

Launching Church Strengthening Movements in Africa

Tim Cantrell

It has been called the “surprise story” of modern missions—the emergence of “Christian Africa.” Within the last century Christianity in Africa has seen the fastest numerical growth of any continent in Church history. The Baptist Union of Southern Africa (BUSA), located in South Africa, has enjoyed a taste of this rapid growth. But such expansion also brings unique challenges.

For Paul, ensuring that young churches were well established was key to the advance of the gospel and the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

One of these includes church planting movements, which, if not married to church strengthening movements, will not flourish in the long run. This article explores this need and these challenges and offers biblical solutions, using BUSA (my own denomination) as a case study. In order to compel the Church to launch church-strengthening movements in Africa that will exalt Christ

and bless the nations for generations to come, we, as the body of Christ, must look at three critical issues: our need, our responsibility and our strategy.

Our Need

The explosive spread of the gospel in Africa has been well documented. In 1900 there were eight million professing Christians; today there are approximately four hundred million

(sixty percent of sub-Saharan Africa)! However, African theologian Tite Tienou states, “Africa has the fastest growing Church in the world; it may also have the fastest declining Church! Numerical growth far outpaces spiritual depth and maturity in African Chris-



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tianity” (1998, 6). Tienou later wrote, “I consider the deepening and the nourishing of the faith of those who identify themselves as Christians in Africa to be of the utmost urgency” (2001, 162). B. J. Van der Walt also warns, “A fat, but powerless Christendom—that is the danger facing us when Christianity grows as rapidly as it is doing at present on the African continent” (1994, 109).

As BUSA faces many of these challenges, it can serve as a good example of the condition of many church movements in Africa. BUSA has seen both rapid growth and the need for depth. Those in BUSA are seeking to find solutions to strengthen their young churches so that they can also pave the way for other African denominations. For nearly seven years, in my work at Christ Seminary in Polokwane, South Africa, I have visited many young, newly-planted churches and have seen firsthand their dire needs for nurture. I have also spent hundreds

of hours in discussion with the leaders of these churches and have heard the challenges they face because their churches were not well established initially.

BUSA states that 413 new churches have been started since 1990; this has more than doubled the size of the denomination. Some leaders declare that a new BUSA church is planted every thirteen days. A recent ecumenical publication on mission in post-apartheid South Africa highlights the BUSA as an example of effective church planting (Kritzinger 2002, 58). In order to deserve such praise, the BUSA’s proof must not be in just the numbers but in the quality of the churches being planted. Since these new churches now represent over half of the BUSA, the health of these churches has serious bearing on the health and direction of the entire denomination.

Thankfully, the BUSA has acknowledged the lack of depth in many of its new churches and has begun nurturing them. Instead of focusing on planting new churches, the BUSA now emphasizes equipping existing churches. BUSA general secretary Angelo Scheepers has a theme of “Impact 2010,” which calls people to “reach and disciple,” to “plant and to nurture” churches. However, there is still great need for a developed strategy of church-strengthening.

My Research

It was because of these concerns in the BUSA and in my ministry in the Limpopo (Northern) Province that I embarked on doctoral research to see how we could improve the situation. I surveyed the leaders of about 250 of the churches planted since 1990; Eighty-three surveys were returned. I

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combined this with interviews of each of the seven BUSA territorial coordinators, along with many other key church planters. The following are some of the chief concerns that surfaced in this research:

- Over one-third of these churches are being pastored by “remote control,” meaning the pastor does not stay locally with their church, but either travels there on Sundays/weekends or only visits two Sundays or less per month.
- Less than half of the pastors believe that preaching verse-by-verse through God’s word is the best food for their flock. Over half say they

would rather choose what to preach along more subjective guidelines or just preach evangelistically.

- Less than one-third of these younger churches acknowledge any link with a mother church.
- Over half say their giving/tithing has shown no increase in the past two years (and what they are getting is tiny in most cases, rarely enough to live on).
- Only one-third of the pastors say they are sure the majority of congregants have a good understanding of the gospel.
- These churches have been in existence for an average of nine years; yet the average increase of adult membership over this time is only eleven new members per church. The churches started at an average size of twenty and are now averaging thirty-one members. This would suggest that these churches are averaging about

one new member each year (a five percent growth rate).

- The combined opinion of the area coordinators and other church planters and leaders is that only twenty to twenty-five percent of these churches have become mature, responsible churches. These same observers also estimate that just over half of these churches still do not have a capable pastor or leader who has received or is receiving adequate training (even if it is non-formal).
- Many of us who have spent much time in some of the younger BUSA church plants in the Limpopo Province have often noticed certain

patterns. First, tent evangelism draws more decisions for Christ rather than real, lasting disciples of Christ. It also tends to attract mostly women, youth and children. Second, there is weak or shallow teaching of the word. Third, there is a lack of good leadership, and a severe lack of men and of whole families. Fourth, there is a strong charismatic influence and reliance on emotion over truth. Finally, these churches are often crippled by a dependency mentality (waiting for outside funding) and a lack of real responsible ownership for the ministries and the mission of the church.

According to contemporary missiologist Jeff Reed, “One of the great indictments of colonial [and modern missions is its consistent failure to establish associations of independent, thriving and reproducing churches, tilled with real leaders, able to think theologically in their own culture” (1992, 138). One African proverb says, “You can never abandon your own horn child.” Yet I fear that too often we do this in our church planting.

Our Responsibility

Instead of focusing on the latest church growth methods and research, we must first rediscover the biblical keys to building mature churches. In the book of Acts and in Paul’s epistles, strengthening churches was central to all of Paul’s labors in missions and church planting. We find the Greek word *steridzo* (to “stabilize, establish strengthen”) used four times in Acts (14:21-23, 15:41, 16:5 and 18:23) and six times in Paul’s epistles (Rom. 1:11, 16:25; 1 Thess. 3:2, 13; and 2 Thess. 2:17; 3:3). For Paul, ensuring that young churches were well established

was key to the advance of the gospel and the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Reed writes:

One of Paul’s highest priorities was establishing the young churches he had founded, he would even leave wide-open doors for the gospel if one of his churches was in serious trouble (e.g., 2 Cor. 2:12-14, he left the open door to Troas because of his burden for Corinth)... For the gospel to progress with any stability, with any kind of depth, with any kind of foundation, these churches had to be flourishing and a base for the progress of the gospel (2001, 17)

For Paul, the activity of “preaching the gospel” equally included both the evangelistic campaigns and the nurturing of new converts in healthy churches. In Romans 15:19 Paul makes a stunning claim to have “fully preached the gospel” across a region of almost two thousand kilometers. The only reasonable explanation for this is that Paul is claiming that he had established strong churches in key city centers, churches that could now carry on the task and reach their own areas. Reed punctuates this point, emphasizing Paul’s plan to always establish “beachhead of Christians” who could impact their own community:

He knew that he had to stick with that plan, that the churches needed to be central. He also knew that if he kept going further and further out with the gospel and he did not have strong established churches, his whole base would be eroded. If his base was eroded, the gospel would not progress and ultimately he would have to take the gospel to them again. And, he would not have the additional help and

and reinforcement of the models that were needed. (1991, 9)

God makes it clear in his word that we must do his business in his way, leaving the results and the growth rates in his hands. Church planters must beware of the same deadly pragmatism that has infected the American church growth movement, with its market-driven mentality of doing whatever it takes to get results. Christ, our master builder, has shown us the importance of quality over quantity in the planting, building and growing of churches. First Corinthians 3:10, 12-15 reads,

But each person must be careful how he or she builds.. Now if any person builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each person's work. If anyone's work which he or she has built on it remains, he or she will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he or she will suffer loss.

Some Cautions

We must beware of a paternalistic or relativistic attitude that says, "Well, that weak little church is better than what they were before, or better than the other bad churches in that village." Or, "As long as a few are saved, it is all worth it." Or, "This is normal, you usually only get a few good churches out of the lot." Nowhere in scripture do we find an approach that says, "Plant many; get a few good ones."

We also must not be deceived into thinking that just because we do not see much damage, there has not been any.

A crack in a house's foundation usually does not surface for a while, but once it does, it can mean big trouble. There are indeed some long-term consequences if churches are not well-planted and strengthened. The following are six:

- If these churches are not well-planted, it can dishonor the name of Christ in the community through false conversions and unstable churches filled with sin, conflict and immaturity (see Col. 4 and Titus 2).

- By not developing good leaders, we leave the door wide open to false teaching to corrupt the church and lead many astray.

- Hasty evangelism can harden people to the gospel through either giving them false assurance based on walking down an aisle, or leaving them disillusioned by a false conversion.

- By not planting these churches firmly, we only create more work for the mother churches down the line when they have to go back and sort out the mess, resolve conflicts and unteach so much error.

- If these churches are not well-planted, we set a poor example for the daughter churches who will then turn and follow this model by planting their own (granddaughter) churches in a hasty, ineffective way. The cancer of mediocrity and instability (and often nominalism) spreads and worsens with each new generation.

- If we are not building quality churches, according to 1 Corinthians 3, one day Christ will test the quality (not quantity) of our work, and we will have to answer to him.

Let us not forget that the Golden Rule also applies to church planting (Matt. 7:12). In other words, plant the kind of

church for others that you would want planted for you! Who would want to hire an architect or builder who admits that out of his or her last fifty buildings, only five have collapsed within the first two years after they were built? Yet those kinds of statistics seem accepted among church planters. One wonders why this kind of hit-and-miss approach to church planting has become so acceptable today. Think of how affectionately and earnestly Paul labored for the maturity of each church he was involved with.

In the BUSA (and in all other denominations) we should say, "Since 1990 we have started four hundred churches/fellowships and we are still planting them until they can truly grow

Antioch (see Acts 11-14) for the region. When there is not a strong, or potentially strong mother church in an area that has weak church plants, every effort must be made (even if it means a few years of cross-cultural mission) to establish a strong indigenous church there as a hub. There is no substitute for strong churches.

Phase 2. Next, younger churches and "orphan" church plants must be matched with an Antioch kind of church in their area. These stronger churches can teach and model for the younger churches and their church planters the clear biblical pattern for church planting. In the book of Acts (Acts 11-14, 15-18) and in Paul's epistles, we find three can teach and model for the

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and flourish on their own!" The hour has come for launching a wholehearted effort at strengthening these young churches until they are well-led, mature, reproducing churches that exalt Christ.

Our Strategy

The key to developing this church-strengthening movement in any denomination is to equip churches and church planters in pursuing a more biblical pattern of church planting and in staying as long as it takes to get the job done. This could unfold in three phases.

Phase I. A logical place to start would be to identify and develop potential hub churches in each area, churches that can serve as a vibrant

younger church churches and their church planters the clear, biblical pattern for main stages of effective church planting (cf. Hesselgrave 2000):

1. Paul evangelized and gathered new converts.
2. Paul established them in the faith.
3. Paul entrusted leadership into the hands of qualified and capable local elders.

Phase 3. Churches and church planters must strive to thoroughly examine their current evangelism and church planting methods in light of scripture. We must resolve to keep growing in our understanding and application of a truly biblical evange-

lism, while establishing and entrusting the leadership. We must patiently and persistently ensure that God's design is being followed and modelled, first in the mother churches, and then in the branch churches. We must not be afraid to make radical changes where necessary.

For example, in evangelizing we must teach churches to evangelize more thoughtfully. Many of the churches have started off on the wrong foot and have laid a weak foundation by a kind of tent evangelism that mostly targets women, youth and children. Andrew Isaiaho, a lecturer at Christ Seminary, has laid out an alternative to this approach. God used Isaiaho to effectively plant a healthy church in a poor, semi-slum area outside of Nairobi, Kenya. It began in 1994 with a mid-week men's evangelistic Bible study for the first six months. Only after a core group of men were converted and were being disciplined were the men urged to invite their families to the Sunday services. Isaiaho has left behind him a strong church led by a mature group of five biblically qualified elders and a growing flock of over sixty members. While planting this church, Isaiaho was bivocational, carrying a full-time job during the day so that he could provide for his family and did **not** have to burden the young church plant.

Conclusion

Through my research and discussions with many BUSA churches and others in Africa, this vision keeps ringing in my ears: In order for the gospel to steadily advance through the BUSA (or anywhere in Africa), mother churches must take responsibility for strengthening younger

churches until they are well-led, mature, reproducing churches. Once churches and church planters are convinced of this God-given mandate, effective strategies will emerge and necessary changes will be made for the glory of God and the good of our churches!

Evangelism and church planting must never stop. Expansion and multiplication must never stop. However, *if* we want it to honor Christ and bring lasting results, it must be married to a church-strengthening movement. Church planting and church strengthening should be one flesh, What God has joined together, let no person separate.

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