

CHAPTER 3

Characteristics of a Multiplying Church

I was a part of the team that came up with a list of 10 characteristics of a Level 5 multiplying church. Exponential has used that list in several books, including a book Jeff Christopherson and I wrote called [*New to Five: Starting a Level Five Multiplying Church*](#). The list is a living document and still a work in progress. In conversations with Todd Wilson, co-founder of Exponential, we talked through how these ten characteristics look on the ground. As Todd and I talked we agreed that if we could reorganize the outcome of that meeting we would publish the list differently today. Here are my takeaways from that conversation.

Think of them as what we call the “1-7-10 characteristics of a Level 5 multiplying church.”

We begin with the *one primary objective* for the church and move to *seven non-negotiable pillars*. These are fundamental to our

understanding of our master and his commission to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. Without these we have no real basis for partnership in the gospel. After that we consider *ten negotiable priorities* for any ministry—these you must decide for yourself. As priorities, not pillars, they give wiggle room for you to cling to your convictions while maintaining relationships with others who view them differently.

One Disciplemaking Objective

The single overriding objective of the church is to make disciples who make disciples while planting churches that plant churches.

This is the direct result of the Great Commission as we read of it in Acts. Every pastor and church should be able to measure this to the fourth generation (2 Timothy 2:2). Scripture states that every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. The goal is for that to happen on our watch. This explains the admonition to multiply disciples from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (having lived in Hawaii, I get “the ends of the earth”).

Seven *Non-negotiable* Core Pillars

While the following pillars are non-negotiable and necessary for achieving level-five disciplemaking, at the beginning, middle, and end of all these is prayer. We wrestled with an eighth pillar, “the priority of prayer”, but then we realized prayer permeates throughout the whole process. That’s why we mention it here at the beginning—to set the tone for the following seven core pillars.

1. Our Distinctive: Jesus is Lord

This is central to everything. We can “agree to disagree” over doctrine but never over the lordship of Jesus. The product of our efforts should aim to produce fully people who are fully surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus rather than cultural Christians. Our mission to make disciples who are fully surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus is what distinguishes us from all other organizations and causes.

2. Our Mission: Disciplemaking

Do you press toward making converts who must continually be fed or disciples who make Biblical disciples of others?

Reproduction is the building block of multiplication and it starts with disciples who reproduce themselves. Fail to create a culture of disciple making and you will never achieve Level 5 multiplication.

3. Our Power: The Holy Spirit

Jesus told the church at Jerusalem to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit. We will do well to adhere to his instruction. Much of what we do is driven by human invention. Someone observed that you needn't be a Christ-follower to lead a church given the present availability of technology and tools. If we intend to redeem our culture, we must first rekindle the fires of the Spirit in our own hearts and those of the people we lead.

4. Our Guide: The Scriptures

If you would change the world you must place the scripture above all other wisdom. The psalmist wrote, “Your word is a lamp to my

feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105 ESV). Whenever our church practices deviate from a scriptural foundation, the tremors of the surrounding culture threaten them. Building our house on the rock of scripture is our hope.

5. Our Platform: The Church

Jesus said that he would build his church. Church involves people gathering in his name. They will focus on the apostles teaching, fellowship, eating together and prayer. They will include holy communion, generous giving and miracles in answer to prayer. If they do this well, they will enjoy favor in the surrounding community which will enable them to freely go and make disciples who learn to reverence and obey Jesus.

Such communities epitomize the essence of church. If we opt for anything else we lose something precious that was given to us by our Master. The beauty of it all is that simple, God-honoring communities are fairly easy to reproduce.

6. Our Call: Mobilizing everyday missionaries into every corner of society.

This book is an exercise in redundancy. I will keep pressing the opportunities bound up in multiplication. I'll also press you toward taking the love of Jesus to people who don't look and think as you do. We should not ask people to exchange their culture for ours in order to follow Jesus. That issue was settled in Acts, chapter 15. We need to mobilize ourselves around the love of Christ and take that love into the unreached corners of our society. Anything short of this is a violation of the command to make disciples of all nations (ethne, or peoples) in the Great Commission. The word ethne could apply to a bunch of surfers who hang out together

or a high society bridge club. If we would obey our Lord we must make disciples of every people group in our nation.

7. Our Accelerator: Multiplication

Addition growth is real growth. We would be in much worse shape if it weren't for the large, path-finding churches of the past three decades. However, addition growth falls short of the goal to make disciples of all people—for mundane logistical reasons. Some of our best brains bang against logistical ceilings brought on by insistent addition strategies. Worse, many of our recognized leaders are facing retirement and an ultimate graduation to heaven. Because addition is a tough row to hoe, their successors will find it difficult to fill their shoes let alone produce more addition growth.

On the other hand, multiplication is rather simple. You teach someone to do what you do then release them to get the job done as the Spirit leads. The result is accelerated evangelism. If new churches evangelize faster than established congregations, we should make more new churches at a faster rate. The math is simple, changing the operating system is not. But change it we must if we intend to leverage disciplemaking to dominate our culture through the love of Jesus.

Ten Negotiable Core Priorities

Along with the one primary objective and seven non-negotiable pillars there are 10 priorities that acknowledge differences in church doctrine, polity and mission field (affected community). Regardless of your tribe affiliation, you need to define these 10 priorities for yourself.

A short list of the ten includes:

1. New Measures of Success (L5 vs L3)
2. Liberated Financial Systems
3. Minimal Ecclesiology
4. Level 5 Leadership within an Apostolic Atmosphere
5. Kingdom-centric/Geo-centric Focus
6. Everyone a Missionary
7. Sending Impulse
8. Easily Accessible (everyone gets to play)
9. Bias to Yes
10. Relational Affiliation to a Tribe, Family or Network of Churches

Let's stretch our thinking by expanding on these ten. As you read the next section please understand that each of these 10 negotiables requires decision-making on your part. It might be wise to read the next few pages with a journal in hand. Jot your thought as you read, then formalize them into a working document that you can use to disciple your most promising leaders.

1. New Measures of Success/Scorecards (L5 vs L3):

Do you seek to grow a single congregation or to disciple nations by multiplying disciples and churches? Do you seek to create the best possible “come and see” environments AND “go and be” environments or are you captive to the Level 3 “come and see” bias?

What gets measured gets done! If you measure conversions and baptisms, you will get them. Measure church attendance and

you will figure out how to make it grow. But you need to measure more to disciple a nation.

At Level 5 a church will measure how many people are involved in active disciple making. It will look at what proportion of the budget went into church multiplication. It will keep its members *focused* on the possibility that they could involve themselves in multiplying a new church. It will celebrate the number of churches stemming from itself and it will make heroes of the people who took new territory for the kingdom of God by planting those churches. A Level 5 church will want to know what percentage of its church plants reproduced themselves.

2. Liberated Financial Systems:

Whenever money is involved, things get sticky. This requires a redefinition of excellence away from perfection toward multiplication. If you spend all your funds perfecting a Sunday morning performance, you grow addicted to money and find it difficult to invest, significantly, in the world outside your congregation.

A multiplication movement places a higher priority on multiplication than it does on presentation. This means that you consumer Christians either mature into fully surrendered Christians or they become uncomfortable in church. One handy tool for this is a statement of mission on your church website. If you make it clear that you intend that every Christ follower learns to live life as a mission, you can begin to filter out “consumer Christians” or spectators.

By reconstituting our priorities around disciple making and church multiplication, we drastically reduced our overhead while expanding the Kingdom at a much higher rate. Remember that if

you build a beast, you must feed it. I would rather feed a menagerie outside our walls than a monster within. A liberated church can afford to invest heavily in church planting, especially when planting overseas. Or a liberated church might stick with business-as-usual while planting a movement of microchurches at almost no cost. Whatever pathway you take toward multiplication, can you liberate your finances (change your spending priorities) to the point that you could invest a tithe of your church income to church multiplication in your community, across the country and overseas?

3. Minimal Ecclesiology:

Does your church polity enable multiplication or is it a hindrance? To frame your minimal ecclesiology, you **MUST** stay true to New Testament truths while minimizing the number of man-made rules that stifle mobilization. We can't expect to deviate from Jesus' way of doing things and expect strong impact.

“What is church?” Is a microchurch a “real church?” How does the Bible functionally describe church minimums? When people are gathered together in His name, is that always a biblical church? If so, is a Super Bowl party among Christians church? I think not. The word, *ecclesia*, appears 114 times in the New Testament. Mostly it refers to the universal body of Christ—there is little theology attached to local gatherings. You would do better to define the roles of leaders, especially pastors (elders) and deacons, including deaconesses because you have scripture for these roles while there is so little scripture describing local assemblies. As you attach biblical qualifications to these roles inside your particular culture and church culture you can identify your minimum threshold for multiplying churches. The idea is to remove, or at least reduce, impediments to individuals reproducing churches.

Do the hard work to wrestle through these questions. Don't just toss out everything that stands in the way of rapid multiplication. Think this through as you don't want to lose something biblical in the name of pragmatism, but you shouldn't further mere church tradition at the expense of the Great Commission. Find balance. You don't want to stand before Jesus someday and have him say, "Why were you so legalistic and controlling?" You also don't want him to say, "Why didn't you take my words more seriously? Did you really think you could get my intended results by using human regulations?"

Keeping our ecclesiology simple is important. My friend Randall Ishida leads microchurches focused on men coming out of prison in Honolulu. Listen to how he describes his meetings: "I like self-discovery," he says. "We don't sing. No Sermon. All members participate in discussing the Bible to discover what God is saying through the Holy Spirit and His Word. We share food, and we share spiritual food. Prayer and fellowship lead to brothers caring for one another. We teach tithing but ask each member to tithe to a checking account in their own name with the understanding that the money belongs to Jesus (the pastor doesn't have access to any money).

They are to give away the money as the Spirit leads. As a freelance pastor, I have no need of money, and we don't pay building rent. Avoiding the issue of money opens the door for fellowship with people who don't trust others' motives. Lordship and obedience are key to our understanding of discipleship. We want to produce disciples who make disciples instead of making church programs."

Randall has worked through defining and contextualizing his minimum ecclesiology for the micro-churches he oversees. He is

seeking to remain true to Scripture while avoiding unnecessarily adding additional man-made requirements that can ultimately create barriers to multiplying healthy, disciple-making faith communities.

Spend the time and diligence necessary to define and take ownership for your minimum ecclesiology.

4. Level 5 Leadership within an Apostolic Atmosphere:

Discussing Ephesians 4 in the light of the modern church can incite volatile conversations. In his classic book, [*The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements*](#), Alan Hirsch summarized the gifts in that chapter as APEST or apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds (pastors) and teachers.

Along with Alan, many hold that these five leadership gifts are *offices* in the church and necessary to its current success. Others believe that the gifts ceased with the death of the last of Jesus' immediate disciples plus Paul (all of this begs the question about whether Barnabas, Andronicus or Junia who are called apostles in the New Testament). Another question is whether, or not, the list of gifts in Ephesians 4 is comprehensive or simply mentioned as means toward a goal of maturing the body of Christ. These are open questions—with answers open to negotiation.

Whatever your view, the *functions* mentioned in the list are more important than the forms. I'm uncomfortable with people describing me as a pastor if I must conform to a definition. First, I am not as much a shepherd as I am a teacher. I have an apostolic bent but won't answer to the title. My point is that we can put aside our definitions and forms in favor of an environment that seeks a well-rounded ministry that reflects the spirit of this important passage.

My friend, Rob Flaherty in Kobe, Japan, pastors one of the largest (if not *the* largest) congregation in the city. He functions apostolically by capitalizing on the popularity of his internet sermons to launch churches made up of online viewers. He hosts meetings in cities across Japan where he has a large following. He gathers viewers together to form microchurches. Nearly every month Rob travels to a new location to launch a microchurch. He brings along one member of his church as a coach to help each new microchurch until a pastor emerges among the locals. Is he an apostle, or does he simply function apostolically? You decide.

Leonard Lawyer disciplined a friend into a relationship with Jesus. The guy lives on Molokai, an airplane trip away from Leonard in Honolulu. When that man began discipling neighbors, they tried a couple of churches but didn't fit. We decided to fly Leonard to Molokai, monthly. His task is to oversee and disciple the new believer who evangelized and now leads a small congregation of people he brought to Christ. Leonard functions much as Paul did in his relationship with a new church in a "frontier mission." Is Leonard an apostle, or a Christ-follower functioning apostolically? What about the guy in Molokai? How would you describe him? What about me as a sponsor of both Rob in Kobe and Leonard on his trips to Molokai?

Level 5 multiplication can only happen in an apostolic atmosphere. This is why minimum ecclesiology is so important. How you answer the questions I've asked in this section will affect your future Great Commission success. By the way, both Rob Flaherty and Leonard Lawyer operate from churches with liberated finances?

5. Kingdom-centric/Geo-centric Focus:

Do you pastor a church or a geographic area? Do you disciple others with a goal of releasing them into the larger kingdom of God to carry the fullness of Jesus into every corner of the geographic area you pastor? We can disciple nations if we organize toward that goal. This implies that leaders serve as hero-making multipliers. These leaders are willing to sacrifice what they might enjoy at home for what they can produce in other places and cultures. A posture of giving rather than holding.

If you view the Great Commission as a call to disciple entire nations, you'll never be satisfied just leading a single church—large or small. Instead, you'll seek to discern whatever part of the world is your parish and then attempt to saturate it with the gospel. When I lived in Southern California, we saw California beach towns as our unique cultural ballpark. When we moved to Hawaii, we understood the whole state was our primary mission field. Our goal was one percent of the population in churches we planted or helped plant in 10 years. It took 11 years but caused a rise of apostolic leaders (outside our own circles) that moved the needle from four percent in 1983 to 62 percent declaring their faith in Christ by 2006. The same survey had 34 percent of people stating that they had been in church during the past seven days.²⁰

Japan was next and finally, whatever doors the Lord opened elsewhere. The goal was never to build either a movement or an organization—we always sought to expand the Kingdom through a “disciple and release” approach to ministry and church multiplication.

6. Everyone a Missionary:

Does the “priesthood of all believers” work in shoe-leather for you? Your members will seize unexpected opportunities if you train them to.

Statistics show that the church in the U.S. is not penetrating into every crack and cranny of society. Our answer is in part to mobilize people to “go and be” the church into their unique mission field in society rather than simply trying to attract people to “come and see.” The “footprint” or “shadow” of the church’s impact is greatly increased when we mobilize an army of everyday missionaries.

The challenge is that the prevailing paradigm in the Level 3 operating system is one of “we can do it, you can help.” The Level 3 church is possibly the best mobilizer of volunteers in the world (possibly the history of the world). Unfortunately, we mobilize volunteers primarily to run the internal operations of the church and to build our capacity for more growth. Imagine the impact of shifting our approach to “you can do it, how can we help!” What if the church became a mobilizing and launching platform for followers of Jesus to discover and engage and catalyze their unique personal calling! What if we mobilized missionaries into the mission fields represented by everyday life? BTW, I see everyday missionaries ministering in their workplace, neighborhood or serving in a soup kitchen as distinct from people operating microchurches. Everyone is a Matthew 28 missionary, not everyone functions as a pastor.

The secret of Hope Chapel as a movement has been the idea that every member is on a mission. We focus on the priesthood of all believers as pragmatic rather than symbolic. Each member of the body of Christ has a function. All are called as fishers of

men, and all are called to make disciples capable of making other disciples. The most important task of church leadership is to help these folks find their way into ministry through intentional disciple-making systems. Our network of home groups is a starting place. Often, these people band together to join a single member in some outreach venture. This, then, inspires us to do more which, in turn, helps people find their way into some unique ministry.

7. Sending Impulse:

Can you see the value in lining up with Jesus in Acts 1:8? Are you a sender or an accumulator?

The question is never: “Are you called to ministry?” but rather, “What ministry does God have for you?” Helping people discern this leads to an outward mentality. Again, people will come to you with farfetched ideas. Learn that ministry is about what happens “out there,” rather than fitting more bodies into your church machine.

Last summer I spent a week, training leaders in a Level 4 reproducing church in Russia. The leader had recently left a successful church (and network) in a small city to start anew in the former Russian capital of St. Petersburg. He’s operating with more faith than money. In spite of the difficulties, he launched two new churches in just two years from a congregation numbering fewer than 100 on a weekend. The church he pastors is young, poor, and filled with possibilities.

Their biggest struggle is to grow fast enough for their finances to catch up to their ability to multiply ministry. We hit a speed bump late in the meetings. Confusion arose over one man, Dmitri, potentially planting a microchurch among recent Jews immigrating

from Muslim lands. To the pastor, the idea of one of his mature leaders launching small churches seemed like a threat, “Why not just invite them to come to our service? Why deny them the joy we have in our worship and teaching?” The answer: These folks speak broken English and could not fit into the Russian language congregation.

Once he grasped the idea that a leader might *remain* in the mother church while planting a microchurch as a freelance pastor, everything fell into place.

Ten hours after our discussion, one immigrant family contacted Dmitri to ask if he could hold “church” for them and a few of their friends who wanted to know about Jesus. At the end of the day, this pastor was excited to see that he could extend the boundaries of his ministry with a new tool that would not demand the financial resources he puts into ordinary church plants.

The Russian pastor already has a sending impulse, but financial considerations along with performance driven church meetings inhibited it. Once freed from those restraints he now launches churches at a faster rate. Ten months later, Dmitri has replaced himself as pastor of that microchurch and is moving to Sochi with a plan to plant 12 microchurches in villages surrounding that city. We must guard our own sending impulses. If you are reading this book it underscores the sending impulse within you. The key is to root out any obstacles to that impulse. Lives depend on it.

8. Easily Accessible (everyone gets to play):

What training and rules must a person negotiate before joining your ministry team? The fewer you have, the more likely you are to multiply.

Everybody plays. Make it easy for people to gain access to ministry. Rereading Matthew 28 (verse 17) tells us that some of those commissioned still doubted the resurrection. This is interesting. Jesus wasn't bothered by the contradictions common to a movement. Some people go off half-cocked but if you eliminate them, you tend to stomp out the tender seedlings of good grass (Matt. 13:24-30). If you want to lead a Level 5 movement, you must get used to an inclusive messiness, which can be as simple as inviting unskilled people to join a ministry team. For example, we allow musicians to hone their skills while serving on our worship teams—we just don't plug them in until they reach a certain Level of musical competence.

Our churches must allow every member to play a role in ministry. Early on, we began breaking every job description into four pieces. We'd arrange them hierarchically by order of difficulty. The easiest chunk became an entry point for new believers to enter ministry.

One metaphor that sticks with me is the idea that you would feed an army of rabbits rather than elephants because they multiply so rapidly. When it comes to disciple-making ability, we need thousands of rabbits reproducing all over the place. Instead, we see rabbits trying to morph into elephants—which never works!

9. Bias to Yes:

Do you find it easier to give permission than to withhold it? Mobilizing the priesthood of all Believers requires that we move from “we can do it, you can help” to “you can do it, how can we help?” This requires letting go of some control and allowing new ideas which are often messy and risky.

Do frontline people have the ability to change protocol to meet needs or seize rising opportunities? Christ followers run everything from households to small businesses to huge construction projects, yet some pastors want to retrain them in basic skills before allowing them to participate. In churches I've pastored, some of our most productive ministries came through people whose "crackpot schemes" would only get them into trouble—according to the naysaying voice in my head. It often took discipline to say, "Yes, you can; how can I help?" However, it usually paid off.

The interesting thing about saying, "yes," was how often the next 14 days would introduce me to someone with a similar idea. I became an effective networker through granting permission. The Jerusalem church did well in sending Peter and John to help Philip when he got in over his head. They did even better when they endorsed the goings-on in Antioch after sending Barnabas to explore the new (and radically different church). A bias to yes, usually involves building a support net of relationships around the new idea.

Wendell Elento left our staff to "pastor" a large company after one employee murdered five others. When he told me that God was calling him away from our team I informed him that he was mistaken (bias to "no"). He proved me wrong. He began by arriving early to work on Thursdays, softly singing worship songs in the room where the evil happened. Word got around. People began asking for prayer. Today he leads three small churches on separate days of the week. Two congregations meet in a restaurant. The other gathers in a bar. Most of the people are single parents who find it difficult to get to church on the weekend. The word, yes, unleashes multiplication while a negative answer prevents it.

10. Relational Affiliation to a Tribe, Family or Network of Churches:

Are you connected with others who see beyond the local church into the unreached people groups in your community? You need likeminded peers.

We can't live fully without human relationships. Most multiplication movements are birthed inside an existing denomination or network much like Microsoft and Apple; both incubated in the lap of IBM. A multiplication movement generates a tribe by maintaining contact with churches born of it. How you construct this is vital to your success.

Besides your original tribe, you need to connect with likeminded peers who can help feed your fire and pick you up after a mishap. You'll often discover these relationships through people you meet at events like the Exponential conferences.

Finally, you should build a tribe among those you commission to multiply churches. Over my adult life, a host of churches have come from a single congregation my wife and I planted in 1971. We have no formal organization but do maintain a tribal relationship. Through written materials, email and my personal website, we've maintained a "Hope Chapel identity," (though most of our churches don't use the Hope Chapel name). Larger training venues have helped, but sometimes we felt we needed to cede that territory to the denomination that birthed me. My point, though, is that you must build tribal relationships or face a breakdown in your future and the futures of the pastors you commission.