

MentorNet #47

Enhancing Cluster Churches

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Dr. Patterson found in Latin America that regional associations of young churches were able to take common action, undertake community development projects, keep its pastors accountable and ward off wolves. To do so, the leaders met often enough to share needs, opportunities and advice. Their church members enjoyed regional celebrations where they shared testimonies, good teaching and lots of Latin food and fiesta.

Dr. Currah recently visited a strongly Islamic region of West Africa where rural churches are spontaneously evangelizing and reproducing, as more experienced leaders coach the less experienced. This has led to a sense of unity without need of constitutions, by-laws and formal decision-making processes. Until someone tells them differently, they will remain one church with many, local congregations and cells.

Two unbiblical extremes plague new, little churches. One is big, usually urban, congregations that seek to impose practices and forms that are not well suited to little flocks; another is the independently-minded little flock that is often led by an insecure power seeker. The NT model of inter-dependent "clusters" of little flocks can effectively avoid both tendencies, provided that you mentor new shepherds in ways that enhance their "fold" of little flocks.

Teach a New Testament model of inter-dependent flocks and co-operating shepherds. Perhaps you could assign texts like the following and have apprentice shepherds report to you what they discover about inter-church relations.

Acts 13:1-2. 'Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers... While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them".'

Acts 19:10; 20:28. 'All the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks... Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God'.

1 Corinthians 16:19. 'The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.'

2 Corinthians 8:19. 'And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace'.

Galatians 1:2. 'To the churches of Galatia.'

Philippians 1:1. 'To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons'.

Colossians 4:15-16. 'Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.'

Titus 1:5. 'This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you'.

Revelation 1:4. 'John to the seven churches that are in Asia'.

There is little evidence that Christian churches met in chapels before the third century. Rather the church consisted of a cluster of many little congregations that shared elders and deacons. A congregation typically was made up of an extended family, their servants and close friends. This allowed apostles, elders and deacons to discuss common needs often and make

decisions together. Thus, it proved difficult for outsiders to impose rules on them and to contaminate their doctrine.

A biblically-informed ecclesiology (theology of the church) must recognise that the term "church", "assembly" or "community" is used in the NT in several ways:

- The Universal church which consists of all believers and only believers, living and dead, past and present. Its only head is Jesus Christ, her God, Lord and Saviour.
- The local church which consists of living believers who love one to another while obeying the commandments of Jesus. It is served by apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers.
- The regional cluster of churches, made up of cells and congregations that enjoy frequent fellowship and are served by apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers, some of whom may be appointed as overseers, elders and deacons.

As church-planting coaches, you and I can help our apprentice evangelists and shepherds to ***form regional networks and to hold occasional celebrations***. When they are challenged by outside forces, give them some guidelines and let them make decisions together. In this way, you will avoid many of the political and doctrinal attacks that can discourage workers and stop church reproduction.

In summary, there are ***several advantages of forming and maintaining clusters of churches*** that maintain communication and take common action as a *regional church*. For examples:

- Workers learn from the start their power from God to plan, agree and cooperate without unwanted external control from outside church authorities, and without need of written constitutions, by-laws and rules of order.
- Clusters capitalize on the loving relations that develop between trainers and their apprentices, maintaining respect and cooperation long after formal mentorship has been completed.
- Elders and shepherds can encourage believers to move between congregations and cells where their gifts of the Spirit might be needed, since little churches may prove too little to have all the gifts that it may require.
- The members of little churches enjoy a genuine sense of the size and importance of their movement and social and ministerial relations.
- Elders plan and coordinate the formation of churches that serve ethnic, class, caste, economic and linguistic communities without requiring any one such social group to adopt the customs of another.
- Where churches suffer persecution and violence, even though some leader may be arrested and congregations disbanded, the movement continues and the others undertake legal and advocacy action in behalf of their fellow believers.

Finally, small house churches and cells seldom include members having the spiritual gifts needed to carry out all the ministries that God requires in the New Testament. However, they can perform these ministries by cooperating closely with other small bodies. Obeying the New Testament 'one another' commands (teach one another, confess faults to one another, admonish one another, etc.) applies, not only within house churches or cells, but between them.

From www.MentorNet.ws Find materials suitable for training leaders of cluster churches at www.MentorAndMultiply.com www.TrainAndMultiply.com www.Paul-Timothy.net