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The Missional Approach of the Acts 29 Church Planting Movement

Marylyn Sohlberg

Missional churches, those that bring Jesus outside the walls of the church and into the unknown, unreached, and uncomfortable areas in the United States and the world, seem to have taken center stage in the realm of popular Christian discussion over the past few decades. However, roughly thirty percent of the globe remains untargeted by “missional churches.”¹ In his book “Planting Missional Churches,” Ed Stetzer highlights the need for missional churches in the U.S. in particular, citing a Gallup poll that observed eighty percent of American churches in decline.² In 2011, Gallup also estimated an average of forty-five percent of Americans who say religion is fairly or not very important in their lives.³ The vision to spread the Gospel to this large demographic of unbelievers, transform lives, and advance the kingdom for the glory of God has proven unshaken and more contagious than ever, as ordinary people everywhere are volunteering to plant new churches both domestically and internationally. The Acts 29 network is one of many up and coming entrepreneurial church planting movements that partners with and mobilizes new church leaders under this vision.

¹ Jonathan Dodson, “Why the Missional Church Isn't Enough,” Blog for Church Planters, by Church Planters, entry posted April 24, 2010, <http://www.acts29network.org/acts-29-blog/why-the-missional-church-isnt-enough> (accessed December 1, 2012).

² Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 13.

³ Frank Newport, “Christianity Remains Dominant Religion in the United States,” *Gallup* (December 23, 2011), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/151760/christianity-remains-dominant-religion-united-states.aspx> (accessed December 1, 2012).

Founded in 1998 by Mark Driscoll, the pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, the movement began as a small group of church planters that met together in order to encourage and keep one another accountable. The group gradually developed into a larger network of church planters who decided to provide spiritual mentorship, “boot camp” training sessions, resources, networking, and a community for future missional leaders. Acts 29 has been highly successful in the sheer breadth of their mission; in only fourteen years the movement has produced more than 400 church plants in the United States and twenty-eight internationally.⁴ The organization attributes this rapid growth to the power of the Holy Spirit and the organization’s high commitment to plant church-planting, or reproductive churches.

Acts 29 maintains a fairly decentralized structure that resembles a community rather than an oversight committee or denomination. Five board members along with thirteen regional leaders and an assessment director, all from various parts of the country, make up the leadership of Acts 29. Acts 29 is trans-denominational, empowering planters from Evangelical, Missional, and Reformed backgrounds, each with differing worship styles, target communities, budgets, and traditions. A key aspect of the mission is to unite Gospel-centered churches that have traditionally been divided against each other, all under a common Christian identity and with the goal of spreading the good news “to the ends of the earth.” Doctrine, however, is an issue that the board refuses to compromise on during the assessment process. This is the most controversial aspect of the Acts 29 movement; critiques are primarily voiced from the

⁴ “About,” Acts 29 Network, <http://www.acts29network.org/about/> (accessed November 10, 2012).

Southern Baptist camp regarding doctrinal issues such as female leadership and elder autonomy.

A major strength that is often attributed to the Acts 29 Network amongst Christian scholars is the high degree of cooperation and brotherhood that has been achieved between its churches. Acts 29 has been one of the most successful organizations to bridge the divide between Protestant denominations and between differing methodologies, or how leaders choose to “do” church. Acts 29 has reversed centuries of tension based on the notion that agreement on the primary matters (i.e. the centrality of the cross, a high view of scripture, and a commitment to communicating contextually without compromising core beliefs) is enough theological consensus to band God’s armies together for the mission of furthering his kingdom and his glory. Acts 29 is not directly affiliated, nor is it necessarily a reaction against any given denomination or certain way of doing things, but is determined to plant churches that come in different forms, anywhere from multi-site video preaching to missional community models to classical launches. In the words of Driscoll, “a church needs to be as formally organized as it is necessary to get on and stay on mission, and no more.”⁵

Not only has the network fostered healthy partnership and cooperation amongst a diversity of churches, it has laid healthy soil for discipling a diverse pool of church planters. The absence of a structural hierarchy or a denominational hegemony amongst the pool of mentors has allowed for open discussions on what is and isn’t working in the American church, essentially creating a safe space where iron can sharpen iron. President Matt Chandler was quoted in the Christian Post saying that “this kind of

⁵ Mark Driscoll and Gary Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Crossway Books, 2009), 145.

mutual edification... occurs when guys are doing things differently than you are, but with the same heart and beliefs that you have, ultimately creat[ing] an environment where maybe a lot of the vitriol you see online can die down as we see that we are on the same team."⁶

A second admirable strength of the movement is its adamant, gospel-based commitment to planting church-planting churches (e.g. those intending to replicate before the church is even launched). David Garrison in his study on church planting movements reports that rapid reproduction is evidenced in every thriving movement he has observed. "Rapid reproduction," he argues, "communicates the urgency and importance of coming to faith in Christ. When rapid reproduction is taking place, you can be assured that the churches are unencumbered by nonessential elements and the laity are fully empowered to participate in this work of God."⁷

Church reproduction that results from organic growth is not necessarily ensured or obligatory for Acts 29 church plants, but rather an indication of a healthy, Gospel-centered church and a planter who has been trained well. This commitment makes up the DNA of Acts 29 training and mentoring efforts; the concept is stressed again and again on the Acts 29 webpage and reiterated throughout articles, blogs, and other recommended publications. Pastor Chuck Ryor, a two-time planter disciplined through Acts 29 reports that his church in Pasadena tithes ten percent to Acts 29 and will incrementally increase its "missional" budget, that is money going to church planting,

⁶ Alex Murashko, "No 'Vision Shift' After Mark Driscoll Leaves Acts 29 Leadership," *Christian Post*, April 11, 2012. <http://www.christianpost.com/news/no-vision-shift-after-mark-driscoll-leaves-acts-29-leadership-73047/> (accessed November 30, 2012).

⁷ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* (Richmond: International Mission Board, 2004), 36.

with the intent of giving away fifty percent when the annual budget reaches \$1 million. Even though his church is still in its beginning stages, Ryor has high hopes for one of his young members to plant a daughter church in the near future.⁸ In its obedience to the Great Commission, Acts 29 believes that the most strategic response to God's call to urgently proclaim the gospel and advance his kingdom in the modern day context is to plant new churches. The model of building "pregnant" new churches is both a strategic and biblical way to maintain the mission that Acts 29 has taken ownership of.

A third strength of Acts 29 is that they try to plant indigenous churches, as opposed to importing theologically trained professionals into new and unfamiliar territory. The local church planters have the ability to assume the role of missionaries within their own culture, which, according to Garrison, has proven a highly successful tactic, common among every thriving church planting movement going on in the world.⁹ On a practical level, a local planter is already familiar with the needs and communication styles of that community, which may be more valuable than a seminary education. The model of indigenization is not only practical, it is also biblical because it reflects early methods that the apostles used to contextualize the Gospel and raise up local church leaders such as Timothy.¹⁰ Finally, indigenization is missional. Church planter Ed Stetzer points to some of the factors that led to the early Protestant church to be mission-minded but not missional, contributing to a large group of evangelicals who still "struggle with presenting the unchanging gospel in an ever-changing cultural

⁸ Chuck Ryor and Carolyn Ryor, "Prism Church and It's Acts 29 Affiliation." Personal interview. 2 Dec. 2012.

⁹ Garrison 34.

¹⁰ A prime example of Paul's use of contextualization is in Lystra in Acts 13.

setting.” He sums up the arguments of Anglican missionary and priest Roland Allen (1868-1947), saying that the church must form “mutual trust between missionaries and new converts as well as confidence in the Holy Spirit to guide both” as a reason to support indigenous church leadership, a principle Acts 29 fully advocates both internationally and domestically.¹¹

Another contributing factor in the formation of sustainable churches is funding. Acts 29 does not guarantee a planter any start-up funds but instead makes a pot of money available for churches who are desperate or need support to plant new churches, the purpose being to create independent churches who partner with, but aren’t dependent on the organization financially. Acts 29 also fosters economic partnerships between experienced pastors and new church planters so that churches can support each other.

Fourthly, Acts 29 has a notably refined assessment process that not only caters to the couples participating in the network, but also has proven effective in the long run, only sending out Spirit-filled planters who are truly prepared for an uphill battle in American culture. “The assessment process was thorough and heartfelt, giving me good council after a difficult season of ministry,” stated Pastor Chuck, who sought affiliation with a non-denominational church after just having finished up fifteen years as a Presbyterian youth pastor in Florida. “There was an emphasis on tests that measured how risk adverse you are, basically seeing if you actually have the stomach for doing this, or if it’s just a flash in the pan.” As Acts 29 Vice President Darrin Patrick puts it in his book “Church Planter,” “When an unqualified doctor performs surgery... people get

¹¹ Stetzer 30.

hurt and things fall apart. It is no different in the church: people usually end up getting hurt when they are under unqualified leaders, and everything from marriages to the church itself is likely to fall apart.”¹² Practical assessment of a planter’s calling, competence, and capability along with Paul’s lists of qualifications for elders are grounded in the organization’s rigorous personality and skills tests.

With a depth similar to their comprehensive assessment process, the vision cast in Acts 29 boot camps and training sessions imagines church plants committed to *holistic* mission. Through his extensive Old Testament exegesis and analysis of the contemporary church, theologian Christopher Wright argues that Jesus’ sacrifice must be seen in the light of the exodus narrative as a fulfillment of God’s promise to liberate slaves, forgive debts, and make disciples of all nations.¹³ Missional churches, in other words, need to reach beyond evangelism to participate in the economic, political, and social redemptive work “on earth as it is in heaven” because God has chosen to use his church, the adopted heirs of the Abrahamic covenant through the blood of Jesus, to carry out his will. Acts 29 exemplifies this sort of missional posture by captivating their planters with a big, Holy Spirit-dependent vision “with the goal of seeing millions of lives changed (not just saved) by the power of the Gospel.”¹⁴ Although from a distance Acts 29 seems merely attractional because of its stated objective to reach people through the

¹² Darrin Patrick, *Church Planter: The Man, the Message, the Mission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 44.

¹³ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: a Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2010), 109.

¹⁴ “Vision,” Acts 29 Network, <http://www.acts29network.org/vision/> (accessed November 10, 2012).

planting of churches and regeneration of dead churches¹⁵, it is not difficult to notice a strong emphasis on contextualization and social action throughout Acts 29 literature,¹⁶ a holistic approach to mission that was built into these plants from their conception. Prism church in Pasadena seeks to revive believers, but also to reach friends and renew culture.¹⁷ “If you aren’t missional, you have no business with A29,” said Pastor Chuck, explaining that a “communal” model- fostering missional communities in addition to the attractional Sunday worship service- is becoming the norm among the 422 or so churches. The Prism community groups have the task of engaging the neighborhoods and workplaces around them, and are committed to an annual plan of three days of community service, three days of prayer and fasting for unbelievers, and an overarching vision to pop the Christian bubble by inviting in their unbelieving friends to fellowship each week. Pastor Chuck’s wife Carolyn Ryor assured me that Prism, along with many other Acts 29 churches, wants to “turn (their) Christians into missionaries in LA... bringing Christ to life and making the gospel at the center of life rather than the church itself.”

But does the redemption of every facet of *human* society cover everything that God intended for his sons and daughters to be a part of? In his book “The Mission of God’s People,” Wright exposes a truly compelling biblical command and a reflection of God’s heart based off his conclusion that God’s mission for the church “spans the gap between the curse on the earth of Genesis 3 and the end of the curse in the new

¹⁵ On its website, Acts 29 states that its mission is to “bring people into church so that they can be trained to go out into their culture as effective missionaries.”

¹⁶ Acts 29 justifies their methods of contextualization with Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 9: 19-23 referring to his methods of addressing the Jews, Gentiles, and the “weak.”

¹⁷ This is Prism’s mission statement.

creation of Revelation 22.”¹⁸ Grounded in this theology is the undeniable fact that God cares about his creation, and that we are to be agents of redemption for the trees, animals, and oceans as well as for our fellow humans. In the beginning, Adam was put in the Garden of Eden “to work it and take care of it,”¹⁹ which, after some hermeneutical unpacking, we find means *serving* creation and keeping it safe. This is a fairly radical idea in the context of the twenty-first century and is completely neglected in Acts 29 theology and doctrine from an observer’s standpoint. This could result from the fact that the network derives its missional theology starting with the Great Commission.²⁰ It could also be a residual effect of a frequently verbalized critique that Acts 29 over-contextualizes the scriptures (in this case subverting the command to a consumerist and environmentally abusive culture) in order to grow the church.

Another weakness that can be argued of the church planting movement is its somewhat contradictory views on scriptural authority. If the *missio Dei* of Acts 29 is truly about engaging culture and contextualizing scripture for emerging generations, many see certain doctrinal statements like the prohibition of female pastors as counterproductive to its mission. Acts 29 training literature is saturated with male-specific language, always operating under an incontestable assumption that women should not hold leadership positions in the church. Acts 29 claims an interest in overcoming doctrinal differences between pastors, yet each planter must agree to the

¹⁸ Wright 46.

¹⁹ Genesis 2:15 (NIV).

²⁰ The Great Commission as most Christians understand it is a reference to Jesus’ command in Matthew 28: 16-20 to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

entire 1,356 word doctrinal statement before being approved by the board.²¹ For those who consider Paul's writings on women to fall in the same category as slavery or circumcision, the outright rejection against any female planter or elder is seen as culturally backwards. Strict doctrinal requirements not only exclude Spirit-led planters who disagree but are also inhibitive to the goal of reaching the unreached populations of the nation, the majority of whom completely disagree and are uncomfortable with this theology.

A third critique that perpetuating this accusation of unbiblical exclusivity is illustrated by a lack of diversity on the Acts 29 board. Of the twenty-five-person leadership roster, twenty-two are white males, one is African American, one is Asian, and there is only one woman. Though almost certainly unintentional, this turns off many potential planters and implies a strong evangelical undertow to the organization, antithetical to its trans-denominational claims.

To combat these weaknesses, I would first suggest greater ethnic diversity on the board. Acts 29 needs to promote multi-ethnic churches and prove that the gospel is a tool for overcoming racial as well as denominational divides within the church. In 2006, one out of every ten Americans was born in a different country²² and in 2011, minority babies outnumbered white newborns for the first time in history.²³ These statistics highlight the importance of diverse representatives to lead an emerging,

²¹ This was confirmed by Pastor Chuck of Prism church. He has known some Presbyterian applicants to be turned away do to their adherence to PCUSA doctrine on female ordainment.

²² Stetzer 19.

²³ Frank Bass, "Nonwhite U.S. Births Become the Majority for First Time," *Bloomberg* (May 17, 2012): <http://www.gallup.com/poll/151760/christianity-remains-dominant-religion-united-states.aspx> (accessed November 30, 2012).

melting pot generation if Acts 29 wants to unite and reach all people under Jesus. A second suggestion I would make would be to introduce the theology of creation care into the literature and doctrine of the movement because it is an integral part of God's holistic mission. Planter training sessions should include discussion around the redemption of the earth and provide opportunities for congregations to partner with organizations that serve creation.

Although I haven't reached a personal conclusion regarding female roles in church leadership, my research on the arguments backing up this strict interpretation of scripture has made me aware of a variety of important factors beyond just the biblical context for Paul's seemingly sexist remarks. My observations, interview and research opened my eyes to the challenges behind successful church planting movements. Acts 29 wants to cater to the preferences and needs of the emerging, increasingly consumerist generation on one hand, but become a church without walls on mission in the community on the other. The network seeks trans-denominational unity under a common desire to carry out the mission of God while simultaneously declaring controversial and denomination-specific beliefs non-negotiable. The multitude of dichotomies and need for balance in church planting movements seems to be a recurring theme throughout history. To me, this demonstrates the fallen state of our humanity and inability to do anything good apart from God. The churches planted through the Acts 29 network seemed primarily focused on Jesus Christ, the cross, the Gospel, and did not seem to shy away from the costly, missional purpose for which we were saved, reflecting an outlook on planting that is driven by prayer and the Holy Spirit rather than methodology. If I ever decide to get involved with a church plant, I will

remember Pastor Chuck's insight when reflecting on his successes and failures as a church planter. He said, "I can't measure my success on how many people will show up because the numbers change from nothing you've done. 'The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rest with the Lord.' In other words, you don't get to pick what God does with your faithfulness."²⁴

²⁴ Proverbs 21:31 (NIV).

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