

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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CRITICAL MASS

Part XVI: The Franchise Model

by Gary North

But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty (1 Cor. 1:27).

We must begin with a biblical fact of life: as Christians, we are regarded as fools by our opponents. The wisdom of this world is not the wisdom of God. Thus, to the extent that the world operates today under anti-biblical presuppositions, we must content ourselves with low imputed status – imputed by our enemies.

Is this a liability? Not necessarily. It should make us more resourceful. Jesus warned those of His day: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matt. 10:16).

The general topic of this series is the problem of critical mass for churches: implosive and explosive. Our goal should be to avoid the implosion of a local congregation where the exodus leads to collapse. Our goal should be the explosion of growth. The question is: How much growth? Can there be too much growth? That is the topic of this report.

In a previous report (No. 14: July/August 1993), I argued that there are distinct limits to local church growth. The main one is the limit of leadership. There are only a few gifted people who are capable of running large organizations. The church must not base its evangelism programs on the availability of highly competent and gifted people. The text is clear: we are to establish our institutions on the assumption that the wise and gifted people of this world will not join the church until such time as Christianity is dominant in culture and new standards of performance and wisdom prevail. Even then, the bell-shaped curve of performance will still be in force: a few retarded people, a few geniuses, and most people in between. We must build the church with, at best, ordinary people.

Extraordinary Performance from Ordinary People

The widely known secret of McDonald's and other franchise businesses is that they have found a system that enables managers to extract extraordinary performance out of ordinary people. What is not widely known is that the original model for all franchise operations is the church. Even the church has generally forgotten that it pioneered the concept of the franchise – and an international franchise at that. Its leaders no longer work night and day to find ways to equip ordinary people to produce extraordinary results. The result: the church today barely produces ordinary results, except on the foreign mission field, where the original

franchise model is still honored.

The old military rule is **divide and conquer**. But the slogan refers to what you should do to your enemy. What makes the church unique is that it is supposed to apply this rule to itself.

Crazy? On the contrary; it is the basis of success. Have you ever seen a McDonald's franchise that can seat 5,000 people? Not even in Russia. It seats only 1,100. Besides, the Moscow McDonald's restaurant is a money-loser. It is there for advertising purposes – part of a very long-term campaign to establish McDonald's name identification in the nation.

The goal of every profit-seeking national franchise company is to establish many branches in every town, each run by a competent man who has an operations manual. Two factors are crucial to the success of a fast-food franchise: a good location and the manual. Where there is a McDonald's, there will frequently be a Burger King within 200 yards. Burger King does this on purpose. Burger King's management lets McDonald's pay for the demographic research.

Each restaurant has an operations manual. Each seeks to hire ordinary people to serve ordinary people. The goal is not to hire French chefs to serve gourmet diners. The goal is to make a lot of money. **The best way to make lots of money is to serve lots and lots of ordinary people.**

Have we ever seen this strategy before? Of course: Jesus' initial recruits. The only professional among them was a tax collector: low imputed status. God does not recruit extraordinary people to serve as the leaders of His church. God chooses the foolish of the world to confound the wise.

What is said of the British Navy is almost true of the church: an organization designed by geniuses to be run by morons. The church is an organization designed by God to be run by ordinary people. God loves ordinary people, for He has made so many of them.

Megachurch Model or Dividing Church Model?

What is the role of above-average people? Here is one of the most pressing questions facing the American church today. The fact is, **most pastors have ordinary talents**. Very few pastors can create an operation as large as D. James Kennedy's or Jerry Falwell's. For this we should be eternally grateful. If the long-term model for every congregation were the megachurch, most Christians would suffer a life of total frustration.

The megachurch is a fragile thing. It relies on a highly gifted pastor-administrator. The megachurch is built in terms of one man's gifts. When he dies or retires or runs off with the organist, his replacement must meet the demands of thousands of members – defined very loosely – who were

recruited in terms of the other man's ministry. Ray Sutton has called the replacement megachurch pastor "a whole burnt offering."

This problem is point five of the biblical covenant model: succession. How does a megachurch secure a pastor who can keep the congregation going? The more church debt, the more pressing the problem.

The goal of most churches should be a local congregation that has no more than 150 adult members. Even this goal is out of reach for most congregations. They will have to work very hard and very smart to reach it. Very few congregations ever achieve 200 adult members – under 10 percent. But if recruiting 150 adult members is the proper goal for most congregations, what of that unique congregation that finds that it can grow larger? Should it accept this growth? Or should every congregation self-consciously plan from the beginning to divide when it approaches 150 adult members?

I recommend the latter. But this raises a crucial institutional question: What is the positive incentive for potential megachurch pastors to accept this model?

Bishops

No member of a megachurch dares utter in public the word which best describes its institutional role: **cathedral**. No member calls a megachurch's pastor by his functional office's title: **bishop**. (The exception is a charismatic megachurch. Sometimes their pastors do appropriate the title of bishop.)

Because American Protestantism is generally congregational, the divide-and-conquer strategy is rejected. Because a man cannot officially become a bishop in most Protestant denominations, ambitious men have as their goal overseeing a megachurch. They seek to establish their visible dominance with big congregations. **They seek to become operational bishops:** overseeing a horde of assistant pastors and secretaries, thereby becoming the dominant voices in the denominational association. The office of bishop is an inescapable concept. It is never a question of "bishop vs. no bishop." It is a question of "**which kind** of bishop?"

"Oh, no," some dedicated congregationalist objects. "In our association, all the pastors are equal." Really? If you think that Rev. Bland, pastor of a rural congregation of 75 adult members, has the same clout in the denomination-association as Rev. Sharp, pastor of First Whatever Church of Dallas, with 25,000 members on the rolls, a 12,215-pipe organ, and 17 assistant pastors program directors, you are living in fantasyland.

The goal of every church growth program should be to plant sister churches in every section of the community. The problem is this: **sister churches do not exist without mother churches**, whether official or unofficial. These mother churches today are large, heavily indebted operations: megachurches. Until American Protestantism can at least imitate the Mormons – debt-free buildings – it will be in bondage to bankers. A church-planting system that places the Church of Jesus Christ in bondage to bankers is not going to be blessed by God. Nobody in positions of church authority believes this, of course. They also wonder why God refuses to bless the American church.

Planting a New Congregation: The Franchise Moment

If a pastor is also the manager or owner of an independent

pre-school or day care, he can make money by establishing another branch of the school. He has an incentive to seek out a young would-be pastor and his wife to run the branch school. Then he encourages this young would-be pastor to start a congregation.

It is at this point that Church A has its moment of truth. Will Pastor A ask 50 members of his 150-member congregation to move under the authority of Pastor B at a new congregation? A man seeking the bishop's office has an ecclesiastical incentive to do this. In a denomination without bishops, there is no personal church-related incentive to do this. But there may be an economic incentive: income from the new day care branch.

This is the moment of truth because it is **the franchise moment**. The owner of a McDonald's franchise is allowed and encouraged to start another McDonald's locally. He has an economic incentive to do this. He will own the competing franchise. But what about a local pastor? What is his personal incentive to reduce the size of his congregation in order to build up a new one? Almost none.

Baptists have a solution to this dilemma: church splits. The church split could be called the Baptist church growth strategy. Where there was only one large Baptist church with a whirlpool tub, there now will be two, although the new one may have a Jacuzzi. But church splits are rarely pain-free. What Protestantism has not yet devised is a repeatable, institutionally sanctioned, denominationally beneficial program of church planting. The independent church model works against church planting because pastoral performance is judged in terms of the size of the congregation.

How does a Protestant denomination create a systemic incentive for extensive church growth? So far, the only widely accepted model is the megachurch. This is a deeply flawed model. First, a megachurch is close to impossible to create. The more rigorous a denomination's theology, the less likely a megachurch. Second, a congregation of 5,000 members will not have the same influence locally as two dozen 200-member congregations that share the same theology, planted strategically throughout a city.

The questions then arise: Planted by whom? By whose authority? In terms of whose plan? This is the unsolved institutional problem for almost all conservative Protestants.

Conclusion

The church needs growth. How should it achieve this? By systematically re-adopting and applying the church's original organizational concept: the franchise system.

A congregation needs two things to begin: an operations manual and a good location. A Christian pre-school operation can pay for the location. But the operations manual is still missing, almost two millennia after Christ. There is no existing, non-bishop-based church operations manual that establishes both economic and psychological incentives for an ambitious pastor to content himself with a congregation of 200 adults when his talents allow him to serve 500 or 5,000. The small local franchise becomes a great local conglomerate – for a time. But eventually the ecclesiastical equivalent of a buy-out occurs: selling off the assets. Until there is a widely tested, widely imitated solution to the ambitious pastor's motivation problem, church growth will remain hampered.

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