

CHAPTER 6

Important Examples

God intended that the New Testament Church would be an Archetype, or benchmark, for all that followed. American Church culture seems to assume that the New Testament model is primitive and in need of improvement.

Let's look at several facets of church in the New Testament. This cannot begin with the book of Acts, it must start with the ministry of Jesus and its outfall in the communities where he performed miracles and preached. After that we'll take a brief look at the church in China. It is growing too fast to ignore, especially since most of the growth took place under a persecuting regime that parallels the early decades of Christianity.

If you view the New Testament church as primitive, then anything you do to change it is an "improvement." If it's a prototype, however, you work hard to preserve the essence of what Scripture records. Technology may change; the basic approach to making disciples and reproducing churches will not.

— Important Examples —

But within the scope of the New Testament, there are several examples that give insight to defining what we call, “church” in ways that differ from our current, very Western traditions. Let’s think about some New Testament examples and then compare them to several untraditional churches I know about.

New Testament Insights

Before pursuing any model, or new tool, get in the habit of asking yourself, “What part of the Great Commission is my personal assignment?” Then follow it up with, “What would a biblical approach to my assignment look like?” Finally, ask, “How can I approximate Scripture in my circumstances?”

I always say that copying others will burn you out. Wrestling with God through Scripture will build you up.

The church in Jerusalem looks like a multisite operation that utilized homes to accommodate its people (Acts 2:41-47). The Apostle Paul surely planted microchurches (Acts 13-28). I think this is the reason that the Holy Spirit dedicated so much of Acts to Paul’s travels. Let’s look at a sampling of thought starters...

The All-Important Numbers

Beginning with Jesus, we see the importance of a primary leader discipling others in radiating circles. Peter, James and John were the big three in Jesus’ ministry. After that, the nine other disciples had a place at the table (you could fantasize that the three closest to Jesus related personally to three others in this circle). Beyond that, Jesus “planted” a church of 120 people in Jerusalem. That’s the number of people that assembled for prayer in Acts 1.

— *Important Examples* —

The Crowd at the Well

Did you ever wonder what became of the crowd the woman at the well introduced to Jesus? It's hard to imagine that the Spirit of the Lord would have abandoned them. What form do you think their faith community took after Jesus moved down the road? It's fairly safe to assume that they would have modeled after a synagogue since they had Hebrew roots mixed with their paganism. That model included a career-supported leader with a small congregation.

Accidental Missionaries

Saul of Tarsus kicked off the first missionary movement with his persecution of the Church recorded in Acts 7 and 8. Those whom he scattered took the gospel to Samaria (and Ethiopia), Phoenicia, Cyprus, Cyrene and Antioch. While the church in Antioch appears to have grown to a significant size, there's little mention of the others. This leads me to conclude that Antioch invested in multiplication while the others did not.

The Synagogue as a Model

From what we know of early Judaism, the synagogue leader supported himself by labor aside from ministry. This would have been true of the “house church” leaders in Acts 2. It would also be an example for the hastily appointed elders in churches from Lystra to Iconium to Antioch (Acts 14:19-23). I thrill to read how Paul returned from near death to sneak into towns where he appointed elders from among his disciples. He could have known these people for only a short time. Yet he and Barnabas were able

— *Important Examples* —

to commit them to the Holy Spirit, “in whom they had put their trust” (Acts 14:23).

China and the Little Flock Movement

We can’t help but reference China when assessing the strength of microchurches. A million Christians (less than 3/100th percent of 547,804,000 people) went underground when the Communist Party came to power in 1948. Watchman Nee’s Little Flock Movement had set the stage for a switch to microchurches. These secret Christians multiplied to around 163 million believers today²⁵ which projects to 20 percent of the population by 2030.²⁶ Ding Guangxun, a Communist Party member and controversial leader of the government-controlled Three Self Patriotic Churches attributed Chinese church growth to the fact that persecution had forced Christians to hold church in homes instead of assembling in large church buildings.²⁷

On one of my trips to Russia, a gathering of pastors discussed the role the Chinese government played in forcing the Church underground, which led to such rapid multiplication of disciples, pastors and house churches. The discussion strayed to the possibility of a movement of microchurches when one pastor challenged everyone with a question: “If Communism forced the spread of Christianity in China, why didn’t the same type of repression spawn a similar movement in Russia?” Everyone sat in stunned silence. A common confidence in the relationship between persecution, the blood of martyrs, and the growth of the church seemed to shatter over a single question. Then someone spoke up, “It was Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement that

— *Important Examples* —

made the difference.” For several years before the Maoists gained control, Nee promoted microchurches.

Closer to Home

All of this is just theory unless it works in actuality. Check out some of these real-life examples of people who took freelance ministry to heart:

A Medical Doctor

My friend Tom McCarthy was a physician who planted a microchurch in his home. As the congregation grew, they rented various facilities and hired support staff. Growth induced the need for more money. Tom put in less than eight hours a week while the staff carried most of the load. He took no salary. The treadmill began moving. The church finally outgrew him. He chose medicine over pastoring. They hired a new pastor, and Hope Chapel Santa Rosa is healthy today. The church continues to multiply new congregations in California and in Fiji. However, money became a sustainability issue as soon as the church increased from micro- to mid-size.

Evangelizing LDS in Utah

Matthew Anderson is a freelance disciple maker planting microchurches in Utah. Matthew runs a website design company; his wife is a registered nurse. The Andersons have no thoughts of forsaking their careers for vocational ministry. In fact, their careers enhance their credibility among those they hope to disciple. They chose the freelance route to, “stay in the stream of our culture,” Matthew says. “Also, the LDS people have a very negative view

— *Important Examples* —

toward vocational pastors, so not taking a salary directly from our church is helpful when connecting with them.” The couple’s disciple-making efforts are geo-centric rather than focused on building large in a single location. They strategize planting at least one microchurch in every Mormon stake in their city.

“Utah is zoned geographically by the Latter-Day Saints into wards and stakes,” he explains. “A ward is a neighborhood that consists of a minimum of 300 LDS members. If you’re Mormon, you go to church in your ward. A stake is a region consisting of six to 12 wards. Our city has 84 wards/congregations equaling 10 stakes. When someone leaves the LDS faith for a relationship with Christ, their local community usually rejects them.”

Anderson is working toward planting a microchurch within every LDS stake in the city so that when people come to faith in Christ, they will have a new faith family within close proximity to their home. The Andersons intend to plant microchurches through relational disciple making.

The groups have the freedom to remain autonomous or to occasionally gather as a network.

Leaders emerge from disciple-making success: “We feel like new Christians mature much quicker when they’re intentionally discipled and challenged to disciple others,” he says. “A mature disciple of Jesus can easily lead a microchurch without previous ministry experience, Bible college education or seminary training.”

I met Matthew when he joined a discussion about microchurch possibilities at a seminar I taught. A potential Level 5 leader, he says, “The simplicity of a microchurch really lends to multiplication. When multiplication is in a disciple’s DNA, reproduction happens naturally.

— *Important Examples* —

Smaller organisms usually have a shorter gestation period, so microchurches have the potential to multiply much quicker than traditional Western churches.”

Anderson’s life is not without tension: “This approach is often misunderstood,” he says. “Many can’t understand why the end goal isn’t to be a large church or to have a beautiful church campus. They think our goals are too small when, in actuality, our goals are much larger than what they can even comprehend. There’s also a personal tension to not make it about being a microchurch. I have to guard myself against pride in the same way a megachurch pastor does. I feel like I need to continually ask myself: *Are we truly making disciples who are multiplying disciples?* Let’s not make microchurches another church fad. If it works well to reach a specific demographic, go for it! We just need to avoid doing things just because it’s trendy.”

Church Planting on Skid Row

Randall Kalama is a young policeman, married to Annie, an executive in the Hawaii Department of Education. They planted a microchurch among mostly homeless people in the skid row section of Honolulu. They used their personal tithes to rent a building and then began meeting with the outcasts of society. This is not a skid row mission. From the beginning, they called it church. They enlisted their disciples (including some from their home church) to operate the church. They even ask homeless people to give offerings to help others. Randall is a single-salary, freelance microchurch planter who trusted God to embark on a unique journey.

“We started PS150 church, not with a traditional church or small group in mind,” Randall says. “It was started as a way for

— *Important Examples* —

followers of Christ (no matter where they fellowship) to have a way to step out into the community of Chinatown Honolulu and share the Good News with whomever they met, including houseless people and those with addiction and mental illness who live on the streets. The microchurch concept was not on our radar, we just wanted to do something that was a low threshold to do ministry outside the four walls of a church.”

He continues, “In my humble opinion, smaller churches or low threshold ministries are easier for lay people within the Body of Christ to come together and build relationships and allow more of the congregation to get involved in ministry as opposed to larger gatherings that tend to produce more ‘spectator’ Christians.”

Though they didn’t intend to plant a microchurch, that’s what happened. Randall endorses the idea: “If disciple making is the primary goal for the Church (Great Commission), then a microchurch lends itself to fulfilling this goal. King Jesus modeled this effectively. He preached to the masses, but He spent all His time (three years) with 12 guys—doing life together as well as teaching them.”

This “doing life together” element seems to be missing from our current mode of church life. Randall and Annie moved away from Honolulu for several years, though they’ve since returned. While they were away for three years, the couple lived in Ruidoso, New Mexico (part of the Lincoln National Forest in the Sacramento Mountains of central eastern New Mexico). While they were there, God opened a door, allowing them to meet every Wednesday night at a drug and alcohol rehab center on the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation bordering Ruidoso.

“We followed the same model we did in Chinatown: meeting consistently (week in/week out); singing praise and worship songs;

— *Important Examples* —

reading Scripture and praying together. We've seen men and women transformed and set free from addiction and surrender their lives to King Jesus."

They effectively launched a microchurch inside a rehab center. For this couple, vocational ministry is out of the question. When they started PS150, their jobs were a matter of necessity. Randall and Annie both work full time and had to continue doing their "day jobs" to support themselves. "We used our own resources," Randall says, "and God provided other people to come alongside and help support PS150."

I asked him about challenges and tensions the couple faced when they multiplied our church into what became PS150. "Chinatown Honolulu is a unique place," he said. "Many of the people who are in the area are houseless and battle with substance addiction or mental illness. There are churches in or near Chinatown, but for various reasons the people living on the street don't make it through the doors of those church meetings. We wanted to take the church to them, since we're taught that 'we are the church.'

"The people of God are His ambassadors, representing Him to the world around us. This approach worked for what He called us to do. After three years of ministering in Chinatown, we've seen lives transformed. Some are doing well today; some have gone home to be with King Jesus. The number of these transformations isn't huge, but when we started, we would tell ourselves, 'Even if one comes to know King Jesus and surrender to Him, it's all worth it.' After we left in 2013, God kept the doors for PS150 church open and He raised up others in the Body to step up and out in faith, and they continue to minister in Chinatown today."

— *Important Examples* —

New Immigrants and Folks Back Home

Every church has leaders that could do this now. Junji Ono and our entire Japanese-speaking congregation launched several years ago as an autonomous church. They never grew past about 35 people while meeting in a community center. However, after moving to a large home they exploded. The result: an ever-expanding network of Japanese-language house churches in Hawaii, Japan and even Houston. By their third year, they had planted 23 microchurches in Japan. The multiplication grew out of control—a good thing. Today, Junji won’t even speculate as to the number of microchurches they have spawned in Japan. He simply doesn’t know everyone in the movement.

Missionaries often describe Japanese people as unwilling to open their homes to others. Japanese houses and apartments are small and often crowded—land is extremely expensive. But Junji and his friends proved them wrong. As long as the group continues to elevate a vision to multiply, they could potentially touch every household in a country that has been more resistant to the gospel than most. After more than 600 years of missionary work, less than one percent of

Japanese follow Jesus Christ. Yet Junji’s group sees limitless opportunity for multiplying microchurches.

Every example in this chapter describes a person supported by employment outside the congregation, or network, which they pastor. Microchurches are not “just for people on the mission field.”

— *Important Examples* —

Francis Chan

Multiplication leader and author Francis Chan recently spoke to a group of Facebook employees. He described the “We Are Church” network of 15 microchurches. Groups are designed to be small so it's more like family where members can actually get to know one another, love one another, and make use of their gifts.

“We've got a few hundred people now, and it costs nothing,” Chan explained. “And everyone's growing and everyone's having to read this book (the Bible) for themselves and people actually caring for one another. I don't even preach. They just meet in their homes, they study, they pray, they care for one another. They're becoming the church, and I'm just loving it and realizing that these 30 guys [are] leading this and the women as well.”

The church involves, “guys coming off the streets, out of prison, to doctors and people that work here (Facebook) or Google.”

Their goal is to double their numbers each year until they touch 1.2 million people in his lifetime. He adds, “It's all free.”

Francis also notes that doing church as a family is messy, “But when it's family, it gets messy. And you start finding out people's dirt. Just like you know about your brother and sister every Thanksgiving. It's messy because it's family. That's what Christ wanted. So we fight for it. And it's been a blast.”²⁸

Remember, I'm not suggesting that we replace anything we have with a bunch of small churches. This isn't an either/or issue. The concept of “or” is a tyrant while “and” is a friend. To plant “macrochurches” OR to plant microchurches is a lousy choice. But to add this to our arsenal might just turn the tide of American

— *Important Examples* —

culture back toward our God who loves people that can't, don't and won't fit our current models.

It is important to see the church as a multifaceted affair if you want to multiply at Level 5. No one-size-fits-all in the kingdom of God. No single strategy or ministry form will accommodate everyone. If we would disciple nations we must take our eyes off of the church across town, or the list of the fastest growers. We must focus on the harvest with the knowledge that every farmer plows a piece of ground a little different from every other farmer. The logistics, culture and practices of a microchurch will be influenced by

- A. Whoever discipled the leader.
- B. The gifts and personality of the planter.
- C. The culture and customs of those evangelized.
- D. The logistics affixed to meeting places, etc.