



Churches Birthing Churches

Richard A. Hunter

In August 1999, Hillside United Methodist Church had come to a critical juncture. Located in the rapidly expanding suburbs northwest of Atlanta, we had outgrown even our newly expanded facility. A vision committee debated building another large building or relocation; but there was little joy or consensus of purpose with these proposals. There was, instead, a sense that the Lord wanted us to do something unique and “out of the box.”

After considering the possibilities of sponsoring an existing church or working with our district to start a new church, the chair of our visioning team boldly pronounced, “We need to start a church right out of Hillside!” The whole meeting turned on a dime and a new vision emerged. We would maintain a strong, growing mother church that sends out a large core of members every two years to start new churches.

“No Fear” became our motto as the congregation unanimously approved this new vision. Instead of focusing on our land and space limitations, fear of the unknown, and resistance to change, we embraced a dynamic and visionary sense of God’s call. We saw

this plan as a creative and faithful way to fulfill our purpose of making disciples without having to relocate or face zoning battles to build on our crowded site. We also saw it as a way to promote new church development in our denomination and practice cooperation in starting churches.

Since then, Hillside UMC has come to see birthing churches as her primary identity and mission. In September 2002, Liberty Hill UMC was born and in August 2006, we launched a second daughter, City on a Hill UMC. The church has set an ambitious goal of birthing five churches in ten years and twelve by 2020. And, we see this church becoming a teaching church for the

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model of birthing churches from within existing, healthy churches.

Shared DNA

From the beginning of this process, Hillside determined to birth daughter churches that are not clones, but churches that reflect our DNA. The purpose and mission of our daughter churches will be compatible and complementary with Hillside's purpose and mission. The daughter churches derive their own values and vision from the core values of Hillside; however, they are encouraged and expected to be unique places of ministry with their own individual visions and footprints in the community. As a symbolic reminder of shared identity, each church that Hillside births will have "hill" in its name.

Selecting and Coaching a Founding Pastor

The key bridge between the mother and daughter church is a "founding pastor" who is selected to lead the new congregation and prepares by serving first as part of the staff team in the mother church. While serving here, the mission pastor gains experience in leading a dynamic, healthy congregation and gains credibility in the mother church. Our bishop supported this arrangement, and we outlined an agreement whereby the senior pastor of the mother church would interview and recommend a founding pastor and then supervise and coach this person through the stage of chartering the new church. From launch to chartering, the daughter church is still a ministry of the mother church, similar to a Sunday school class meeting off-site. Once the daughter church grows to maturity and is self-sustaining, the mission church is chartered as a new appointment and charge in the UMC.

Sending Missionaries

Most senior pastors would not be excited to see more than one hundred

people walk out the door to start another church. Yet this is exactly how Liberty Hill was born. We empowered our new mission pastor to "fish" within the congregation—to share the vision of the daughter church and recruit laypersons to go as missionaries to start the new congregation. This missionary group included 7 of our top 10 giving

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households and 31 of our top 100 giving households. Yet by God's grace, the year leading up to the charter of the daughter church was our best financial year ever. Following the charter, we had a net gain of 27 members, even after transferring 141 adults and youth to Liberty Hill.

A Different Approach to Congregational Development

Most new churches are started as "parachute drops." A denomination or sponsoring church sends a mission pastor into a community where there is population growth or a large unchurched population. Then, the pastor is expected to find a core group, locate a meeting space, assemble resources, and build credibility in an area where he or she is an outsider. This model has some success stories, but often the mission pastor is overwhelmed and alone. And the tragedy is that many church starts fail in the first ten years.

On the other hand, virtually all mission churches succeed when the church planter is nurtured by a strong parent church.

The model of birthing new churches from healthy, visionary mother churches has a number of advantages. It builds on the wisdom of experienced pastors. It capitalizes on the mother church's reputation. It allows the new church to begin with a strong core of committed laity. It supports the daughter church with financial, staff, and program resources, as well as a legacy of healthy operating systems.

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best wishes. The size of the church is not the issue, it is the vision. Small-, medium-, and large-sized churches can birth new churches.

Not every church is called to the birthing process. God can multiply the kingdom through you and your church in many ways. But my experience has convinced me that churches birthing churches is an effective, biblically grounded way of reaching people we are not currently reaching.

Lessons Learned

We learned some important lessons in this first birth that influenced the way we birthed the second church.

First, staffing has to be fluid and team oriented. We thought we would need a youth pastor from the beginning and hired a part-time person. Thankfully, he was multitalented and able to switch his role to children's ministry and administrative duties when we realized that few families with older children and teens were willing to come to the new church and build a youth program.

Instead, we attracted primarily young couples who wanted to build a children's ministry, young singles who were attracted to a cutting-edge church, and empty nesters excited about serving in a new church.

Second, supervision of the founding pastor by the mother church's senior pastor had to change and be very intentional. Once the launch occurred, the founding pastor easily fell out of the loop back at the mother church. Communications, encouragement, and supervision were more challenging. So, we covenanted to meet monthly for "checkups."

Third, space needs were even larger than we imagined. The mother and daughter churches need to work from the point of conception (pulling the vision and core group together) on funding and choosing meeting sites. Liberty Hill outgrew their 180-seat auditorium at a local theatre in six months, even with having two services! Their attendance slowed until they moved to the local high

school. Then, their attendance increased to over 500 in the next six months!

City on a Hill UMC launched August 13, 2006, meeting in an elementary school about six miles from Hillside. They have forty-five people from the mother church plus children in their core group. We anticipate about 150–200 worshippers for weekly services in the first three months. A key part of the vision at daughter church no. 2 is that every member of the core and everyone who desires to join the new church must attend a small group and take the course, "A Follower's Life," taught by leaders in the core group.

In June 2006, Bishop Lindsey Davis assigned me to a new appointment, the Snellville UMC, which is located east of Atlanta in a growing suburban area. This church of 4,300 members is a regional church that could also birth numerous daughter churches in our area. So, now I am praying with the lay leadership for the Lord's discernment and guidance. I am convinced that this model will work here and possibly in your church as well. I would welcome your questions and am

available to resource you in leading your church into the birthing model. I pray that The United Methodist Church decides to birth many daughters through our existing churches in response to the Great Commission! □

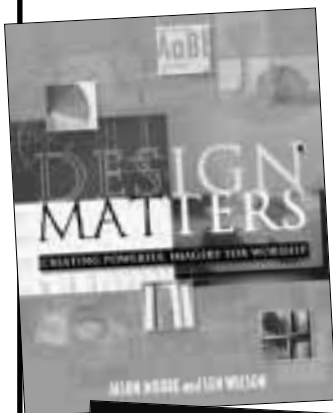
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