

NEW Harvest

~ Equipping mission planters to multiply the harvest ~

Center for U. S. Missions

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LESSONS IN CHURCH PLANTING by Jeff Hamilton

Some time ago Doug Kallelen suggested that I meet Jeff Hamilton, a friend of his, who is starting a Four Square mission in the Irvine area. When we met, Jeff shared much of what he shares in this article, which he wrote at my request. What a blessing when a church planter is willing to share his journey as the Lord forms and shapes him, as he does all of us, to be the mission planter He wants him to be. Thank you, Jeff, for the open and honest way you have shared your insights. I know God will bless your message to help many of our readers.

—Ken Behnken

A few months ago I read an article about a church plant that had gone from 40 to 400 in one year. The pastor of this church shared some of the lessons he learned through this whirlwind experience. His comments started me thinking about my situation and what I've learned through it.

The church my wife and I planted, New Horizons Christian Fellowship in Irvine, CA, is approaching its 3-year anniversary of public services (3-1/2 years from the first meeting of the core team). In that time, we have gone from 12 people in our core team, to a monthly average of 75 and currently back down to 45 in attendance (with half of our original core

team still active in the church). Although now I am grateful for the way that the Lord is building our church, it wasn't supposed to be this way. When I started this journey I didn't realize the significant lessons that were still ahead for me. I did not realize that after a dozen years of "successful" full-time ministry leadership, there was still major work to be done in my life. These lessons in character and leadership have significantly changed my paradigm of success¹. Here are some of them.

Exceptions never are.

New Horizons was started from scratch. Thankfully the Lord gave us many exceptional people in our early months to build with. They were incredibly gifted and had their own call to ministry that extended beyond our church body. Opportunities to use their gifts outside of our church often conflicted with activities crucial to building our church. Because of what these folks contributed to our public

gatherings, I often "excused" them at their request from participating in non-Sunday ministries and meetings. What I thought of being a gracious act on my part as the leader in accommodating their schedule actually ended up re-defining their commitment. Each exception I made for them erased the previous standard of their



responsibility to the church. This eventually created a two-tiered leadership – the "exceptional" people whose gifts made a place for them, and the other

developing leaders who were identified by their faithfulness and commitment.² Both groups were committed to their assignments, and there was great affection between everyone. Yet both groups eventually became frustrated, as the "gifted" no longer knew what was required of them (since the requirements changed for each person with every exception), and the "faithful" were being held to different standards. By default I created *two different sets of rules, which prevented us from becoming one team.*

Affection is a gift; trust is earned.

We have experienced the natural transition of many of the early core team moving on. What we have discovered in the process is that friendship doesn't guarantee your spiritual leadership in their lives and their partnership with the vision of the church. Our early core team was made up of people with whom we had various levels of acquaintance. They really liked my wife and me and we all hoped to see these relationships blossom. Our core had expectations of us as pastors, and we had expectations of them as partners. We all had expectations about friendship. Yet we never expressed any of these expectations. We experienced the reality that *expectations never communicated always result in frustration.* The commitment we had in affection anesthetized the growing dissatisfaction with the partnership. The affection for one another was so great that we resisted reality for months. Nevertheless, our confidence in each other's ability to fulfill these expectations had eroded. Frustrations gave place to disappointment, disappointment to doubt, and doubt leads eventually to distrust. Real communication and

Lessons in Church Planting, continued

consistent action are the foundation for trust. Somewhere along our way, expectations substituted for communication, and good intentions never translated into measurable action.

Vision isn't enough.

Our early core team not only believed in my wife and me, but also in the dream of New Horizons. And I consistently kept the dream in front of the team. But when we discovered that we weren't growing as quickly as we thought we would, and the excitement of this new endeavor began to dissipate, we found that vision alone doesn't keep people motivated or provide grounds for accountability. I discovered that *you can inspire for only so long*



without defining. I failed our leaders many times by focusing so much on the future that I didn't help them take the steps necessary to head in that direction. Simple administrative tasks like providing people with job descriptions and implementing procedures would have helped us evaluate our success or regress.

Character is crucial.

In this season as a leader, facing my first real season of difficulty, all the garbage in my life has bubbled to the surface. Another leader once told me, "Every time you go to a new level, there are new and bigger devils." I didn't realize that stepping up to this new place

of "lead shepherd" was going to require so much. It's not the work ethic that's necessary for church planting that was difficult to adjust to. Neither was the public aspect of the ministry the challenge. The weight I felt was the responsibility to be a spiritual leader. *It requires a humility that I didn't realize I didn't have* – which is the understanding that I couldn't do this in my own ability. Although I had been developing my "skills" as a pastor/leader, I had not been guarding my heart and cultivating my character with the same effort. Easily distracted by my need for immediate gratification, I put off the real work of spiritual discipline and personal growth to fill myself with people-pleasing activities. Don't get me wrong. Skill is important. People are important. But God's concern is the conforming of my life to His Son's. My primary concern should be allowing Him to do it.

Know the difference between your opinions, preferences, and convictions.

As the leader, especially in an entrepreneurial setting, I found out you have to know what you stand for. Communicating your mission and values is a significant leadership responsibility. Yet your mission and values are expressed most often in unintentional ways: through the little decisions you make every day. These decisions either reinforce or undermine your organization's mission and ultimately your leadership. It is important then to understand the significance of these types of decisions. Opinions (as the saying goes) are like noses – everybody has one. You can't put more weight on

yours than anybody else's, especially when their opinion pertains to the areas of responsibility you have given to them. Give your opinion only when asked, then don't expect it to be followed. Preferences are about what sets people up for success. It's about making them feel secure so they can perform well. If it's not a distraction and violating the values of the church, preferences should be accommodated (including yours as the leader). But convictions cannot be compromised. They must be measured against the values and mission. And as a leader, the convictions for the church are internalized in you. You have to be able to sort through your opinions and preferences ruthlessly. Then as you relay them in various settings, you have to connect them with the mission and values. Doing it once isn't enough. *People have their opinions on what your convictions should be.* The leader better know the difference.

Do everything you can do, so that God can do what only He can do.

There are so many helpful tools available to help with the launching of a new church. There are so many wonderful things that you can do as a body to touch your community. Yet in all of the conference and books, there is little said about what I now consider to be the most significant factor in church growth. That factor is best expressed in the words of Jesus, "I will build my church." *Church growth is God's responsibility.* I've also come to believe that *church health is my responsibility.* There is a specific

assignment for this church in this community or we wouldn't need to be here. There is a responsibility to care for and minister to those in our church family and to those in our sphere of influence. There is the need to express God's love to our community. We must be intentionally pursuing our mission. However, our attention to these obligations alone doesn't always produce growth. There is a God-process, a "kingdom" timing that I don't

***I can sow, others can water
... but God alone gives the increase.***

completely understand in the development of a church body. But I am convinced that if we as a church don't take care of who and what has been entrusted to us, it will never be multiplied. I can sow, others can water, there are even tools to help cultivate and prepare for fruitfulness, but God alone gives the increase³.

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¹ My previous paradigm for "success" in pastoral ministry could be simply determined by one easily measurable factor – rapid and continuous church growth. This one statistic would be reflective of the church's leadership gifting, effectiveness of outreach efforts, discipleship, and spiritual momentum.

² There is always a tension between giftedness and faithfulness (see **2 Timothy 2:2**). What I've come to realize is that my conflict really had to do with the fear of possibly losing people more than I trusted God to supply (**Proverbs 29:25**).

³ **1 Corinthians 3:6**

Recent Research

Glenmary Research on Religious Congregations and Membership: 2000

A study done with 149 religious bodies in North America found that one half (50.2%) of all Americans are associated with one of the 149 religious groups who participated in the study. Those states with the largest percentage of people participating in church are Utah, 74%, and North Dakota, 73%. Oregon, 31%, and Washington, 33%, were at the bottom of the list.

North Dakota (426) and West Virginia (437) have the lowest ratio of population to congregations. That is, there is one congregation in North Dakota for every 426 people.

Nevada is at the other extreme, with 2,130 people for each congregation. (Statistics available from www.glenmary.org/grc/RCMS_2000/findings.htm)

According to Glenmary findings, there are 140,057,419 people unclaimed (not attending a church) in the United States. (www.thearda.com)

Fear and Lack of Critical Thinking

Margaret Wheatley, speaking to an Innovation Network Conference, Sept. 22, 2002, in Minneapolis (as reported by LNextra email letter) said, "Fear and lack of time for critical thinking are blocking innovation in today's culture. The problems we face today are far beyond our capacity to solve with old ways of thinking. Innovation requires thinking, and thinking requires time. Fear and lack of time bring out the worst in people, not the best, and certainly not our creativity. Our task is to create the conditions that bring out people's ability to think."

As I read this statement, I began to think about how it relates to the church. How much time do we take for critical thinking and prayer? How much time do we work on new and different ways to relate the message of a timeless Gospel? Are we allowing our members to take time to do some critical thinking about their faith and life? -KWB

What did we learn from 9-11?

Steve Waldman, editor and chief at Belifnet.com, sees an interesting pattern in the way people responded to the tragedy of 9/11. There was only a vague passing interest in spirituality. People attended church for a short time but quickly fell back into their old patterns. Waldman believes that the big news is "what didn't happen. The fact that people initially went to houses of worship and then stopped, should be viewed as a huge story, not a non-event."

The bottom line, he said, is that "Americans didn't view organized religion as much help. . . While the pews were emptying, psychologists' offices were filling up." Shortly after Sept. 11, Barna Group Research found that the percentage of Americans affirming that they believe in "moral truths or principles" that are eternal and unchanging actually declined - from 38% to 22%. Only 32% of "born-again" Christians still believe in the existence of absolute moral truth. (Adapted from *Spirituality Up, Doctrine Down* by Terry Mattingly on www.pastors.com) U.S. News and World Report recently reported that only 19% of Christians say that Christianity is the only true religion, and 10% of all Christians say they've never experienced God's presence as a spiritual force close to them.

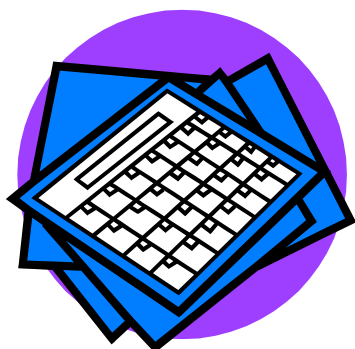
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Upcoming Events

- May 3, 2003 — *Planting Missions Across Cultures*, Seward, Nebraska
- May 14-16, 2003 — *Daughter Church Planting Leaders Training*
- May 19-23, 2003 — *Urban Ministry Retreat*
- July 21-28 — *Mission Planters Institute*
- August 6-8, 2003, *Turn Around Churches Leaders Training*
- Sept. 27, 2003 — *Ministry Across Cultures*, San Francisco, CA
- Nov. 7-10, 2003 — *Healthy Church Consultant Training*, St. Louis, MO

Events are held on the campus of Concordia University, Irvine, California, unless otherwise indicated. Registration materials for most events are on our website : www.centerforusmissions.org.



Spiritual Information on the Internet

A study released in December of 2001 by Pew Internet & American Life Project (Elena Larsen, Research Fellow) found the following:

25% of internet users have gotten religious or spiritual information online at one point or another. This is an increase from Barna's survey in late 2000, which showed that 21% of Internet users—or between 19 million and 20 million people—had gone online to get religious or spiritual material.

More than 3 million people a day get religious or spiritual material online, up from 2 million in 2000.

For comparison's sake, it is interesting to note that more people have gotten religious or spiritual information online than have gambled online, used a Web auction site, traded stocks online, placed phone calls on the Internet, done online banking or used Internet-based services.

67% of religion surfers have accessed information on their own faith.

50% have sought information on other faiths.

38% of religion surfers have used email to send prayer requests. The practice is far more common among congregation members (42%) than non-members (12%).

15% of religious surfers say their use of the Internet has made them feel more committed to their faith, and 27% say it has improved their spiritual life to at least a modest degree.

64% of religious surfers believe that the Internet provides easier access to religious study and educational materials than they can otherwise find offline.

Non-members of religious organizations rely on the Internet to find resources that members of actual congregation are likely to find in their faith communities.



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