



What kind of Churches should we be planting around the world? T. J. Addington

ReachGlobal has a very specific target for the kinds of churches that we help plant around the world. The target can be defined in five words: healthy, indigenous, self-supporting, reproducing, and interdependent.

Healthy

Health includes healthy theology and ethos. The Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) has intentionally defined what we call the Ten Leading Indicators of a Healthy Church. While ReachGlobal is not focused on planting EFCA churches globally, there is a focus on working with groups that have EFCA theology and ethos, and that are committed to church health. Only healthy churches produce healthy disciples and additional healthy churches.

ReachGlobal is working to bring a high level of emphasis on health everywhere we do ministry. ReachGlobal is working closely with the EFCA Director of Church Health, Jim Fann, to bring the systems, training, and emphasis on church health to ReachGlobal fields around the world.

Indigenous

Indigenous churches are churches that reflect the culture of the people among whom the church is planted, while also being thoroughly biblical in their practices. Too often missionaries have inadvertently brought both biblical practices and outside culture with them in planting churches rather than bringing the truth of the gospel and allowing that truth to be expressed within the culture of a local population.

For example, anyone who has participated in worship services in Africa can understand how culture impacts “how people do church.” The service may last four hours, have African music, lots of dancing and long (even multiple) messages. The congregation might then have a long meal together before they disperse. The whole service can last most of the day.

The key to planting indigenous churches is simple: Missionaries do not plant the church. Instead, missionaries train, develop, empower and coach nationals to do the church planting. Missionaries cannot plant an indigenous church—only nationals can. Thus, wherever possible, our task is to develop, empower and release healthy national leaders who can plant healthy, indigenous churches based on the same gospel Truth but in their context

Self-Supporting

This is perhaps the most difficult concept for those who live in the developed world to understand. “Self-supporting” means that the indigenous church is not dependent on outside funds in order to exist, nor is its pastor paid from outside the local congregation.

It is based on the conviction that Christ designed the church to exist in any culture, any socio-economic and political climate, and to do so in such a way that it can organically reproduce itself regardless of the structures in which it exists. When we tamper with the structure designed by Christ, we inadvertently destroy or impede the organic growth of the church.

A great example of how the church operates organically can be found in China. When missionaries were forced to leave in 1949, there were approximately one million believers in China. A prediction was made that the church would die. Interestingly, the many missionaries who were active in China had imported Western ways of doing church, including all the denominational distinctives present in the Western church.

Instead of dying, the church flourished. It did so organically as Christ designed the church to do in spite of a terrible economy, a government that tried to eradicate it, and the absence of trained pastors. It flourished much like the early church, with lay, bi-vocational pastors, and house churches, neither of which were dependent on funding. China is proof that the church does not need to reflect a Western model to flourish, but that it can flourish organically in any context—if we do not tamper with it.

There are three barriers to church multiplication world wide. These three barriers are practices of the Western church that are often imported to the church in the developing world. The following are the three barriers: 1) Being a church means needing a full-time pastor, 2) The pastor needs a degree, and 3) The church should have a building and real estate.

Why does this thinking hurt multiplication? It does so because we live in a poor world. Consider this: 54% of our world lives on less than three US dollars per day, and 91% of our world lives on less than \$10,000 per year. What does this say about the ability of most of our world to conduct church as it is conducted in the West, with full-time pastors who have degrees, and with church buildings and real-estate?

The early church was not hampered by these three constraints. The very reason that it could organically reproduce itself, like the church in China, was that it did not rely on paid pastors, degreed pastors, or real-estate.

Because we view church in American terms, we often seek to reproduce our version of church around the world. One of the easiest ways to do this is to pay pastors in developing contexts. After all, it costs only a small amount of dollars to support a pastor in a poor economy, or so the thinking goes. Hence, we start to pay pastors so that they can work full time, thinking that it makes perfect sense and will increase their effectiveness. However, good intentions sometimes have unintended consequences.

Let us consider some of the unintended consequences of this practice. First, it is no longer an organically-reproducible model. Once you start paying pastors, new churches are not started until more money is available to pay that pastor. Second, it is almost impossible to wean these pastors off of that support once they are on it. Third,

congregations do not give because there is little need for them to do so. Fourth, these pastors and congregations are not indigenous or independent since they are beholden to those who pay them. Finally, dependency is created. The church cannot exist without the outside money. The bottom line is that what was done for good reasons actually hurts the church and stifles the growth of the church. It also tampers with how God designed the church to organically reproduce itself in any world context.

If a church is to be healthy, indigenous, and reproducible, it must be self-supporting. When we force another model on the church, it has negative, unintended consequences. This is why ReachGlobal is committed to self-supporting churches.

A word about real-estate and buildings: Great wisdom is needed regarding when to help a church in the developing world purchase or build buildings. Remember the church does not need real-estate to flourish. When we define church in terms of buildings and real-estate, other churches start to define it that way. As a result, everyone in that locale begins to believe that to be a church it needs buildings. However, the people in these locales cannot afford the buildings. Thus, in order to reproduce themselves they need help from the outside to purchase and build structures. Again, the organic nature of the church is compromised.

In one city where ReachGlobal works, there are five key churches. Each of these churches has been helped by outside work teams to build a church building. Those five churches have been very slow to plant new churches. They have said, “We need to be strong first,” which means they need to complete their structures and then have enough people to pay for their upkeep. One must ask the question, *Did our help in building buildings get in the way of organic multiplication?*

ReachGlobal and other missions have learned hard lessons in this area. Those lessons have led us back to what we believe is a healthier and more biblical model of self-supporting churches that can organically reproduce in any context, any political climate, and any economy. Where it is necessary to help pastors find a way to support themselves, we want to help them be self-sufficient through micro-enterprising rather than through ongoing financial support.

Reproducing

Healthy churches reproduce themselves. Movements that are not deeply committed to, and actually practicing, the reproduction of new churches are simply not healthy. This often happens when denominational structures take greater precedence than multiplication. Where the organic nature of the church has been tampered with, multiplication is stifled and hindered.

God designed the church to reproduce itself organically, intentionally and rapidly—once the gospel takes hold. Healthy churches can do that. It is our goal to minister in a way that fosters this multiplication of the church wherever possible.

Interdependent

ReachGlobal believes that congregations are healthiest when they are in fellowship with and are cooperating with other like-minded congregations. Thus, we choose to work with groups that value interdependence rather than independence. Interdependent churches work together to bring the gospel to those around them, to train workers, and to do missions together.

However, this does not mean that we are in the business of starting denominations. In fact, denominational structures often hinder multiplication as leaders focus on their needs rather than the multiplication of the church. We would desire that these organized structures develop organically, at the right time and for the right reasons, rather than denominations taking the lead to make it happen.

If you would like to dialogue on any of these principles, please feel free to write me at tim.addington@efca.org.