taking the Risks of Faith

Faith is taking a step into the light not into the dark. Once God has made his will explicitly known, the step may not be easy, but that is what faith is all about—trusting God to

⁴³Tom Clegg, *Lost In America: How You and Your Church Can Impact the World Next Door* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2001), 109.

⁴⁴Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire: What Happens When God's Spirit Invades the Hearts of His People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 149.

⁴⁵John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: the Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 41.

⁴⁶John Guest, "The Church as the Heart of Apologetics," in *Is Your Church Ready? Motivating Leaders to Live an Apologetic Life*, eds. Ravi Zacharias, and Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 50.

come through on his promises and revealed direction. Recall the experiences in ministry that you have had when “showed up” in response to your obedient actions done by faith.

Writing of being such a risk-taking congregation, Steve Sjogren states,

Most churches can't handle that sort of thinking. Conventional thinking in virtually all congregations I'm familiar with is, "think long and hard, gather all the statistics and studies available, get some consultants involved, vote multiple times on the proposal, and then, if there is a windfall in the budget, consider stepping in--but never, ever actually jump.' Finally, after two to three years of talking and stammering about the issue, the church is ready to take a bit of action.⁴⁷

As God's people respond in faith and act in trust, he will prove faithful in the very practical things of everyday life and ministry.

God Makes Himself Known in Practical Ways

In this contemporary age there is a skepticism that pervades in the minds of unbelievers, some of which has come as a result of the lack luster of what they see in churches and the lack of evidence of the supernatural. A hearing of the gospel on the part of unbelievers from God's people will come as God is allowed to demonstrate his reality in practical ways that unbelievers can understand. The area of finances is one of the most practical and lends a great opportunity of opening the door for evangelism. If there is anything that can catch the unbeliever's attention about spiritual matters it will be when God's people are living demonstrations of provision in the area of finances in their families as well as in the corporate experience of the body. What happens when a church makes a commitment, for example, to become debt-free by expecting God to make provision for buildings in advance of the project completion? There are so many benefits to allowing God to provide ahead of time. Certain one most important one is a testimony to materialistic secular unbelievers who are watching. It is a blessing when congregations move forward in the confidence of a action that is confirmed to be God's will. Equally important to the assurance of God's precise will to the community of believers is the demonstration of his power and provision to a skeptical unbelieving world.

Conclusion

The challenge in this contemporary age as churches seek to reach unbelievers mandates having the right biblical perspective (theologically), the right contextual understanding (sociologically), the right identity (ecclesiologically), the right actions (methodologically), and the right relationship with God (spiritually). All of these aspects should be held in balance. However, if the church is living and demonstrating an example of authentic Christian community and is committed to spiritual preparedness, even when it lacks proficiency in techniques, method, and technology, God's blessings will come.

⁴⁷ Steve Sjogren "How to Build an Outward-focused Church," 43-4.