

CHAPTER 7

Tensions You Will Face

Anytime we attempt something new, we face frustration or tension. Some tensions are self-generated as change ushers in unfamiliarity. Others come from those we serve. And some tensions arise from interaction with our peers.

If we identify tensions ahead of time, they lose the element of surprise and become less alarming.

How you see yourself in light of your expectations will either reinforce your behavior or contribute to general feelings of anxiety. You may score points in terms of world evangelism while failing to live up to some imagination you hold about “real ministry.” Let’s look at some potential tensions of thinking and leading in both “microchurch” and “multisite” situations.

1. The wrong scorecard

One difference between church as we know it and a microchurch (or a multichurch that launches microchurches) is how you measure success. Conventionally, the American Church community measures success by addition—the bigger, the better. But bigger churches won't saturate the country with the gospel. However, *more* churches can.

Microchurches measure success in terms of intimacy, involvement, and evangelism. Granted, these areas are difficult to quantify. An easier measure is the number of microchurches in a given location. This is where the multichurch model becomes important. It's easier to set goals and measure results when you think in terms of numbers of congregations coupled with an (estimated) average number of people.

2. Time vs money

Microchurches cost virtually no money to operate. Financial costs may be low, but time is an issue. Leading a microchurch, or a multichurch network, requires lots of time. Prepare yourself to delegate more than ever before. If you don't, the church could swallow your family. Jeph Chavez says, "The microchurch releases a pastor from having to put all their time, resources and attention on the material aspects of a conventional church plant (building, budgets, programs, marketing, etc.) to making disciples who will pastor their community. A microchurch doesn't cost a lot of money. Starbucks can be your office. Your home or the home of a core team member can be the gathering place; and freelance volunteers can be your staff. With this understanding, the multiplication timeframe is reduced to equipping the character and

mission of the planter, rather than the accumulation of resources for a large church-planting launch.”

A microchurch should not be a conventional church in microcosm. Think of most churches as triangles with a key leader at the top and member/consumers at the bottom. This is not a bad thing. You can build a Level 5 multiplying church this way and at a larger size structural logistics strongly favor a triangle. But a microchurch should look more like a circle with each member contributing to the others. This is where “self-discovery” becomes important. Rather than preparing a sermon, a microchurch pastor can assign scripture then “conduct the orchestra” when the group gathers for the teaching (self-discovery from scripture), fellowship, prayer and communion. Such a model vastly reduces the load carried by a freelance pastor.

3. The temptation to play Pope

This tension applies to multichurch leadership. As a multichurch pastor, you’ll be tempted to maintain control of everything in every group. A healthy sense of responsibility can kill you if you assume control that belongs to the Lord of the Church. And too much control limits the ability to reproduce. You may not believe in someone just because you don’t know them, which slows down whoever’s discipling them toward planting a church.

If you get caught up in how others operate, you’ll find yourself bogged down with management rather than disciple making. What could become a movement of hundreds of churches will stall as a network of a dozen or so. Control others’ thinking by making disciples who obey Jesus, and you won’t need to control behavior. This works best if you’re serious about discipling people

into ministry rather than hiring from outside your circle. Almost 50 years of ministry experience has shown me that working with “hired guns” demands more control down the line.

The best antidote to these problems is a minimal ecclesiology (one of the 12 characteristics of a multiplication movement we covered in chapter 1) coupled with a simple doctrinal position. As long as everyone agrees to these, let them operate as they see fit. You want to maintain unity by occasional fellowship/training events for leaders. And if someone veers away from your agreed principles, bless them to launch a separate movement. Maintain distinctions, not divisiveness.

4. Clergy-laity perceptions

If you decide to move toward planting a microchurch, someone will criticize you for stepping outside the norm, usually playing out in incorrect labels and accusations: The pastors you launch aren’t “properly educated” or you’re a “cult leader” if you don’t line up with a denomination.

This happened to me in our early days. The problem was that local churches planting churches was so far outside our denominational norms that others felt threatened by our activities. The word, “cult,” was an easy way to treat someone as a category, not as a person that didn’t need to explain or understand. When we later enjoyed face-to-face encounters, this changed. It’s easier to discount strangers than friends.

The issue of proper theological training was a bigger roadblock for us. Shortly after we sent Rich Agozino to plant the first church from our own, a neighboring pastor who possessed both a D. Min.

and a Ph.D. grilled him with, “So, Richard, where did you study for the ministry?”

He knew full well that Rich had come up through the Navigators but that actual preparation for planting was time spent with me—lots of it. I was embarrassed to hear that Richard fired back, “I studied under Ralph Moore at Hope Chapel. They have more than a thousand people in church. So, how many people attend yours?” The other guy’s attendance hovered around 150 (this was a time when a thousand people was considered a megachurch). Education is valuable but not as a club to beat up on others. BTW, Richard went on to multiply four churches from the congregation of 400 people he planted.

Morph your church into a multichurch, and someone will accuse you of having delusions of grandeur. We must get used to criticism. I like what Aristotle said about avoiding criticism: “Criticism is something we can avoid easily by saying nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing.” While we were members of a denomination, we constantly battled against the charge that we were trying to start one of our own. After leaving that family, we now ward off church planters who want to attach themselves to us legally. I refuse to become the president of anything because administrative details would slow the task of developing new leaders. The Apostle Paul never started an organization or even named a church. I want to live like him.

One surprising area of concern comes from congregants who feel safer as spectators. They don’t participate because they expect you to do everything: “After all, what did they teach you in seminary?” Be sensitive to their feelings but don’t give in to them. I’ve found it best to search out the people who can accept change and “move with the movers.” Leave the rest undisturbed.

5. What to do with the kids?

One tension arising in microchurches is that they don't provide a well-oiled program for children. The answer comes from involving them in the life of the group. I currently lead a home group attached to the church I pastor. Four people speak Mandarin—including a seven-year-old girl. She does crafts at a table near the main group, and we always include her in the discussions. She contributes amazing insights and takes home a sense of inclusion.

Involving children in adult small group situations is a tickly subject. Some hire babysitters. Others lock them in a room with Disney DVDs. My wife and I made an early decision to include ours in as much of the discussion as was practical for their ages. They would bring toys or sit next to one of us playing games on paper (today they could use an iPad). As with our current group, we invited them into the conversation once it began to roll. The long-term results of those relationships were that they found their first after-school jobs with members of that group (several of those adults moved with us from California to Hawaii to plant the church). The greater results are that my son succeeded me as pastor of Hope Chapel Kaneohe Bay (now Anchor Church) and my daughter, a Fuller Seminary grad, leads outreach teams to the Middle East.

6. Costs to a sponsoring church

If you pastor an existing church, this specific tension probably comes from your board. The thought of a few people starting something away from the main campus can frighten them. They fear a loss of money and manpower. Someone said, "Once you build a complicated machine, you need to maintain it." Churches

most focused on addition feel the heat on this one. The move from addition to multiplication will generate this tension.

The answer here is to go slow. Educate your people using the data we talked about in the introduction to this book. Help them to see that the U.S. Church is currently falling short of the Great Commission. Teach them that we will lose our place at the cultural table if we don't do something different. Offer microchurch as one option—not a silver bullet. Let them choose how to address the shortfall of churches and converts.

7. Peer group tensions

One major obstacle to innovation is peer pressure. We don't get over it in high school. Much of the tension you face when you try something different comes from other pastors. If you try to march to their drum, you're sunk.

Back in the 1970s, we planted the first Hope Chapel. Our initial congregation was largely hippies, bikers and an exotic dancer. These people were hungry for Jesus. Unfortunately, the other pastors in our community couldn't look past outer appearance, and we were labeled "Hippity-hoppity Hope" and "Dope Chapel." If we had listened to these pastors, a couple of thousand churches would never have been born.

My advice: Smile, nod in a friendly manner—and then do the right thing.

8. "Not a real church."

I recently published a blog post, called "Planting Pocket Churches"²⁹ about microchurches, which spurred some thought-provoking discussion. Two people commented that they had tried

planting microchurches with success. One urged me to shy away from the terms “pastor” and “church” because they caused him so much grief. When he used that (New Testament)

terminology, he was slandered for it because the network he planted didn’t include “real churches,” his critics said. He suggested that we retreat to the term “Bible study” because this would make it more palatable to those people who do not need what we have to offer—they already have it! The idea that a microchurch is not real comes from cultural Christianity. Ask any card-carrying agnostic, or atheist, if they would prefer a church centered around a meal and open discussion or a typical hour-and-a-half entertainment-oriented church service and find out for yourself which is the pathway to our future.

Microchurch leader Wayne Ching (you met him in chapter 5), weighs in on the issue: “At one time, our members were advised by family members to ‘go find a real church.’ This is due to confusion over what a house church is or does and seeing cultural norms as requirements for being a church.”

It’s important to note that the people Wayne pastors are getting the gospel in their own cultural context rather than the somewhat foreign setting of our evangelical church culture. For them, the microchurch is the real church. Our increasingly resistant culture needs a church form that connects with it relationally. We must root everything in Scripture while we speak the language(s) of those we hope to evangelize.

Again, I want to stress simplicity when you define church. If it looks like a duck ... right? Learn to wed Scripture, need, and culture while ignoring tradition. If it won’t fly in Ethiopia without the benefit of Greek studies, it might be superfluous.

You can change the world if you keep things simple, practical and reproducible.

9. Fuzzy copies

If you run a document through a copy machine you get a near-perfect copy. Copy that document, and you lose a little more clarity. Copy that copy ... and so on. In the end, you have a very fuzzy representation of the original document. Inevitably, pastors bring up the “fuzzy copy” argument when discussing these church multiplication issues. My answer always goes back to the Word and the Spirit. The Holy Spirit and the Bible have carried countless Christians through times of persecution and a dearth of religious education.

Sure, the Church of England saw things differently from the Puritans. But you do, too. The Chinese Church hosts some interesting theology, but that doesn’t keep those people from Heaven. I mentioned earlier the Russian Orthodox believers who kiss the caskets of embalmed saints (in every church building—they have lots of saints). It was the Orthodox Church that gave the Communists the idea of embalming Lenin.

Fuzzy copies, yes, but still copies. Each group I mentioned sees the gospel through different eyes than you do. But so does the church down the street. When we focus on the enduring truth of the Word and the Spirit, the picture becomes clearer.

10. Short-life churches

Most microchurches will last a long time. Wayne Ching has led the same group for more than two decades. On the other hand, some of Wendell Elento’s churches have had a far shorter lifecycle due

to job changes and people moving away. But would you want him to stop what he's doing because of a short lifecycle? What about those people he disciplined in each church (he continues to lead several)? The average American church has a lifecycle of 30 to 50 years. No one would deny their right to exist because of that. This is where our scorecard comes into play. Are we pursuing the purpose of the Church? The number of disciples we make and send out is our measure of success—not the lifeline of a church. Even today's largest churches in the United States won't be with us in 75 years, if history is any guide. The healthiest congregations will multiply others. Those attached to a multichurch network almost never stop operating.

However, some do stop meeting. So, what? If a group meets for years, or even just months, good things happen. I've watched a few groups disassemble only to see their members form new groups or migrate to other churches. And what of the evangelism that takes place while the group existed? That fruit goes on to eternity. The short-life argument fails to consider that every church has a lifecycle. Good things do come to an end.

My friend, John Gupta, came to Christ through a church in Madras, India, which claims the Apostle Thomas (Didymus, the twin) as its founder. That would make it the longest-lived congregation I know. London's St. Paul's Cathedral dates history to a continuous worship dating back to 604 AD. But most churches won't last for centuries. Every year, thousands of churches

close in America. Somehow, they get exempted from the short-life criticism. It seems that we can overlook a church closure if we have spent thousands of dollars educating a pastor or millions on real estate. To put it bluntly, this is a bogus argument in light of eternity.