

A traveler's guide to church growth

An exploration of four contemporary models

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Study leave report

June 2016

Preamble

My wife Catherine and I had the privilege of spending seven weeks in May and June 2016 travelling through the US and UK visiting a range of churches as well as reconnecting with my wife’s relatives. This was made possible by the generous provisions of study leave and the gracious release of Hope Presbyterian Church, Christchurch, as well as the Best Travel Fund. We are grateful to the many new friends and relatives we hardly knew who hosted us in our travels and enabled me to contemplate the issues raised in this report.

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Introduction

In 1995 I, my wife and baby daughter arrived at Hornby Presbyterian Church in Christchurch, New Zealand, which we gladly made our spiritual home. At the time there was one pastor, a part-time administrator, part-time youth pastor and part-time children's pastor. Attendance was between 180 and 200. Since then this church has grown into Hope Presbyterian, a large multi-congregation church of around 800 people with a large staff team, serving the southwest of Christchurch and the Selwyn District. It has been a wonderful privilege to be part of a church that has experienced consistent growth over the years and I have come to expect that healthy churches grow. In my study leave I deliberately chose to look at dynamic growing churches overseas to see what we can learn and apply to our own circumstances in Christchurch as well as what might be applicable further afield in the PCANZ family.

I came to my study leave with a number of questions around issues drawn from our Hope context: How do other multi-site churches operate compared to us? What role does church planting play in growth and how do we make this sustainable? Are we a missional church or attractional one?¹ What other models of church are out there? This report will seek to answer some of the questions on my heart using case studies from churches visited in America and England as well as some key reading around the topic.

I will also compare various models of church growth² I have read about and draw conclusions about what might be the most suitable approach for our context at Hope Presbyterian. The context for other readers will of course be different, but I hope there will be some value in this comparison even if my conclusions differ from yours.

My thinking has been informed in almost diametrically opposite directions by the reading I have done. Firstly, *Breakout*³ tells the story of St Andrew's, Chorleywood, a church which radically remodelled itself to form mission shaped communities of 50 people who share a common passion for a target group. This was done in an attempt to change the direction of thinking from an *attractional* come to us model to a *missional* go to them one. Then there were the successful multi-site churches in *A Multi-site Road Trip*,⁴ which I later witnessed in action at Holy Trinity Brompton. In contrast/addition there is the 'church planting' strategy to grow the kingdom of God and proclaim the gospel. Prior to my study leave I had attended a conference in Christchurch called Multiply,⁵ a movement which seeks to encourage church planting by churches throughout New Zealand and promotes the biblical foundations of this approach. Another example of this is Tim Keller's *Church Planter Manual*,⁶ which gives a very detailed and specific plan for church planting in New York City. For additional theological input and balance I read Donald G. Bloesch's *The Church*,⁷ which takes a conservative Evangelical perspective.

¹ Michael Frost, Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books) 2003

² I use the term 'church growth' to denote broadly what I understand a healthy church looks like: numerical, spiritual, discipleship, outreach and mission growth.

³ Mark Stribe, Andrew Williams, *Breakout* (Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Media) 2010

⁴ Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligow, Warren Bird, *A Multi-Site Road Trip* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan) 2009

⁵ <http://www.multiply.co.nz/>

⁶ Timothy Keller, *Church Planter Manual* (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church) 2002.

⁷ Donald G Bloesch, *The Church* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic) 2002.

While these models and approaches to church growth differ significantly, the common denominator is the belief that the church exists to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and to call sinners to repentance and a new life in him. Where this belief is strong throughout a church it seems the strategy is almost irrelevant because the gospel is “the power of God unto salvation” (Romans 1:16).

Churches visited

- Tideland Presbyterian, Stanwood, Washington, USA (mission communities)
- Camano Chapel, Camano Island, Washington, USA (large-programme church)
- Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), Onslow Square, Kensington, London (multi-site)
- St Saviours, Guildford, Surrey, UK (standalone but modelled after HTB)
- Hillsong Guildford, Surrey, UK (multi-site)
- Oxford Community Church, Oxford, UK (church planting)
- Gateway Church, Ashford, Kent, UK (church planting)

Multi-site churches

Multi-site churches are described by Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon and Warren Bird as the new normal in growing, dynamic churches. Their book *Multi-site Road Trip* gives case studies of many such churches across America and explores a variety of approaches to multi-site ministry. Basically, a multi-site church has one leadership structure that ensures ministry and mission is resourced over a number of locations. It will typically be led by a strong and charismatic senior pastor who will set the general direction of the church assisted by an eldership, board and/or staff team. It differs to church planting movements in that the campuses/sites are not set up to become independent churches operating under their own governance but will remain under the authority of the sending church and will contribute to the life of the whole church, wherever it meets. It's worth noting that in the examples given by Surratt and colleagues the campus sizes can be quite large, so it is not a case of a strong church taking weaker churches under its wing but strong churches being strong in various locations.

Approaches to worship vary but typically these are contemporary-styled services with emphasis placed on quality music, preaching and Sunday programmes. The Sunday event is very important to these churches and resources of time, money and people power are invested heavily to ensure a quality experience is offered. Preaching is often delivered via video by the senior pastor or leaders with gifts in this area. This ensures consistency of teaching and vision and helps to keep the unity of the sites. I experienced preaching by video once, at Holy Trinity Brompton, Onslow Square, although this is not frequently their normal practice.

One thing that struck me from my reading and visits was that each site felt like a church in its own right and yet they were clearly part of a bigger entity. There was no sense that we were at a 'lesser' congregation or were missing out on the main event going on somewhere else at the 'mother ship'. I believe this was due to the resourcing given to each site. For example, at Holy Trinity Onslow the music team was drawn from members of the other Holy Trinity churches. This meant there was consistent quality of musicians across their sites as they ensured each location was well resourced. This avoids the discrepancy that can exist between sites where stronger gifts may be in one place and not another, which can give the impression some sites are prioritised over others.

Another noticeable factor, and one that touches on a common frustration we have at Hope, is the way announcements were handled. In both Holy Trinity and Hillsong there were video notices that were brief and to the point. These focused on a few items of interest to the whole church, regardless of what site you were at. For example at Onslow there were just two notices given: a local one about a picnic lunch happening that day at a nearby park and one about a church-wide gathering (camp) called Focus (which attracted 7000 attendees last year!). There was an intentional move away from cluttering the worship service with notices and this was consistently observed at all the churches we visited.

Holy Trinity Brompton⁸ employ service leaders, rather than site pastors, who ensure the smooth running of the service and the consistency of vision and values of the church. Each site has an unofficial vicar who doesn't always have a role on Sunday but is usually in attendance. This provides some consistency of pastoral oversight without it becoming 'their show'. The preaching team is shared around the sites much like the music team is. This means each congregation hears from a variety of preachers regularly and avoids any 'celebrity preacher' status at one site.

This is an area worth considering at Hope to develop a greater sense of oneness. Currently, each site has its own preaching pastor with the senior pastor preaching mostly at Hornby and occasionally at the extension sites. Very rarely do the extension pastors preach at Hornby, which has the effect of enforcing a hierarchical view of the church sites.⁹ This would be a relatively easy change to make; however, there is a trade-off and that is a potential loss of pastoral connection between the preacher and the people who may have a different preacher each week. This is addressed in churches we visited by having site pastors who take care of the pastoral and organisational needs locally, leaving the preachers to concentrate on the ministry of the Word and Sacrament. It is also worth noting that the congregation at Onslow numbered around 200, which is a level where one wouldn't expect to have a personal relationship with the pastor.

In our Hope context our sites range in size from 400, 100, 80 to 20 so there are differing dynamics at play influenced by congregation size.¹⁰ The smaller congregations could feel they have lost connection with 'their' pastor if he/she rotated around the other congregations. They may also feel devalued if they believe they don't have 'their own' pastor, so some work on changing the culture would be needed. Positively, this could help offset a parochial bias and the tendency to focus on 'our' patch.¹¹

Another aspect that impressed me from Onslow was the way the prayer ministry after the sermon was handled. This was led by the service leader and a team of lay people who were very skilled at praying for people and discerning what the Holy Spirit was saying. They were clearly well trained in this form of ministry. HTB encourages people to belong to small groups of around 30. The size of these groups is significant; 30 is like a mini-church and so provides a wonderful training ground for worship leaders, preachers, pastors etc. All public ministry gifts can be identified and developed in these small groups safely and effectively.

⁸ HTB is the umbrella name for the whole church, which includes four locations in Kensington plus many affiliated churches.

⁹ Hornby is sometimes referred to as the 'mother ship', 'main site' or 'hub', all of which are unhelpful terms promoting this hierarchy. This language was absent in the multi-sites I studied.

¹⁰ Tim Keller gives a good explanation of these dynamics in *Managing Church Growth*.

¹¹ This tendency is found in leaders, clergy and rank and file members.

Another multi-site church I visited was Hillsong, Guildford, located southwest of London off the M25. This church (or campus as they call it) was established in 2005 and has around 2500 members today over three services. There are two other London campuses that are closely related, plus campuses in Kent, Oxford and Newcastle.¹² We attended the recently started mid-afternoon service with about 400 others in the G Live theatre. It was loud, energetic and rock concert like. In terms of an attractional model of church this was the pinnacle, attracting a largely young crowd. The music, lights and staging was to a very high standard and probably beyond the reach of most of our churches.

I was very impressed with the level of organisation this all took. All of the lighting and sound gear is brought in by a semi-trailer from London and set up by volunteers, as is all the hardware needed for crèche, the children's programmes and everything else.

This is a highly centralised multi-site church with the pastor and his wife serving various other roles in the network and core administrative and leadership functions happening from the London base. Guildford has a site pastor who handles pastoral care and mid-week ministries, but the entire operation is largely volunteer-led. I was tempted to think this church was all about what happens on Sunday but I was impressed by the list of ministries that happen outside of this, especially serving many who are unlikely to become members, such as prisoners, Syrian refugees in Calais, homeless people etc. While there is very little that we in the typical Presbyterian Church can relate to in Hillsong, it does prove that given the right leadership and structures a church can become large and significant without an army of employed staff.

Why do some churches go multi-site? In the cases examined in *Multi-site Road Trip* the answer is mostly to create more space for people. Many were growing beyond their building's capacity and rather than 'build bigger barns' they opt for more affordable barns of similar size. In some cases these sites are located in rented facilities (school halls, cinemas etc.) and either through technology such as live streaming video cast or through rotated preachers or staggered service times ministry is multiplied to reach new areas for Christ.¹³ John Piper, who pastors a multi-site church in Minneapolis, cites two main motivations for going multi-site: stewardship and evangelism. It is more cost-effective to multiply into other locations than to build bigger and grander facilities to which everyone comes, and therefore better stewardship of resources. It is evangelistically more effective to have a worshipping community in the area you want to reach.¹⁴

The case of HTB Onslow is interesting because this was a church which was healthy and strong with 500 members, which could stand on its own feet. St Paul's Onslow Square was derelict and the building was closed in the 1980s until the early 1990s when HTB, under the leadership of Rev. Sandy Millar and with the blessing of the Bishop of London, planted a new congregation there. This was set up to have full autonomy in a traditional church plant model and grew to about 500 people by 1998. It enjoyed a close relationship with HTB and came under their governance structure. When it was realised there was considerable duplication of functions around administration, finance, and

¹² I am unsure of the working relationship of these further-away campuses with the London ones.

¹³ This is not dissimilar to a rural circuit preacher familiar to many in the New Zealand church scene. The most significant difference is that the focus of the sites is mission (not maintenance of a service with historical roots in the community) and the development of a common church identity (rather than stand-alone churches who share a preacher). The differences are subtle but significant.

¹⁴ Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon and Warren Bird, *Multi-Site Road Trip* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009). P. 201

property and ministry delivery, a bold decision was taken to bring the church fully back under the control of HTB and to plant three new locations from the congregation of St Pauls. This was aided by the necessary closure of the building for refurbishment.

What I find interesting about this story is the way it challenges my thinking as well as many around me who have expressed the same thing. Namely, that we at Hope Rolleston will grow to a size that is viable in terms of being able to resource our ministry without outside help and so can become independent. Perhaps this is the Kiwi dream, to have autonomy from the colonial power, to stand on our own and make our own decisions. This is when a new church plant knows it has been successful! But St Paul's Onslow Square had all of this and still discovered they were better off surrendering their autonomy for the greater advancement of the gospel. No doubt this took some courageous leadership and wouldn't have been without some collateral damage. But the outcome was three more thriving churches reaching their communities.

Church planting movements

Hope Presbyterian Church planted a new congregation in the growing town of Rolleston, which is to the southwest of Hornby within commuting distance to the city of Christchurch, in 2010. As far as I am aware this was the first time Hope Presbyterian had planted a greenfield church from scratch and I had the privilege of being the planting pastor.¹⁵ This congregation has grown from around 20 people to about 130 over the past five years and supports significant youth work and community ministries as well as a lively Sunday programme for children and contemporary worship. This experience has led me to explore the role church planting has in growing the church and spreading the gospel of Christ.

A church plant differs to a multi-site congregation primarily in that these churches are established with the goal of becoming an independent church under their own governance and to be self-sustaining and regenerating (i.e. planting other churches themselves). It is here where multi-site congregations and church plants cross over. Many similarities exist between planting a new church and adding an extension congregation or campus. Many of the same leadership skills are needed. The difference is that a church plant generally starts smaller with a leader and small team commissioned to do the work of ministry – preaching, teaching, evangelism, pastoral care etc. – while an extension congregation will be much more reliant and aligned to the resources and vision of the sending church. In the case of Hope Rolleston, the distinction between church plant and multi-site congregation is less clear.

In answering the question, Why plant churches? Tim Keller puts it very strongly:

The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for 1) the numerical growth of the Body of Christ in any city and 2) the continual corporate renewal and revival of the existing churches in a city. Nothing else – not crusades, outreach programmes, para-church ministries, growing mega churches, congregational consulting, nor church renewal processes – will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting.¹⁶

¹⁵ For a detailed history of Hope Presbyterian see Michael Reid, *Thus Far*. (Christchurch: Verve, 2008). This includes an account of the Hei Hei church, which closed around 2000.

¹⁶ Tim Keller, *Church Planter Manual*, (New York: Redeemer Church Planting Centre) 2002, p. 29.

Keller also puts the case biblically that our primary calling is to plant churches. From the Great Commission comes the command to make disciples and baptise. These actions mean the incorporation of respondents into a worshipping community with accountability and boundaries (e.g. Acts 2:41–47).¹⁷ The Apostle Paul, arguably the greatest missionary ever, had a simple strategy of going to the largest city in a region and planting a church there. Once a church was established and leaders were installed, he moved on to the next place.

New church plants have some advantages over existing churches in reaching people. For example, new congregations tend to be younger congregations because the traditions of older congregations suit people who have been there longer whereas new congregations are focused on what will work for a new group of people. Likewise, new residents are incorporated more easily into a new church because they will find a place to serve and belong, whereas in an older congregation this integration can be more difficult as ministry and leadership roles are already filled by long-term incumbents, and are geared to serve the needs of an existing congregation.¹⁸

This was borne out by our experience at Rolleston. Prior to the church starting, discussions were had with the local Cooperating venture (which included a Presbyterian component) that had had a worshipping community in the town for the previous 40 years. In spite of significant new growth in the town (especially among young families seeking better quality housing at an affordable price) this church had static membership growth. They simply weren't set up to accommodate new people and were adamant about not changing the way they operated. We were hopeful that we might have been able to work collaboratively with them, but the style of worship and missional approach we were taking proved to be incompatible.

During my study leave we had the joy of staying with Steve and Lorraine Thomas in Oxford. Twenty years ago Steve planted Oxford Community Church, which went on to plant a further 14 churches in the area. He is semi-retired and now leads Salt and Light, an umbrella organisation which supports church planting around the world.¹⁹ Oxford Community Church, the flagship church, reached 450 members under his leadership and a thriving Christian school was developed as well. Their church planting efforts have continued, with the latest being a young couple released to plant in Leeds.

There were three main questions in my mind I wanted to ask Steve, which are key considerations for any church seeking to reproduce itself in a new location:

- What guides the timing and location of a church plant?
- What level of support is in place for a new plant?
- What has been learned about sustaining a new plant beyond start-up?

He answered the first question with another question: Is there a landing strip? Is there any interest in a particular area that indicates the movement of God? Have there been any prophetic indicators to confirm the vision for a new plant? In most cases when a successful church plant occurs there is interest among leaders or key resource people to see it happen. This creates a landing strip. Once a key leader or leaders who carry the DNA of the sending church are identified, training is given and a specific strategy is worked out. A key to identifying the right leaders is whether they are people who

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 30

¹⁹ <http://www.saltlight.org/uk/>

can gather others around this vision and whether they are mission minded. They need to be entrepreneurial self-starters.

This very much accords with the Rolleston story. The landing strip was the weekly children's church run by Brent and Heather Agnew. This was a spinoff from their twice-yearly holiday programme and was attracting a core group of 20 children plus some parents who were congregating around the fringes of this. Similarly around the same time the door opened to do presence-based youth work in the local primary school.²⁰ And thirdly, I had been praying about my future as my training for ordination was drawing to an end in 2009 and Rolleston was very much on my mind. There was also a clear and obvious need for a biblically confident, contemporary and vibrant church in this growing town as it was very under churched. The work of Rev. Michael Schwass should be acknowledged in the significant role he played in securing financial support and the initial drawing together of a core leadership team.²¹

No church plant can thrive without significant support. In the Salt and Light network new plants are encouraged to stand on their own feet and are not generally supported financially from the sending church. Because of this it is critical that a leader can be found who will inspire people to join in the mission and who has the capacity to be bi-vocational, at least until the church can support the leader. Non-financial support comes in the form of annual appraisals and ongoing coaching for the church planters, who remain in a tight network of other church planters.

It is at this point that the Rolleston story diverges. We were beneficiaries of a grant from Press Go, a mission fund of the PCANZ, which enabled us to begin the church with a full-time stipend as well as to purchase significant equipment and rent our facilities.²² This certainly alleviated any concerns about finances but it could also have made the church complacent in its mission to reach the community; survival and viability have a way of focusing the mind on what's really important! I have often wondered if our growth rate would have been higher if we had had some financial pressure spurring us on.

The sustainability of a church plant is a critical issue. It would be pointless to plant churches in a flurry of enthusiasm only to have them fall over a short time later. Salt and Light recognises the importance early on in a church plant of the Biblical ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher from Ephesians 4. These ministries are unlikely to be present all the time in a fledgling church but through the wider network are and can be a great encouragement to the new church.

Alongside this, new churches grow and are sustained much the same as established ones: through good pastoral support, discipleship, teaching and providing meaningful opportunities to live out the faith. Salt and Light churches empower and release lay people to be pastors to the flock with the aim that every member would be in a pastoral relationship with someone who cares for and shepherds them in discipleship. This is not seen as the sole domain of the ordained pastor.

²⁰ Two 24/7 youth workers we placed in Rolleston Primary school supporting Year 7 and 8 children. From this work a Friday night youth group was formed, which has continued to this day. Funding for this came through the Youth South West Trust, a ministry of Hope Presbyterian.

²¹ Michael served on the pastoral team at Hornby Presbyterian Community Church as it was then called.

²² \$260,000 over 5 years was given. At the time of writing this grant is exhausted and the church is about 70% self-sufficient; the balance subsidised by Hope. The true costs include full-time youth worker and part-time children's worker plus a contribution to the administration costs and global mission support.

Church planting is a challenging strategy not least because it requires great sacrifice on the part of the sending church who will be required to support the work financially and with people resources. Church planters are usually apostolic types who are passionate, motivated, gifted and able to draw people together around a common vision. Just the types you want in your church! However, there are many benefits to the sending church as well as the Kingdom of God in planting churches and I have included an excerpt on this from a paper from Steve Thomas in Appendix 1.

Missional communities

From my reading and observation, missional communities seem to be a halfway house between church planting and multi-site expressions of church. The most striking example comes from the St Andrew's Chorleywood story mentioned in the introduction.

St Andrew's Chorleywood, an Anglican Church northwest of London, provides a stunning example of an alternative model of church growth through a radical approach of creating mission shaped communities (MSCs), rather than concentrating on the weekly Sunday gathered event. In 2010 this church was made up of 440 who met regularly on Sundays to resource 32 MSCs comprising 1135 men, women and children who serve the un-churched communities they are called to reach. These groups come together every fourth Sunday to celebrate what the Lord is doing in and through them.

The premise this model is based on is that the church is more often like a cruise ship; it feeds, shelters and entertains the passengers on their way to their destination. But what if the church was more like a lifeboat station – rescuing people perishing on the seas of life? This picture spurred radical and bold change in this church. MSCs are restricted to 50 people; if they get bigger than this they need to divide and find another mission. This prevents the missional communities becoming their own little churches and straying from the lifeboat vision. A danger in this model is rogue leaders who seek to do their own thing. This is a high trust / high accountability model by necessity.

MSCs have the following characteristics:

- Has its own distinct vision for mission, e.g. age group, neighbourhood, network or some other specific area of common interest
- Has a name – key to building identity and belonging
- Is a community of up to 50 adults who regularly meet together
- Is led by members of the church family, preferably with a leadership team
- Seeks to identify emerging leaders
- Is committed to forming new small groups from within its membership that shares its distinct vision for mission
- Has a heart to see the MSC multiply – so that when it reaches 60 adults it multiplies to create another MSC from within its membership
- Is accountable to the sending church and its ordained leadership
- Remains part of the gathered church
- Is lightweight/inexpensive/not bound by building or maintenance.

One of the first MSCs was Open Door, which had a heart to reach a community outside Watford. They found a community hall next to an allotment and began meeting for worship and engaging with

the people tending their plots. This MSC grew and has become three MSCs focusing on the Sunday morning allotment crowd.

In our Hope context the work Courtney Forrest has done with his leadership team is akin to an MSC. It is focused on the youth of Rolleston, meets regularly for prayer and encouragement, and draws new leaders into this vision. The difference may be that because we have a strong Sunday focus, most of these young leaders pull double or triple duties aside from youth ministry. Similarly Messy church is akin to an MSC (albeit staff led and dependent). It has drawn members of the church together for this fresh expression of church and outreach.

A helpful image was provided by a Naval metaphor (ch 6). St Andrews Chorleywood started as a battleship with three escorts. The escorts were the churches it had planted and which followed closely the battleship (mother church). The pastor's role in this was captain of the battleship and the escorts support the battleship. Under the MSC model this changes into one of a task force. The battleship becomes a flagship resourcing many task units who are given a 'licence to hunt'. The task unit's role was to patrol parts of the ocean they were called to cover. In this scenario the admiral of the flagship employs what is known as 'command by exception': 'I will not interfere with what you are doing except under two circumstances. One, you invite me to. Two, I see you going off course'.

Some useful points of difference between conventional church plants and the MSC model are listed below:

Church plants	Mission Shaped Communities
Planted and invested in a particular community	Highly mobile
Often led by paid staff or bi-vocational leaders	Volunteer led
Seek to become financially independent	Low cost with tithes going to the sending church
New converts are baptised by the church plant	Baptisms are conducted by the sending church only
No limit on numerical growth	Limited to 50 adults
The church plant is often an end in itself	Called to reproduce into new MSCs
Meet every Sunday	Don't always meet on Sundays (unless this is the day they do their mission). Gather monthly with other MSCs and sending church
Develops its own preaching/teaching plan	Follow the teaching provided by sending church
Uses conventional preaching/teaching methods	Encouraged to use innovative approaches to Bible teaching in context
Primarily resourced by the emerging congregation	Resourced by the sending church

The *Breakout* story was personally very inspiring and useful in thinking about how the people of God can be mobilised for mission in their communities. There is safety in numbers and doing mission in a

community can be very empowering. However through perusing their website it would appear St Andrew's has retreated from this strategy and has reverted to a more conventional focus on the Sunday worship event.²³ So a critical factor of this model may be its sustainability. It relies on continued leadership in this direction to counter the forces that steer the church to its default setting of 'cruise ship' rather than 'lifeboat'.

Tidelands Presbyterian Church on Camano Island, Washington, a new church plant initiated by the presbytery, was also developing a similar strategy. I met with their pastor who spoke of their work among disadvantaged school children and he also emphasised the prioritising of community mission over the Sunday event, which they deliberately kept simple and resource light.

Mergers

Finally a fourth model that is very relevant to the Presbyterian scene and one that is becoming increasingly common is that of church mergers. This is where churches dissolve their parishes to form one parish, often under a new name. In some cases these mergers retain worshipping congregations in their original neighbourhoods and have the appearance and some characteristics of multi-site churches. While my study leave didn't specifically focus on mergers, some reading and our Hope experience of bringing West Melton/Halkett into our fold has given me some first-hand experience of a successful merger.

In 2008 the semi-rural parish of West Melton/Halkett took a bold step in approaching the much larger urban Hornby Presbyterian church to explore the possibility of a merger. This church worshipped on alternate Sundays in two locations and had connections with Kirwee, further west. There were about 20 regular members attending faithfully. The Kirwee branch opted to stay out of the merger and went solo while West Melton/Halkett surrendered their autonomy (and money) to Hornby, becoming a part of the parish in July of that year.²⁴

The effect of this merger was a dramatic change in the culture, values and outlook of this church. Almost immediately four families who lived in the area but worshipped in Hornby joined the church with a view to helping it reconnect with its community (which was growing through new housing developments). The vision and leadership expertise from Hornby enable new ministries to flourish such as the Alpha marriage course and Mainly Music.²⁵ Regular and consistent ministry was also provided through the provision of a Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership intern for a period of two years.²⁶ This church continues to attract new people to it and is about to embark on a building programme to provide more space.

Stories abound across the PCANZ family of churches merging together with mixed outcomes. Sometimes these mergers happen for survival: two or more struggling congregations come together and become one larger, but still struggling, church. A very helpful resource for any church

²³ <http://www.st-andrews.org.uk/>

²⁴ Kirwee was closed by the Presbytery in 2014.

²⁵ A preschool music programme was in place that was originally started by members of the church who had surrendered it to the local branch of Plunket, a secular organisation. This was brought back into the fold under the Christian Mainly Music banner.

²⁶ This is the training programme for ordination in the PCANZ.

contemplating a merger is Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird's *Better Together*.²⁷ The authors provide good advice on the motivation and possible pitfalls of mergers, as well as some specific advice around financial systems applicable to the US.

Conclusion

In these times of shrinking congregations and the loss of Christian influence in society many churches are searching for new ways to be missional and engaged in reaching their non-Christian communities. We long to see people come to faith in Jesus and be disciplined to become all they are called to be. As long as I can remember this concern has never been far from the minds of pastors and church leaders. This has led to a plethora of strategies and innovations, a small sample of which have been explored in this report.

Donald Bloesch heralds a call for the church to return to be a *confessing* church, by which he means:

...the valiant effort to confess the faith once delivered to the saints in the language of our times but in contradistinction to the spirit of the times, an effort born of the realization that the Word of God stands in judgement over all ideologies as well as all attempts by the church to insure its own survival or to gain respectability in the eyes of culture.²⁸

Perhaps it is not as complicated as we think. When churches remain faithful to the core purpose of proclaiming Christ and living in fidelity to this call God will lead them and bless them. The church of Ephesus was chided by the Lord for being busy with good works but forgetting their first love which was their relationship with Jesus (Revelations 2:1-7). When all is said and done, we are called to be faithful, not successful.

One thing that is becoming clearer for me as I look at models of multi-site churches and church planting movements is that I may have been labouring under an identity crisis (I may not be the only one but I'll own it). What I mean is that Hope is many things: a church planting church (Rolleston), a renewal church (West Melton), a multi-site church (all the various congregations), a fresh expressions church (Messy) and a programme church (too many to mention). I'm not sure there's a model that fits a church like ours! And maybe looking for a model that does fit is not the best approach. The examples explored in this report can be useful to us but we mustn't simply import the strategies of others without doing the spiritual work of discerning God's unique path for us. This frees us from the tyranny of trying to apply every new trend and the latest gimmicks from abroad.

Ultimately we must be motivated by a desire to see God glorified and the Word of Life proclaimed to a world stumbling around in spiritual darkness, not by a struggle for survival or a grand scheme to extend our ego-driven empire.

"Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain" (Psalm 127:1)

May God bless us in the task of leading his Church.

²⁷ Jim Tomberlin, Warren Bird, *Better Together*. (NY:John Wiley and Sons Inc.) 2012.

²⁸ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church*, p. 274.

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Appendix 1 – Why do we engage in Church planting? by Steve Thomas

Reason 1: To extend God's family

This first, most important point is made superbly by Terry Virgo¹:

“Church planting, it has been observed, is the most effective form of evangelism. Some statisticians have done the sums and worked out that you get more individuals saved through church planting than from any other form of evangelism. Sadly, however, by simply adding up numbers they are in danger of missing the point. Church planting is not simply a matter of getting a number of individuals saved; it is about the advance of God's community in the earth. Historically, our attitude to evangelism has tended to start with the individual. Once saved, he or she has been free to pursue the secondary matter of finding the church of their choice if they so desire. I believe that we should evaluate church planting from a completely different perspective. God has always been interested in having a people, a family.

“This community then becomes the place where God is manifested on the earth. His people are His dwelling place where He can be found and encountered. There is no need to make a pilgrimage to a designated holy place. God's people are His holy dwelling. God is accessible on His planet among His people. So when we plant a church in a new location, we are establishing a temple where God can be encountered, where His presence is felt and experienced. Holy lifestyles lived out in holy communities.

“God wants a wonderful family growing throughout the world; a place where lives are changed; where His presence is felt and lost people can find a home. He does not only want to save lonely people and send them in search of a church where individualism still thrives, He wants to deliver them from their isolation by drawing them into His community. Counting numbers of heads (or bottoms on seats!) is not the only exercise that should preoccupy us. Is the community of the King growing? Is His kingdom being manifest? Has His mighty presence come to town? Is there a city set on a hill that cannot be hid?”

Reason 2: For evangelistic effectiveness

If the extension of God's family is the motive, then it will also be true that church planting is an effective evangelistic tool.

Peter Wagner² puts this argument, somewhat pragmatically, in this way:

“With few exceptions, new apostolic pastors agree that ‘the most effective evangelistic methodology is planting new churches.’

“Some say, ‘Why plant new churches instead of renewing old ones?’ Answer: both time and money can be better directed towards reaching the unchurched. There are few examples of how efforts to renew old churches have effectively increased evangelistic effectiveness.

“‘It is easier to have babies than raise the dead!’”

“Research shows that young churches grow quicker than old churches and that small churches grow faster than large churches. That is why multiplying new churches is such a dynamic growth principle.”

He puts it even more bluntly elsewhere³:

“I begin this book with a categorical statement that will seem bold and brash to some at first sight, even though it has been well substantiated by research over the past two or three decades: The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.”

Reason 3: There is a large harvest field

A third reason to plant churches is the size of the task. There is a very large harvest field facing us, the workers (as ever) are few, so we need lots more churches, touching different communities.

It has been said that people become a Christian, on average, after a process of seven meaningful and positive interactions and conversations with Christians. Evangelism ultimately is a one-to-one process – observe, for example, how Jesus treated people as individuals – and so we need enough churches in touch with enough people for meaningful relationships to be formed.

Reason 4: There is a diverse harvest field

Those who study church growth, mission and church planting acknowledge that ‘homogeneous growth’ – that is, focusing on those in particular ethnic or societal groups – is the most effective evangelistically.

There is quite some discussion about to what extent this is desirable – how, for example, does it concord with Paul’s teaching about church, where the divisions of society are broken down: “Neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female”?

However, we need to note that Paul (i.e. the same Paul) also says: “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings.”

Clearly, somehow, he expects us to keep a creative tension between ‘one body’ and ‘all things to all men’. There is room for different tactics for different groups of people.

The principle of homogeneity is probably essential evangelistically. Subsequently, the challenge for the church is how to break down the barriers between people groups in the regular fellowship life of the church.

Reason 5: For the benefit of the rest of the church

Churches (and people) stagnate. Any of us involved for long in local church, and especially in leadership, know that we need to keep stirring ourselves and our churches to be faith communities on a mission to see the Kingdom of God extended on the earth – rather than static, cosy, comfortable places for Christians to be supported, awaiting The End.

That would seem to be the lesson of the oft-quoted contrast between Acts 1:8 and 8:1. Acts 1:8 commissions the Jerusalem church to “go to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth”. In Acts 8:1, when it seems they have missed the point and are ‘stuck’, God sends persecution to get them moving again!

The provocation of church planting is one way in which the church can be constantly kept mobile, responsive and dynamic.

And, if church planters seek to develop non-competitive relationships with existing churches in that area, those churches too can be provoked to fresh gospel fervour! That’s human nature – we are all

provoked to do a better job when we see someone else doing well. In business, small aggressive start-ups often stir the established companies to find fresh dynamic and strategy.

Reason 6: To facilitate faith and creativity

God has created mankind, in his image, with an inbuilt creativity. The challenge of evangelism today requires that all of those creative energies are fully deployed!

Why not simply have creative and missional cells in large churches? Certainly, there are times when this is the right strategy, but cells can all too readily 'swerve to rot' (a phrase coined by Laurence Singlehurst, Cell UK⁴) and either become social clubs (albeit engaged with people around them) where there is no life of Jesus, or become cosy, pastoral and 'nice' – there is no multiplication dynamic, no impartation, no power to do anything.

There seems to be something about a church plant that draws out an adventurous, creative, pioneering spirit. What is it? Or, to put it another way, why is a cell often not like a church plant?

* Risk/adventure. The same cell of people, sent out with a mandate to plant a church, can have a much greater sense of adventure (and risk!). And risk often brings out the best in God's people, pressing them into faith in God.

* Investment. Church plants often have greater contact with apostolic and regional teams, so they receive a greater level of input and foundation laying.

* Innovation. God has invested mankind with a natural sense of creativity and innovation. This openness to the experimental and untried is often released more in church plants than in cells in an established church. That would seem to be the story of Acts 11 and the church in Antioch.

Reason 7: To raise up new leaders

Church planting provides a context for emerging leadership to learn and make mistakes that may often be missing in more established churches. Even with the best will in the world, it is harder to take a risk with younger leaders in a large, established church, than in a small church or plant.

Reason 8: To bring a distinctive contribution

There are many movements raised up by God during church history, people with a common vision and fresh passion, used by him to restore some truth of doctrine or practice to the rest of church.

The 'charismatic'/'restoration'/'new church' movement (i.e. us!) is one such movement, valuing:

- Relational and community life
- Spirit-led charismatic worship
- Being a prophetic people who respond to God the Holy Spirit as he leads us
- The restoration of 'Ephesians 4 ministries'
- Personal pastoral care and discipleship.

Held alongside fundamental evangelical truths, these values have already brought much change to the established church in the last 30 years. We are convinced that the combination of these values and the resultant atmosphere in our churches is still a unique contribution that 'New Churches' can bring to cities, towns and in our world today.