

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP:

CHURCH MULTIPLICATION

Tom Blaylock • Director of Church Multiplication

I want to begin this update by sharing some good news regarding “imagine this LLC”, our church plant in Grand Ledge, Michigan.

On Sunday, September 28, 2008 “imagine this” launched a 10:30 a.m. service in addition to the Sunday evening service. I believe we will see more people touched by this ministry as they open the doors for a morning worship service. Since adding this second service, they have held an additional baptism service and now average 150 in two services.

Also, I am happy to report from Michael Mudge that Bethany House of the Lord in Cumberland, Md., baptized 11 believers in August 2008 and another one in September. The age range of those baptized was 8 to 70.

And from Howard Matthews (HomeFront Church in Grandville, Mich.): “We had 263 people in church Sunday [fall of 2008], and we are 100% self-supporting for the year.”

We are grateful to the Lord for the lives that have been touched and transformed through these church plants. We are also grateful for the way some of our established churches (like those who have formed our West Michigan LEAD Team) are investing strategically and passionately into the ministry of church multiplication in their region – they are the heroes among us.

Assessment of UB Church Multiplication

In terms of my assessment of the UB church’s health regarding church multiplication, and what steps we should consider taking, I offer the following.

During my ten years with the United Brethren, I have witnessed several church planting attempts in various regions. In the Columbus area, there was the Center for Church Planting in Central Ohio. This was a regional effort

that involved several churches and Central Conference. However, after what looked to be a promising start, this organization was shut down in 2007 and the two church plants that emerged—one Hispanic and one Anglo—have both disbanded. (The Hispanic work continues, but is no longer United Brethren.)

Out east, I have met with several church planters that have come into the United Brethren church as more of an ethnic adoption than anything else. These are precious brothers (men like Dalton Jenkins), but for the most part represent congregations that became UB as already established groups. For me, this is important but an entirely different category outside of church planting.

There are some isolated examples of fruitful church planting activity scattered throughout the denomination, but the overall assessment of our church planting effectiveness is very poor (I would estimate a less than 50% survivability rate after five years). In Michigan the survivability rate is somewhat better, at about 70-80% (we closed Fresh Breeze in the late 1990s and Journey Church around 2004). So, even with Michigan factored in, the scene changes little.

This is not a problem unique to us. The Church of the Nazarene and other groups have gone through periods even worse than what we have experienced, and have managed to turn things around.

In my opinion, the reality is:

1. We have done a poor job planting churches in recent years. We need to own up to this and discover ways to move forward. I believe we have owned up to our failures, but have been unable or unwilling to seriously engage new strategies to move forward.

2. We not only lack momentum as a group, but actually have negative momentum right now. As I traveled around talking to UB pastors and leaders, I sensed resistance, cynicism, and indifference the majority of the time.

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3. We talk about church planting as though it is a high priority, but when we look back at how we have allocated resources and invested time and energy, we have made a half-hearted attempt at best.

Two Suggestions

As I look to the future, I have two suggestions regarding church multiplication:

1. We need to continue working with our established churches to encourage better health and more effective leadership. We lack a critical mass of healthy churches. I am encouraged by what I have seen in Michigan among churches such as Banner of Christ (Byron Center, Mich.).

My suggestion is to closely tie in reproduc-

tion to church health. In other words, define health to include multiplication as an essential piece of their missional strategy, and do whatever we can to resource and provide accountability to that end.

2. We must make a significant investment in church multiplication in terms of money and time. I believe we need to intentionally raise a budget that will enable us to hire a Church Multiplication Director at least half-time, but preferably three-quarters to fulltime, who works out of our Huntington office and can travel extensively. We must also raise a budget for this leader to work with—one that will enable him to engage our established churches (partnerships) and recruit and place church planters in fertile soil.