

## **Core Elements for Planting, Establishing and Growing a Kingdom Community**

By Bob Young

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### **Introduction**

The ideas presented here may at first appear to be a progression so that one goes through a series of steps to reach the ultimate goal of a new or revitalized kingdom community (church)—healthy, vibrant, and well-established. The reality is that there is overlap, progress, reversal, and interaction in the ideas and steps set forth here. While a new church plant may work through these steps in sequence, it will likely be necessary to go back and revisit some concepts to solidify progress toward the goal. Some later items may need attention early in the process. Certainly, it will be helpful for members of the early core group to understand the process and know what the ultimate goal is.

### **Establishing the Foundation: Connecting with the story**

This is first. Church can be done without the story of Jesus, but it cannot be genuine or authentic apart from the story. The gospel story is the foundation. The story is bigger than we are. The story of Jesus defines the kingdom and motivates discipleship—therefore it precedes kingdom and discipleship. The gospel gives us identity, individually and collectively. Growing identification with the story of Jesus is an essential part of a maturing process.

Jesus understood and helped his followers understand that his coming was part of a much longer and more complex story of people created in the image of God and able through the restoration of that image to overcome fear. A whole set of fears—some imaginary and false, some valid—developed as a result of the human experience with sin. The life of Jesus was a demonstration that what humanity got wrong in the Garden was repairable. One does not have to understand every detail of the story to get to this point—God’s purpose, kingdom, discipleship, fellowship and sharing. Connecting with the story so that we understand that we are part of the continuing story is essential to healthy faith.

The story declares that God made human beings for relationship with him and is committed to tearing down the barriers that have broken that relationship. God does this in a relentless pursuit of his human creation—blessing, re-creating, and restoring. The entire story is one of God taking the initiative to give (grace) what humans cannot provide for themselves.

### **Community: Identify the core group**

God’s work is done in the context of committed communities. Kingdom communities are established as a few individuals work together to bring to reality the presence of God in their individual and shared lives, are guided by God’s purpose, and accept the challenge of bringing the kingdom to reality as disciples making other disciples. Thus the kingdom reality is experienced and spreads.

Identifying and establishing a core group is the first step. This usually happens (in many or even most current church-planting models) before the official unveiling or public launch. In the revitalization of a local church, the first step is identify or develop leaders who are passionate about the purpose of God and the challenge of re-establishing God’s kingdom presence in the

lives of committed disciples who know that apart from making more disciples, authentic kingdom exists only weakly, if at all.

Jesus began with a group of intentional participants, a small group of three, a larger group of 12, and an even larger group of those sent, numbering near 70. In these groups he established relationships, experiences, and understandings so that God's nature was clear, God's revelation was accepted, God's purpose was adopted, grace was observed and practiced, and the kingdom of God was active and present.

In this initial phase, each leader participant takes turns learning and growing in the context of the group by engaging in and leading various activities (consistent with giftedness) and by sharing the experience. Ideally, this group should be small enough to explore and establish small group dynamics and large enough to create momentum. The reality is that some who are initially part of the core may drop out and not continue, while others may be added to the core group at this stage.

### **Mission: Identify the specific purpose**

Each church plant or revitalization has a different focus. The specific mission must be identified, clearly stated and engaged from the beginning. The mission must guide all activities and be constantly kept in front of those involved in the effort.

Jesus came with a mission of redemption and reconciliation (see Luke 4 where the mission is described as releasing people from captivity and blindness and restoring creation to wholeness, or Luke 19 where he affirms that he came to seek and save the lost). Jesus asks those in his core group to participate with God in what God was already doing through the Spirit. This involves advancing God's purpose in various ways—acts of mercy and compassion, sacrifice, service, and teaching. Jesus' mission was to restore humanity's relationships with God, one another, self, and the surrounding world.

Each member of the core group must explore the mission and understand its impact in the life of the individual. The mission is realized in the larger group as it is individualized and realized in individual lives through the encouragement and experience of the group. When core group members buy in and adopt the mission as a life guide, they are able to challenge others to do the same.

### **Kingdom: Cultivate experiences that reflect the kingdom**

The kingdom experience occurs in the context of the local church. Unfortunately, the experiences in many contemporary churches do little to reflect kingdom realities. Those involved in church planting must ask afresh what the kingdom is to look like in the specific context where they work. Those seeking to revitalize church must ask the hard questions about how many of the traditional activities of the church are kingdom-related and help advance the things of God's kingdom. The kingdom experience begins in the core group and is sharpened as God's purposes for the group are clarified. In this way, when the church plant or revitalization is announced and begins, a genuine kingdom experience soon opens itself up to others who also want to experience the reality of God's kingdom.

Jesus' first step was to create a vision of the kingdom among his followers. This vision of the kingdom released his followers from meaningless, trite, ritualistic religion and demanded the establishment of new roots in faith in God through Jesus. This kingdom reality sees God in

every part of life in the world, and makes it possible to carry a message of redemption and reconciliation to creation because creation (especially human creation) is viewed from God's (kingdom) perspective.

When the kingdom (church) experience is valid, each member participates in the continuing process of discovering truth. When the kingdom is experienced in this way, it is also sought, even as Jesus taught his followers to seek the kingdom and his righteousness above all else.

### **Discipleship: Become and make authentic disciples**

Discipleship is a process. One does not become a disciple and then learn the way. One becomes a disciple as one learns the way. Discipleship is as much reflected in the process of attaining maturity as in the first baby steps.

Jesus invited those who followed him to a new way of life. This life was experienced in the context of the kingdom experience, but also in the experiences of life in the world. The transforming principles that guide discipleship transform life. Religion tends to focus on exceptions and excuses—discipleship extends far beyond the typical trivial approaches to church life.

Following Jesus as a disciple demands a redemptive approach to being human—in my own experience and in the experience to which I call others. Transformation occurs from the inside out and demonstrates the power of genuine life over death.

### **Evangelism/Mission: Go make disciples**

The previous elements cannot fully bring a community to spiritual health and life in Christ. The fulfillment of God's plan for spiritual health includes sharing the good news with others. The church that does not develop the DNA of reproduction or duplication has failed to become fully what God intends for the church.

Jesus, immediately before his departure, instructed his followers to continue what he started. That is, Jesus' followers, committed to the mission, were to make certain that the mission continued and that the purpose of God was accomplished. Jesus empowered his followers for the task, and urged them to be involved in a process that would be repeated again and again. The process is one of accepting God's purpose for the world, experiencing God's purpose for his followers, becoming like Jesus, participating in the eternal story, and telling the story to others. Telling the story of God's restoring grace transforms us, others, the world, and history. The participation of the contemporary church in the Great Commission establishes an organic leadership development process which is capable of producing exponential growth.