

**CITY HARVEST: A STUDY OF ORGANIC CHURCH PLANTING  
IN A GLOBAL CITY**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

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In this dissertation I describe the dynamics of organic church planting in the metropolitan urban communities of New York City, a quintessential global city. Through a series of interviews and a review of precedent literature, I analyze organic church planting in this particular context.

I begin by reviewing the missiological theory developed by thinkers such as Roland Allen and David McGavran, and the research of David Garrison. In addition, I interface with current data that is emerging from the reports and training of practitioners of church planting movements.

Following a description of my case studies and general methodology, I present my research findings. I have grouped these church planting communities into categories of common characteristics and offer "thick" descriptions from the interviews conducted.

I support my research findings by articulating the missiological theory underlying organic church planting. This theory connects the previous description of theory for spontaneous expansion of the church and reporting of church planting movements with the research findings that emerged from this research project. I argue in this dissertation that organic church planting is an additional chapter in a continuum of development for contextualized church planting.

Finally, I address the contextual factors impacting organic church planting in the setting of New York City's diverse urban communities. I review the contemporary

theory focused on the study of global cities as a contemporary phenomenon in urban space. I specifically analyze some factors that make a noticeable difference for organic church planting and disciple-making processes in the setting of a global city.

As a result of this investigation, this dissertation aims to integrate missiological theory relating to organic church multiplication. It connects developed theory with contemporary organic approaches, and integrates theory and research findings with current urban studies.

Mentor: Ryan Bolger

288 words

## **DEDICATION**

To my wife, Hylma, and my daughter, Adalia, who stayed home while I was away, who encouraged me when I felt insecure about my own abilities, and who have constantly been a source of strength and support.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, reports of church planting movements in overseas contexts have come to the attention of North American Christians. These movements may be viewed as a contemporary phenomenon in the church of God, and while they are generally initiated by missionaries, they grow exponentially being led by indigenous believers. David Garrison is currently well-known in many church planting circles for bringing his research of these movements into public view, and discussions among leaders of Western churches highlight the growing desire to see such missionary emphasis in their own settings.

As conversations about the emerging church in the West continue to evolve, Western leaders are asking whether similar movements of church multiplication are likely—or even possible—in the North American context. While I am increasingly concerned with the advancement of the church as a missionary enterprise in Western contexts, I am also personally and significantly invested in the development of mission strategies in and through globally connected cities, New York City in particular.

One significant development among church planters in North America has been a seemingly increasing emphasis on organic church planting. Over several years, I have been a practitioner of organic church development in New York City. However, while I have certainly witnessed lives changed and people coming to know Jesus Christ, a more accurate description of my own ministry would be that of a researcher in a lab. I have realized a need for missiological innovation in urban settings. It appears, at least to me, that missiological activity among Christian churches in North America has been lacking

in general, and missiological engagement in global cities—and in New York City in particular—is simply daunting for most who dare attempt it. Church planting does appear to be on the rise and seems to be increasingly advocated by leaders of many Christian persuasions. Yet, I question whether we have any conclusive evidence to demonstrate a reversal of overall church decline. While this paper does not attempt to present data particularly dealing with church growth and decline, such questions provoke this particular research project.

I believe there is a need for continuing evangelistic experimentation and learning through missiological processes. I have undertaken this research in order to further my own learning process and hopefully offer increasingly effective input for the practice of organic church planting in New York City and in urban settings in general.

### ***Purpose***

The purpose of my research is to understand the dynamics of organic church planting in New York City. I intend for this research to become a resource for practitioners in New York City, and in addition I hope that it will benefit evangelists and church planters in any number of urban settings. This investigation has been significantly enriching for my own understanding of organic church planting in the context of the city, and hopefully my experience can be of benefit to others.

### ***Goals***

The goal of this research is to gain significant understanding of organic church planting activity that has occurred in and around New York City in order to see an increase in the effectiveness of organic church planting that will facilitate evangelistic and transformational development of indigenous communities in the urban context.

I will meet my goals for this research when I can articulate an understanding of organic church planting activity in New York City and make meaningful recommendations—grounded in research—for further development and training.

### ***Significance***

There is a growing body of research applied to missional work in urban areas in North America, and while research concerning organic church planting in the United States is a relatively new pursuit, such investigations are beginning to emerge. This research contributes to an increased understanding of organic church planting. Also, little has been done to interface organic church planting with the global city context. This research will make a contribution to both the study of emerging forms of church planting—specifically organic church planting—in North America and to the studies of urban missiology in Western contexts. In addition this research grounds contemporary practices of organic church planting in a progressive understanding and development of church multiplication during the last century.

### ***Central Research Issue***

The central research issue of this investigation is to describe the factors involved in the spontaneous expansion of the church through the planting of organic churches in the context of New York City.

### ***Research Questions***

During the process of this missiological research, I will seek to answer the following questions.

1. What is the missional impact of organic church planting in New York City?

2. How are organic church planters meeting the opportunities and challenges presented by New York's global city environment?
3. What transformational impact is the experience of organic church having on those involved in organic church planting in New York City?
4. What common characteristics are observed among organic church planting efforts in New York City?

### *Definitions*

This paper involves a number of key terms. While many of these terms will be described in more detail in later chapters, it is helpful to gain a general grasp of the important terms used in the presentation of this research.

At the center of this research is the term organic church. I am describing<sup>1</sup> organic church as a Christian community developed through making disciples in the natural social settings of a culture or cultures. As I describe organic churches from this perspective, I am relying heavily on the construct offered by Neil Cole (2005). As I use missional, I am describing evangelistic activity that crosses into the spheres of the unreached and brings transformation of the gospel within their cultural setting. "Missional at its essence means 'sent.' The idea is the exact opposite of waiting for...[others] to come to us" (Halter and Smay 2008:38).

As I write about ministry that is transformational, I am making reference to community activity that nurtures noticeable changes in the lives of the participants. The term, church planting movements, are foundational for studying organic church planting in the context of this research. I am working with and responding to David Garrison's definition, "a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweep

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<sup>1</sup> While I offer some definitions in this section of the paper, organic church is best understood as something described rather than defined. This research is a pursuit for understanding organic church planting; therefore, this paper in its entirety builds a definition for organic church through the overall content as a written work.

through a people group or population segment” (2004:21). Each of these terms are significant and are used extensively in this investigation.

### ***Delimitations***

In order to focus the scope of the research, I must apply specific delimitations. While there are many church planting efforts in New York City that I would consider a positive contribution to mission in the urban setting, I will delimit my study specifically to organic church planting.

At the beginning of my research my aim was to study the dynamics of organic church planting in global city contexts in general. While there are a handful of high level Asian global cities, I quickly narrowed my study to organic church expressions in North America and Western Europe. Soon after, I narrowed the contexts studied to North America. Finally, I realized that for my research to make a wider contribution, I needed to focus on a more specific context. Therefore, I have delimited my study to those organic church planting efforts that have been taking place specifically in New York City (NYC) from 2006 to 2009. This includes communities within the five boroughs as well as some of the surrounding edge cities within New York’s metropolitan area where the city’s urban culture is nearly indistinguishable from New York proper.

### ***Assumptions and Biases***

For strategic reasons, I do believe that the church should focus significant resources and missiological experimentation and engagement in major urban centers around the world. This perspective represents an urban bias that influenced my choice to locate this research in NYC. While I have access to organic churches and church networks in suburban and rural settings, I have chosen to narrow my focus to the urban

setting. In the end, this narrowing helps focus the research process so as to bring clarity to my research findings.

An additional bias grows out of my personal involvement in organic church planting. While I have personal experience and positive memories of work in other church models and recognize their value, I have a strong solidarity with organic church planting as a common missiological practice. Therefore, I acknowledge the potential to present my findings with undeserved optimism. It will require discipline to sort out any seemingly negative findings or unrealized goals in organic churches studied. In addition it will require humility to report positive findings.

In addition to these biases, I assume that there are unique challenges and opportunities when addressing organic church planting in the global city context as compared to organic church planting in rural or suburban settings. Because I am not studying suburban or rural church planting, this research lacks the sort of breadth that would include such comparative evidence.

### *Overview*

Focusing on organic church planting in New York City, this investigation joins together several streams into a singular research focus. This research is a convergence of missiological theory surrounding the spontaneous expansion of the church manifested through church planting movements, organic church planting and its related issues as it is emerging in Western contexts, the globalized urban environment, and specific communities found in the context of New York.

Chapter 1 describes principles and practices that provide a foundational framework for understanding the impulse of organic church planting. It surveys authors such as Roland Allen and his writing on spontaneous expansion of the church, and outlines the observations on church planting movements made by Garrison. In this

chapter I intend to build an understanding of theory and research behind church planting movements in order to develop a framework for studying organic church planting in a given context.

Chapter 2 takes into account the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the New York City context. My intention is to identify key factors found in global cities that have an effect—both positive and negative—on practices of organic church planting. In this chapter I will reflect on broader emerging cultural realities taking place in Western context and in New York City in particular, and I place significant emphasis on New York as a global city context specifically highlighting the impact on organic church planting.

Chapter 3 highlights the research methodology of this investigation. I intend to inform the reader of the approach used and provide profiles of the particular communities involved in the study. The organic church communities are briefly described using a biographical sketch for each of the case studies for my research.

Chapter 4 gives a thick description of research findings. I intend to provide a thorough understanding of the experience of organic church planting through the eyes of church planting leaders themselves. The findings in Chapter 4 are based on a series of interviews with organic church leaders and participants in the New York City area. These findings are organized into categories reflecting common traits.

Chapter 5 reinforces the research findings with a review of missiological theory underlying organic church planting in the North American setting. My intention is to continue to build an understanding of organic church planting by including a wider conversation concerning the subject in Western context. This chapter makes use of precedent literature dealing with organic church planting, contextualization, leadership issues, and related topics.

In Chapter 6 I offer a set of conclusions and recommendations based on previous research findings and precedent literature. These recommendations are rooted in the findings of organic church planting in New York City complimented by the theoretical framework. I am particularly focused on offering practical input arising out of research to practitioners of organic church planting.

This research sketches the dynamics of organic church planting in New York City. It offers an understanding of organic church planting in this urban context and makes recommendations for the way forward. Grounded in missiological theory and practical research, this study of organic church planting is intended to make a contribution to the mission of God in New York City and beyond.

**PART I**  
**THEORY AND CONTEXT**

As a foundation for the study of organic church planting, I ground this research in the principles and practices for natural contextualization and church multiplication. By outlining the research reported on church planting movements around the world, I present the impulse of organic church planting as a strategic step towards spontaneous expansion of the church in the North American context. Studying organic church planting in New York City, I have utilized my participation in a network of relationships among church planters to orient my research process around a collection of organic churches and organic church planting activity in the city.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **BACKGROUND LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT**

When I began this investigation into organic church planting, I quickly began to reference the writings of Roland Allen, especially pertaining to the spontaneous expansion of the church. As a result, I soon realized that the current discourse concerning organic approaches is not a novel development. Organic church planting has roots that extend back well over a century. For quite some time, missiological thinkers have been laying the philosophical foundation for mission that removes cultural barriers to the gospel and allows for contextualization and church multiplication that go beyond the residue of imperialism and colonialism. This approach encourages indigenous expressions of the gospel and the ability for local believers to form churches that reflect their own context.

#### ***Roland Allen***

As I surveyed the literature corresponding to organic church planting, Roland Allen immediately became an important writer and missiological thinker in the context of my investigation of organic church planting. Allen is a thinker making a significant contribution to modern missions, and Allen's writings are often recommended by those engaged in organic church planting (CMAResources.org 2009).

Allen advocates for a missions movement led by indigenous believers in their context. He writes, "Could we once persuade ourselves that self-extension, self-support and self-government go hand in hand, and are all equally the rights of converts from the

very beginning, we might see such an expansion of Christianity throughout the world as now we little dream of' (1962:40-41). With this perspective in mind, the impulse of missions is to be the empowerment of local people with the gospel. This empowerment leads to the need to remove potential cultural barriers that may not reflect an indigenous component in that cultural context.

Allen emphasizes that evangelism and church planting must be spontaneous. Multiplication must be liberated rather than controlled (1962:5). Allen prescribes a missions movement that is organic in nature. That is, it must be thoroughly indigenous.<sup>1</sup> The work of missionaries is to spark a movement of the gospel that moves within the natural flows of a particular cultural context. He writes:

Many years ago my experience in China taught me that if our object was to establish in that country a church which might spread over the six provinces which then formed the diocese of North China, that object could only be attained if the first Christians who were converted by our labours understood clearly that they could by themselves, without any further assistance from us, not only convert their neighbours, but establish churches. That meant that the very first groups of converts must be so fully equipped with all spiritual authority that they could multiply themselves without any necessary reference to us that, though, while we were there, they might regard us as helpful advisers, yet our removal should not at all mutilate the completeness of the church, or deprive it of anything necessary for its unlimited expansion. Only in such a way did it seem to me to be possible for churches to grow rapidly and securely over wide areas (Allen 1962:1).

Allen confronts the fear that many missionaries may feel. It is natural for church planters to fear the worst for their new believers and churches and therefore put in place mechanisms of control. Allen points out that many believers are afraid of such spontaneous expansion due to lack of control. He emphasizes that such a movement is spontaneous because it is powered by the Holy Spirit in the work of persons and in churches. He goes on to warn that if converts learn that they can only spread the gospel

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Allen lived and worked in rural China during the beginning of the twentieth century. While his context represents a different time and place than my current research and the author certainly confronted a different set of assumptions, the dynamics of his principles are still very applicable to a variety of cultural settings that exist today.

under the control of another, they will always be bound by that expectation (1962:12-15). Allen claims that spontaneous expansion is slowed because missionaries feel that new believers must be “nursed” to keep them faithful. Churches are taught—whether verbally or non-verbally—to believe that only trained professionals can carry the Christian faith forward and mission practices are largely not designed to support spontaneous growth and expansion. Rather than teaching them from the beginning to carry the good news from their conversion, we too often—with good intentions—provide formal training institutions and money that result in clogging the process of multiplication instead of cultivating it (1962:32-33). Allen insists that “unless they [churches] are self-governing and self-supporting, they cannot possibly propagate themselves” (1962:27).

Allen does not argue that there is no place for the missionary. Rather he says, “If they cry to us for help, . . . we should give them help, but help which would support their position and assist their zeal, not supersede them and kill their zeal; help that should strengthen them as leaders, not make them subordinates. To supersede them is disastrous” (1962:38).

Allen argues that missionary efforts should result in indigenous churches that reproduce themselves without outside aid. Such reproduction is hindered by distractions such as western missionaries that promote enlightenment thought in lieu of the gospel or carry with them ethno-centric cultural values or impose structures that are not indigenous to the culture. For example, Allen explains that constructing the traditional missionary compounds of his time slowed the advancement of the gospel and church planting. He writes:

The spread of the religion would be as easy and as difficult as the multiplication of houses like those. Europeans would propagate it in proportion as they could multiply such places, natives would as easily propagate it as they could multiply houses like those (1962:77).

Considering Allen's reflections, it is important to evaluate the presence of externally developed structures when developing new Christian communities. For instance, "equating church with buildings limits any church planting effort to the number of church buildings that can be provided" as well as additional factors that slow or limit the ability to reproduce without additional aid (Sanchez 2007:51).

Although not using the terms organic or phrases such as church planting movements, essentially, what Allen was arguing for in his day was an organic process of church multiplication. Cultural components in one context may be foreign additives in another context. Such cultural additives that are foreign to a specific context should be left out. External structures that do not arise from local concerns and local resources are likely to hinder spontaneous multiplication. Missionaries are to teach the gospel in such a way that it can begin to move naturally in the host culture. The people will in turn adopt structures and cultural mediums that are indigenous to that culture. Considering organic church planting in an urban setting, contextualization occurs in the many layers and subcultures of a diverse society. Allen's vision for spontaneous expansion may be applied across a stratum of urban cultures.

Organic church planting is rooted in this progressive development of missiological theory. Organically developing churches in the cultural fabric of New York City is built on the same principles as prescribed by Roland Allen. Organic church planting is not actually a new phenomenon on the stage of world missions. Rather it is new language for an idea that has been developing for over a century. Organic church planting is a continuing step in a continuum of missiological theory and practice.

### ***Donald McGavran***

Decades later, Donald McGavran argues for a similar type of expansion of the gospel. He insists on the development of people movements. McGavran argues that

movements that reflect a spontaneous expansion of the church are “naturally indigenous” as the gospel spreads through the continuity of cultural groups. Due to the indigenous nature of such movements, many of the new converts won’t even see the missionary that sparked the beginning of the movement (1955:87-88).

McGavran argues that people movements do not come about by a missionary hastily baptizing new converts in order to present a successful report to his supervisors. However, in my interview with Bob, who has experienced missionary service in Africa and in New York and who has lead a missiological research project in New York City, he explains that a pressure to perform felt by church planters does indeed hinder many efforts that would otherwise be focused on a steady missiological process. There seems to be an inherent tension between McGavran’s writing and the realities of life for church planters in Western context.

McGavran says that people movements occur as a series of social groups that are part of a culture make decisions for Christ. As social units within a cultural stream come to an active faith in Christ, momentum builds into a people movement (McGavran and Wagner 1990:221-223). McGavran’s focus on group conversions and an emphasis on group process by David Watson (2009) leads to real challenges in Western urban settings. While many subgroups in New York City—and North America in general—likely do embrace elaborate group processes, the overall emphasis placed on individualism in American culture (see Stewart and Bennett 1991:133-138) poses a unique challenge to the theory and practice of group conversion. Although the direction taken by this research project does not lead to an in depth evaluation of these anthropological issues, individual and group decision making in the cultural context may point to a complex set of social dynamics that will likely impact the work of organic church planters in Western settings.

Reflecting on Allen’s work, McGavran writes:

With them [people movements] “spontaneous expansion of the Church” is natural.... It requires that new converts be formed into churches which from the beginning are fully equipped with all the spiritual authority to multiply themselves without any necessary reference to the foreign missionaries. These might be helpful as advisors or assistants but should never be necessary to the completeness of the church or its power of unlimited expansion. Spontaneous expansion involves a full trust in the Holy Spirit and recognition that the ecclesiastical traditions of the older churches are not necessarily useful to the younger churches arising out of the missions from the West. New groups of converts are expected to multiply themselves in the same way as did the new groups of converts who were the early churches. Advocates of spontaneous expansion point out that foreign directed movements will in the end lead to sterility and antagonism to their sponsors...(1955:88-89).

McGavran’s explanation of spontaneous expansion reflects a highly relational and organic approach for seeing a gospel movement unfold. As groups of people within a culture shift their allegiance to Christ, expansion of the church naturally develops. While the missionary may begin the process, the local believers must experience a natural process of decision-making that lead to multiplication of disciples and churches. As I will discuss later in this paper and as McGavran implies in the quote above, the full DNA of discipleship is infused from conversion in order to see natural and spontaneous expansion of the church.

### ***David Garrison and Observations of a Vision Realized***

Just before the turn of the millennium the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention released a study led by David Garrison surveying church planting movements around the world (1999), and the initial release was followed by a book a few years later (2004). These reports demonstrate that much of what Allen described a century ago is now being realized in our time. Garrison’s work describes what researchers have observed taking place around the world.

Garrison defines a church planting movement as “a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweep through a people group or population segment” (2004:21). The reported observations of these church multiplication

movements are informing organic church planters and, therefore, play an important role in this research project.

### **Common Characteristics of Church Planting Movements**

Garrison identifies ten characteristics universal to every church planting movement on which he reported. These characteristics are meant to be descriptive of the phenomenon of church planting movements, and it is helpful for me to note that these characteristics are not meant to serve as a prescription for church growth.

#### ***Prayer***

First, prayer is essential for church planting movements. Prayer for a church planting movement includes prayer for the missionaries and prayer for the people group(s) being targeted. However, Garrison also points out that there are key practices of prayer that are also counter-intuitive. The church planter sets an example of prayer. Christians pray for the new believers, and the new believers are actively praying themselves. Prayer is intentional, and significant amounts of prayer focus on the need for more “harvest workers.” These practices of prayer are a key ingredient in any church planting movement (2004:172-77).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As I’ve engaged in conversations about church planting movements and their potential for occurring in the West, one question that surfaces is to ask how much the factors involved that lead to these movements are attributed to God’s action and how much is attributed to human activity. Curtis Sergeant points out that it is wise for our human activity to be aligned with the principles of spontaneous expansion, so when God moves in a particular culture, we are prepared to participate in a new movement (2008). While these sorts of questions are difficult, if not impossible, to definitively answer, these considerations highlight the importance of prayer—perhaps even more so in urban contexts where church planting movements are less frequently observed. Prayer unites the work of people with the work of God.

### ***Abundant Gospel Sowing***

A great deal of evangelism helps drive a church planting movement. Abundant evangelistic work equals more evangelistic results. The concept of sowing abundantly in order to reap abundantly is applied here. Results, therefore, are generally proportionate to the degree of evangelistic proclamation that takes place in a cultural setting (Garrison 2004:177-181).

My research is particularly concerned with the urban environment, and in the setting of a global city there are numerous competing messages. Spontaneous expansion of the church does seem highly unlikely without a steady witness of the gospel. Believers must communicate the gospel in context saturated with a plurality of messages; however, at the same time dense urban populations present the opportunity to frequently communicate the gospel to diverse subcultures.

### ***Intentional Church Planting***

Missionaries work to see churches intentionally planted so that they may also reproduce new churches. When churches are planted the qualities that result in reproducible churches is already in mind as a part of the process (Garrison 2004:181-182). The church planter has in mind what needs to be reproduced at the very start of an initial church plant. As a result, the planter attempts to infuse essential elements into the discipling process that will likely lead to healthy multiplication.

### ***God's Word as the Guiding Authority***

God's Word is held in high esteem. Allowing God's Word to have ultimate authority is a safeguard against heresy, and the missionary often defers to the Biblical witness rather than to their own expertise (Garrison 2004:183-184). By elevating God's

Word as the guiding authority, new churches that are birthed by lay people looking to the Word to shape their life together as opposed to a constant dependency on the missionary.

### ***Local Leadership***

In order to facilitate movements church planters move very quickly to involve local leaders and transfer responsibility for the movement to them (Garrison 2004:186-187). Rather than wait until young leaders have gone through advanced seminary programs or until Bible colleges are established, missionaries cultivate leaders from the very beginning of the process through teaching new believers hands-on.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Lay Leadership***

Church planting movements are carried on the shoulders of the laity. Garrison points out that “unpaid, non-professional common men and women are leading the churches,” and he outlines six reasons for this approach to leadership. First, there are practical reasons. A movement requires numerous workers, and the laity provides the largest number of potential servants. Second, church planting coordinators often point to theological principles holding up the priesthood of all believers. Third, it is recognized that Jesus called workers from among the laity rather than appealing to the religious institutions of his time. Fourth, involving large numbers of laity has demonstrated greater success at reducing turnover in the case of new converts. Fifth, leaders from among the laity will have higher degrees of identification with the people as opposed to

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<sup>3</sup> While I sat in a workshop addressing church planting movements, one attendee commented that this approach to ministry meant no more seminaries or similar educational institutions. However, David Watson, the presenter, commented that training programs become necessary when thousands of leaders have been multiplied. It’s not that seminaries or formal institutes are never incorporated into a movement, but rather such structures are only incorporated by the people once leaders are multiplying to the point that the need is exhibited (2009). The counter-intuitive perspective found in church planting movements suggests that local leadership is raised up at the grassroots level, and then supplemental training programs are only developed when the need emerges from a spontaneous expansion of the church.

missionary clergy that are often separate by income, education, special vows, or even living conditions. Sixth, utilizing laity for leadership and gathering in homes within church planting movements allows churches to utilize funds for mission and ministry rather than facilities and other costly items. However, Garrison points out that a seminary trained minister or missionary church planter certainly may be involved in the movement. Oftentimes, a missionary is the initial catalyst. This type of worker is not necessarily excluded, but “on the cutting edge of its growth it is the laity who is leading the way.” As laity leads these churches, Garrison explains that two factors are necessary for a lay-driven movement to function in such a way. Churches must be small enough—a maximum of twenty to thirty people—for a leader to serve the body without being forced by ministry circumstances to leave his or her secular employment. Also, servants of the church planting movement are “lifelong learners.” “In church planting movements, lay leaders typically have an insatiable hunger for training.” Missionaries that are helping nurture a movement are constantly providing workers with “on-the-job training” (Garrison 2004:189-191).

Organic church planting aims at developing faith communities that are led by and contextualized among the laity. Church planters in New York City seek to develop lay leadership as a driving force for missional engagement.

### ***Cells or House Churches***

Church planting movements are characterized by very small churches that may meet in homes or public places. These communities of faith have economic advantages, but their small size also presents numerous other advantages. Simple, reproducible structures open up possibilities for multiplication and makes leadership duties more manageable. With the ability to involve group processes, these small size churches may nurture greater accountability, member care, and focus on life application. If heresy

arises, it can be more easily isolated and compartmentalized from the rest of the movement. If new believers join a house church, they are more likely to be assimilated rather than getting lost in the crowd or slipping through the cracks (Garrison 2004:191-193). The majority of the organic churches in this investigation function as house churches while a few of the churches meet in other spaces such as a storefront or library in a church building. All of the churches studied are small communities that reflect this principle.

### ***Churches Planting Churches***

“Church planting movements are not in full flower until churches begin spontaneously reproducing themselves.” Often missionaries know it is time for them to withdraw when they see this type of reproduction taking place (Garrison 2004:193-194). Neil Cole (2007) repeats the principle that a church planter should not consider church multiplication a movement until it is reproducing fourth generation churches. It is conceivable that once the multiplication of disciples and churches is reproducing to the fourth generation, that it may indeed become a movement that is out of the control of any one missionary.

### ***Rapid Reproduction***

Because church planting involves laity rather than a single church planter, multiplication happens exponentially. The speed of church reproduction varies among church planting movements observed from region to region, but it is most often described as “rapid.” Instead of a philosophy of allowing a church to grow large and secure before planting another church, new churches are planted with the intention of seeing them reproduce naturally from the very beginning. Churches reproduce and pass on the

qualities of a reproducing community to the next generation churches (Garrison 2004:194-195).

Perhaps one of the most unrealized hopes of organic church planters in New York City is the lack of rapid reproduction in the form of a church planting movement. However, Watson makes the point that there is generally a gradual ramp up period leading to such rapid reproduction. At the same time Bob makes the observation that church planters in New York, and in the United States in general, often feel pressure to produce something quickly.

### ***Healthy Churches***

Churches in church planting movements are described as “healthy churches.” These small, reproducing faith communities are well-rounded involving “fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism/missions, and worship” (Garrison 2004:196-198).

Garrison’s reporting is essential for understanding the impulse of organic church planting. He reports that noteworthy movements of new churches have taken place in several locations around the globe. Organic church planting reflects an effort to be aligned with these characteristics with the hopes of seeing natural multiplication of disciples and churches in new and challenging settings.

However, there are also obstacles to such natural multiplication. Organic church planters working in a Western urban setting will need to grasp the specific factors that Garrison has identified as potential obstacles to spontaneous expansion in the form of a church planting movement.

### **Obstacles to Church Planting Movements**

While common characteristics can be found in church planting movements across different parts of the globe, common obstacles to spontaneous multiplication is also

identified by observers of movements. In a 2008 interview, Cole identified three factors that he believes are hindrances to a spontaneous movement of multiplication. He explains:

Three things deter spontaneous multiplication: buildings, budgets, and big shots. They may add to the kingdom, but they deter spontaneous multiplication. If ministry requires a highly trained, professional staff member, then an ordinary person is going to be prevented from doing it. And buildings may be useful, there's nothing immoral about them, but they don't multiply. If buildings grew out of the ground, that would be nice. But they don't. If we have to wait for the space and money to build facilities, we're not going to multiply very quickly (Jethani and O'Brien 2008:37).

During a workshop in Dallas where David Watson was teaching on catalyzing church planting movements, he identified similar factors. According to Watson (2009), a multiplication movement ceases to accelerate when missionaries begin to prematurely add paid staff and church buildings to their mission efforts.

Garrison also recognizes that there are hindrances to initiating church planting movements. Garrison highlights nine factors that he had discovered to be obstacles to church planting movements. These factors are extremely important for organic church planters in New York to realize because they are easily identifiable even by the casual observer in this Western urban setting. I believe that some of these obstacles are also brought to the surface as points of tension for the church planters in the context of my research findings.

### ***Extra-Biblical Requirements for Being a Church***

Missionaries should avoid “imposing extra-biblical requirements for being a church.” An obstacle gets in the way of spontaneous multiplication when church planters or sending agencies require things such as church buildings, paid staff, or academically trained leadership in order for a group of believers to be defined as a church (Garrison 1999:49). These things may or may not be present in a movement, but to require them is

to sabotage the potential for spontaneous multiplication. Such limitations are restrictive since churches can only be multiplied as quickly as those elements can be reproduced.

I believe that these limitations are even more significant in a global city setting such as New York. The cost of paid staff and facilities may appear insurmountable to a number of believers struggling to live and work in the city, and the cost of infrastructure in a global city increases the need to incorporate approaches to church planting that are able to reproduce naturally within the cultural setting. These conditions seem to make organic church planting a logical strategic step towards multiplying disciples.

### ***Loss of a Valued Cultural Identity***

Cross-cultural workers should “avoid creating a loss of a valued cultural identity.” When missionaries enter a host culture, it is vital that they avoid imposing foreign cultural values upon the host culture. Churches must be indigenous to the culture in which they are planted, and missionaries should be sure to teach the gospel rather than their own home culture (Garrison 1999:49-50). For example, churches planted in Kenya should be Kenyan, not American. Churches planted in Japan among Japanese should be culturally Japanese, not English or Korean transplants. Churches planted in the city need not reflect suburbia. An urban model may be inappropriate for many rural areas. This principle should be applied in every context. However, it has been my experience that it is significantly more challenging to determine when this is taking place in an age of globalization in urban multicultural contexts. How is the church adapting to the ever-changing nature of urban environments? How much should new churches among marginalized populations reflect the subculture verses helping them connect with the dominant culture, especially when both mainstream culture and the many urban subcultures influence one another in a continuum of adaptation and change? Also, in a multicultural setting loss of one’s cultural identity may simply be subtle. The cultural

distance between the missionary and the recipient of the gospel is likely to be much less; however, cultural identities are present and need to remain intact if spontaneous expansion is to occur through existing cultural streams. This research seeks to discover how organic church planters are addressing missiological issues in light of the many diverse cultural identities that exist in the city. The urban setting raises complex questions that will likely require creative solutions.

### ***Overcoming Bad Examples of Christianity***

In some contexts missionaries will have to overcome “bad examples of Christianity.” When churches have been planted in various settings that have resulted in unorthodoxy or a nominal Christianity mixed with immorality, it will be difficult for missionaries and new indigenous leaders to convince potential converts of the value of Christianity. Even behaviors that would not necessarily be considered immoral may hinder natural multiplication such as lack of zeal for evangelism and local church planting. This lack of missional involvement may have an impact on other new believers as well generating a church culture among the new converts that is passive when it comes to mission (Garrison 1999:50). As a missiologist living in New York, I can easily list several high profile unorthodox religious sects associated to varying degrees with Christianity. “Bad examples of Christianity” abound in the city.

How do organic church planters, as well as other missional practitioners, overcome the spectrum of “bad examples of Christianity” and the various negative reactions to these examples as expressed within the larger culture? While this paper does not attempt a definitive solution, organic church planting may provide a limited, but helpful, response. Organic churches function within natural relationships, and they may possess the ability to navigate religious tensions through the apologetics of relationships,

natural growth patterns in contrast to high profile marketing, and fresh efforts of contextualization among urban populations.

### ***Non-Reproducible Church Models***

“Non-reproducible church models” can easily hinder the potential for spontaneous movement. “Whenever missionaries begin planting churches with components that cannot be reproduced by the people themselves, they have undermined a church planting movement.” Garrison points out that church planting movements will adjust appropriately to the host culture in whatever setting it is initiated. “If villages are made of bamboo, then church buildings are made of bamboo. In urban areas, cells or house churches emulate family structures instead of a congregational structure that requires expensive buildings used exclusively for worship meetings” (Garrison 1999:50).

### ***Subsidies Creating Dependency***

Although it may be with good intentions, “subsidies creating dependency” can stunt natural church multiplication. Whenever the gospel is carried to a new population by a missionary, there is generally a need to support the missionary from the outside. However, when outside support creates dependency among the local people, it can stifle a church planting movement (Garrison 1999:51). Urban settings are particularly challenging as they are considerably more expensive than rural areas.

### ***Extra-Biblical Leadership Requirements***

“Extra-biblical leadership requirements” may decrease church multiplication because churches can only be planted as fast as leaders may be produced under these extra requirements. In the New Testament a desire to serve Jesus and the development of

Christian character are profiled as leadership qualities in church as opposed to formal education, ordination, or other institutional requirements (Garrison 1999:51).

### ***Linear, Sequential Thought and Practice***

Catalysts of church planting movements often avoid “linear, sequential thought and practice.” Missionaries that have been involved in developing church planting movements have come to understand that such a development doesn’t necessarily come through a step-by-step process. Instead of strict linear thinking, workers move in a more multifaceted approach. For example, evangelism begins from day one and continues through language learning. Disciple-making doesn’t start at conversion, but rather it begins with the first encounter. New converts are nurtured toward conversion as potential disciples from the very beginning. As a result, conversion is a continuation of the process that has already begun (Garrison 1999:51-52).

### ***Planting Frog Rather Than Lizard Churches***

Garrison uses the metaphor of planting *frog* rather than *lizard* churches. He writes, “Frog churches perceive themselves as ends in themselves sitting complacent expecting the lost to come to them in search of salvation.” However, lizard churches seek out the lost. Like a lizard seeking after food, these churches pursue the unreached where they are. Lizard churches go where the lost are rather than expecting the lost to come to them. A lizard can adapt, may change its appearance, sacrifice its tail, and search aggressively. This can be described as a more fluid approach to church that leads to a realistic expectation of missional engagement with the surrounding culture. On the other hand, frog churches are not likely to result in church planting movements (Garrison 1999:52). Garrison’s description lizard churches essentially describes the concept of

missional church. A frog church seeks to attract outsiders and then waits for them to come to it while lizard churches go out and find outsiders bringing the gospel to them.

### ***Prescriptive Strategies***

Finally, church planting movements are the work of God. Therefore, the use of “prescriptive strategies” may inhibit a cross-cultural worker from giving attention to what God may already be doing in the host culture. He or she arrives with their own set of answers despite the context or the need to ask difficult missiological questions. A non-prescriptive approach does not assume ignorance, but it does leave room for critical contextualization. The actions of the missionary do matter; however, this work does involve a humble attitude and dependence on God’s leadership (Garrison 1999:52). An organic process involves a learning-and-adapting-while-doing approach.

### ***Getting Practical***

In his reflection on church planting movements, Garrison describes the beginning of their discovery of these church planting movements when a conversation with David Watson took place. Following Watson’s report on what was happening in India, the leadership of his mission agency was highly skeptical of the kind of multiplication being reported among indigenous people in what was an extremely difficult part of Asia, but as the external auditors came to examine the progress of the work, they discovered thousands of new disciples multiplying healthy churches (Garrison 2004:15-16).

In recent years, David Watson has begun to offer training and resources from his experience as a practitioner and trainer with church planting movements. After reading Garrison’s description of church planting movements and working to develop organic church planting in the context of New York City, I hoped to learn from the practical

processes that have been applied by experienced church planters in the context of church planting movements, and I pursued the opportunity for a discussion with David Watson.

Watson points out that Bible study and church planting methods must be “reproducible by the person lowest on the totem pole.” Methods that lead to church planting must be able to be reproduced by the common believer. If they can only be reproduced by the most gifted personnel, multiplication of churches will only take place to the degree that those types of leaders are available (Watson 2008).

Watson outlines a process for church planting that leads to spontaneous multiplication by indigenous leaders.

- Developing access to the community. Watson suggests that this is the most difficult step. It involves the process of a missionary gaining access to indigenous people and building relationships within the host community.
- Finding the person of peace. The concept of the person of peace will be discussed more at a later point in this paper. The person of peace is a person of influence in the host community and provides the opening for the spread of the gospel.
- Moving from working with the person of peace to helping the person of peace work with their family and friends. In order to plant churches, the missionary must look beyond the person of peace to their circles of influence.
- Initiating a Bible study. The person of peace gathers his or her friends and family. This is an inductive Bible study that helps participants realize obedience to the gospel through an inductive process of self-discovery of truth and learning of new habits.
- Seeing the Bible study evolve into a church community (Watson 2008).

This church planting approach describes a process for developing new churches through disciple-making activity within culture. The diagram of the church planting continuum in Appendix A illustrates the process of church planting, with the movement from accessing relationships in the community to discovering the person of peace to seeing a spiritual community emerge as a result.<sup>4</sup> Although the diagram appears as a

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<sup>4</sup> The Church Planting Continuum in Appendix A was developed by Joe Hernandez to demonstrate this process. While working as the North American church planting coordinator with City Team ministries,

linear process, it attempts to demonstrate the overlapping functions and activities within the process rather than purely sequential steps.

Watson (2008) explains that seeing this process evolve from the first days of entering a new community to accessing relationships to multiplying churches on average involves a process of approximately four years. He explains that initiating church planting movements requires strategic behaviors that are counter-intuitive for most church planters. He insists that spontaneous expansion means starting slow to grow fast and starting small to grow big (2009). His focus is on exponential growth that builds steady momentum over time.

In his dialogue with Bob Roberts, Watson points out that “church planting movements” is meant to be a descriptive term. Church planting movements are actually the result of making disciples and training them for obedience. “Watson likes the term ‘gospel planting’ because we plant the gospel and train obedience and the result is churches. The focus is not on the act of church planting itself” (Roberts 2008:30).

Curtis Sergeant, who worked among church planting movements in China and helped conduct the church planting movement research with Garrison, observes that some basic dynamics of ministry are different in the United States when compared to what he witnessed among church planting movements. He explains:

The perception of what discipleship is, I think, different here than in CPM’s [church planting movements]. I’m familiar with it in terms of just the overall environment. He says, I think it is true that it is an advantage in some ways to be in more of a persecuted environment, because there are, in a sense, fewer distractions and you don’t have to deal with casual or nominal Christians because you’d be crazy [to be nominal] (Sergeant 2008).

Cole argues that church planting that leads to a multiplying movement follows a process that begins at the micro level. He teaches that church planters must first focus on

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he created this diagram to illustrate the church planting process associated with David Watson, who also serves with City Team ministries.

making disciples. From among new disciples, leaders begin to emerge. As leaders multiply, so do churches. When churches are naturally multiplying, a movement begins to emerge. Cole (2007) insists that organic church planters must think—disciples, leaders, churches, movements—in that order. This emphasis of placing disciple-making and leadership development ahead of church planting reorients the process of church multiplication back to a focus on the growth of people rather than the building of structures.

Sergeant (2008) points out that in the church planting movements that he's observed there is a mutual accountability to both practicing the faith and also to pass it on to others. He sees this type of mutual accountability as rare in churches in the United States, but it is understood as a natural part of discipleship in church planting movements.

According to those who have had key involvement in the spontaneous expansion of the church through organic church planting, discipleship is the essential component. Seeing spontaneous expansion as a reality, disciple making takes center stage.

While McGavran instructs that the development of people movements takes place over significant time (1990:223), Watson (2008) points out that, in his observations, wherever there is a history of a strong traditional church, church multiplication typically moves more slowly. Naturally, I couldn't help but make the connection to the North American setting. There are certainly challenges to be considered when seeking spontaneous multiplication in a North American city.

### *Summary*

Roland Allen desired to see the missionary enterprise move beyond practices that reflected Western colonialism and empower new believers in China to take hold of the gospel and churches in the cultural context relative to the early twentieth century. Garrison reports that this phenomenon is occurring in many settings today. As I read

through the work by Garrison, conducted research interviews with key leaders in the city, and experimented with organic church planting practices in New York, I felt a growing need to seek out additional insight on actual processes involved in contemporary church planting movements. Conversations with and presentations by David Watson, Curtis Sergeant, and Neil Cole began to provide even more practical frameworks for understanding the dynamics for spontaneous expansion of the church in contemporary contexts. As I examine efforts to catalyze spontaneous expansion in a North American urban setting, these principles and observations will continue to be informative throughout this study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **NEW YORK CITY AS A CONTEXT FOR THE SPONTANEOUS EXPANSION OF THE CHURCH**

The very nature of organic church planting invites a discussion over context. The intention of organic church planters is to bring the gospel into a society, community, or people group and to allow the host culture to provide the ecclesial structures based on natural relational rhythms and their cultural expressions of the gospel. A church is meant to grow up naturally from the gospel being planted in a person of influence or group.

In this chapter, I will describe cultural dimensions in New York City, the context of this study, and the implications for church planting in this specific urban setting. New York represents many of the contemporary cultural issues facing the church. It is set in an emerging post-Christendom environment, and the cultural landscape is certainly a stage for the workings of globalization in local and translocal cultures. As a quintessential global city, I uncovered three factors that may have an effect on the spontaneous expansion of the church through organic church planting in New York City. Economic polarization, global diversity, and cultural influence are to be found in most urban environments; however, New York City is a dynamic illustration of these issues at work in a global city environment.

Organic church planters in New York City will continue to confront numerous challenges and societal changes. In a postcolonial, urban, global society new challenges and opportunities face the church. During the twentieth century a new realization began to creep in that Christians are challenged to embrace a status as foreigners in a hostile world rather than the previous vision of a powerful and central Christendom (Luzbetak

2002:104). It is in this environment that organic church planters are reaching for a spontaneous expansion of church.

### ***Emerging Culture***

Few would argue whether or not we live in times of extreme change. Organic church planters in New York are working in the midst of immense cultural challenges and constant change. Brian D. McLaren compares the cultural shifts in Western society to tectonic plates shifting. He highlights the numerous changes that have taken place over the last century—automobiles, radio, air travel, birth control, antibiotics, the internet, microwave, and human genome project as some prolific and popular examples—and argues that all of these changes that have taken place within a century are comparable to tectonic shifts moving in fast forward. He also illustrates the current cultural shifts with the example of mapping. He explains that much like mapping after the discovery of the Americas or the fall of the Soviet Union, we now face a new world that requires a new map. Old maps simply don't work for this new world (McLaren 1998:1-13). In order to navigate society as it now exists, we need to become oriented to new realities and operate under new sets of assumptions. As a result, the church faces significant challenges as it seeks to understand a new world. Religious and cultural change is apparent across the Western cultural landscape. Organic church planting provides an opportunity for fresh contextualization in this changing culture.

### **Post-Christendom**

The church in North America confronts a new cultural reality. While there is an abundance of conversations about post-modernity, post-Christendom is an emerging and parallel reality requiring the attention of churches in North America. In my research findings, Pete recognizes that among Albanian immigrants Christendom approaches to

outreach will likely fail to make a significant impact. A more contextualized and relational approach is necessary. In many cases organic church planting seeks to reach the increasing populations of both immigrants and natives in North America outside of the reach of a Christendom culture.

To begin to understand post-Christendom, we must understand Christendom. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch draw a distinction between Christianity of the early church and the culture of Christendom as the predominant worldview in the western world. They describe early Christianity as a “dynamic, revolutionary, social and spiritual movement,” but the shift to Christendom was to establish “a religious institution with its attendant structures, priesthood, and sacraments” (Frost and Hirsch 2003:8).

Christendom often describes the interaction between Christianity as an established religion and the rest of the broader culture. The background of Christendom relates to the church as a legal status in European religious and political history. However, “‘Christendom’ also describes the functional reality of what took place specifically in the North American setting.” Church culture in North America took part in shaping a dominant “Christian culture” (Guder and Barrett 1998:48). Regardless of whether one believes Christendom is of value or is a liability to the cause of Christ, the religious landscape is changing, and church planters in New York are working in the midst of this change of cultural tides.

Stuart Murray defines the shift to post-Christendom as “the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence” (Murray 2004:18).

A paradigm shift from Christendom to post-Christendom is significant for church planters. For instance, for members of a society that are influenced by a culture of Christendom, evangelism can assume that many, if not most, of those in the culture

recognize the Bible as having a high moral authority. The Bible can almost universally be utilized as a starting point in evangelistic conversations. However, as I teach evangelism in a variety of settings, I regularly attempt to communicate the need to adapt previous assumptions to the new culture. While I always want to get unbelievers into the Christian Scriptures due to my personal experience witnessing the transforming power of God's Word, the authority of Scripture can no longer be assumed as the starting point for evangelistic discourse. If a secular member of society neither believes the Bible as a source of truth nor sees it as having authority, it is not enough to say: "Because the Bible says so." It is simply not possible to embrace the same assumptions in a post-Christendom context as in a culture described as Christendom. Today, as I stroll through a used bookstore in upper Manhattan, the only Bible I can find is on the shelf labeled mythology. Post-Christendom is a new reality confronting the church.

For church planters, an organic approach may allow for the possibility of fresh contextualization to naturally occur in post-Christendom contexts. Over the centuries, Christianity has adapted to new cultural conditions in various parts of the world. Murray makes the point: "Whether post-Christendom is post-Christian or not will depend on whether we can re-imagine Christianity in a world we no longer control. Christendom is dying, but a new and dynamic Christianity could arise from its ashes" (Murray 2004:8).

### **Post-Imperialist**

Again, much energy has been poured into the conversation about modernism and the present shift to a postmodern society, and much of this conversation has been helpful. McLaren weighs in on conversations about postmodernism by describing the debate on transitions from modernism to postmodernism as only one side of a coin. He suggests that the parallel conversation relates to colonialism and post colonialism (2007:142-144). I appreciate McLaren's point. It demonstrates a global perspective in light of post-

modern shifts, and in the cultural setting of New York City a global perspective that takes into account international worldviews is exceedingly important.

While there is an ongoing academic discussion on post-colonialism that I indeed acknowledge here, I am specifically interested in an increasing focus on indigenous leadership in relation to missiological activities. This expression of post-colonialism may present new opportunities for the church. Perhaps if post-colonialism is an emerging worldview in Western—not to mention, global—society, North American leaders educated in modern institutions may begin to find value in lessons learned from churches and church movements in developing countries. There is certainly much to learn. In addition worldviews emerging among minority and marginal populations in Western urban contexts may experience an increased sense of local empowerment. Realizing Allen's longing for a movement of an indigenous faith, organic church planting calls for post-colonialism to come home.

### **Globalization**

The world is shrinking. That is, cultures and religious worldviews from around the globe are mixing and mingling in local spheres. However, predicting the exact direction of globalization is difficult. In many respects, globalization is still unfolding (Hanciles 2008:37). Nevertheless, "it is clear that we are moving into a new era in which all humans are becoming part of one global history. The planet has become for us a single whole. All crucial problems have become world problems, and nothing essential can happen anywhere that does not concern us all" (Hiebert 1999:97).

As church planters teach the gospel to new believers and seek to initiate new Christian communities, they are confronting an increasingly connected world where local and global converge. While the church in the West comes to terms with a post-imperialistic Christianity and church planters learn to evangelize increasingly post-

Christendom populations, shifts across the globe are having an impact in North American cities.

These emigrations reflect the emergence of a post-colonial, post-European world, where U.S. citizens are increasingly as likely to be Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist as they are Protestant, Catholic, or Jew. This new situation presents yet another level of challenge for a country that has thought of itself as a Christian nation, and for most of its history, even more narrowly, as a Protestant nation. Consequently, the decision of whether to be a Christian civilization or embrace a diaspora model of Christian life is playing itself out not only in Asian culture but in North American culture as well (Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis 2008:99-100).

There is little doubt that the current cultural climate raises significant challenges for missionary workers. It is in the midst of this continuum of change that organic church planters are reaching for a spontaneous expansion of the church within urban space

### *City Movements?*

If the church is to become a missional presence in the West once again, it is also going to embrace its identity as an urban movement. The world moved beyond the fifty percent mark as a planet that is mostly urban somewhere around the turn of the century. Some argue that the populations of cities are evolving into a common personhood rooted in an urban ethos and lifestyle (Clark 1996:1-4). Although others claim that a global pluralism—though interconnected—continues to persist with renewed complexity (see Hanciles 2008). While contextualization will continue to require missiologists to collect local anthropological insights, possessing an understanding of urban dynamics may be one of the next crucial disciplines for mission practitioners.

This study is set in New York City, a quintessential global city. It has commonly been referred to as the cross roads of the world. As a New Yorker, I walk out the door of my building, and encounter dozens of ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. Buses, trains, and cars carry their passengers in, out, and through the city's neighborhoods in an interconnected network of urban mobility. I heard it said once, that when a person can't

tell the difference between national news and local news, it might be an indication that he or she lives in New York City. The city is full of contrast. Once as I walked in front of one of Manhattan's premier museums, I noticed a stretch limousine parked on the same city block as a bicycle powered rickshaw. New York City is a cultural mosaic representing the panorama of urban reality.

Timothy J. Keller points out that without intentional engagement in the city, the church's influence becomes nearly irrelevant in the larger culture (Keller and Thompson 2002:45). Today cities are where it is conceivable that the church might bring rich and poor to the same table. Cities are where the discourse of society takes place. While cities have always had a regional impact, cities are now the headquarters of global influence. Gaining an understanding of the dynamics of global cities will help play a part in deciphering the issues impacting church multiplication through organic church planting in urban space.

### **The Global City**

Global cities are studied as a particular type of urban space. Saskia Sassen, who produced a seminal and much discussed work on the global city, focuses on New York City, London, and Tokyo as the archetypes of this powerful urban force in the global village. Sassen explains the phenomenon of global cities this way:

Beyond their long history as centers for international trade and banking, these cities now function in four new ways: first, as highly concentrated command points in the organization of the world economy; second, as key locations for finance and for specialized service firms which have replaced manufacturing as the leading economic sectors; third, as sites of production, including the production of innovations, in these leading industries; and fourth, as markets for the products and innovations produced....The fundamental dynamic posited here is that the more globalized the economy becomes, the higher the agglomeration of central functions in a relatively few sites, that is, the global cities (2001:5).

The label, global city, is the result of being ranked by urban analysts based on a set of criteria that ranks cities worldwide ordering them into a sort of global urban hierarchy. The Globalization and World Cities Research Network (GaWC) based primarily in Loughborough University in England places New York City at the top of this pyramid of urban influence (GaWC 2008).

The key factors regarding the setting of the global city that have the most bearing on this study are those dynamics of life on the ground. What shape does life take among populations of global cities, and how do these factors relate to church multiplication—whether positively or negatively—through organic church networks? I have identified three areas that deserve attention.

### *Economics*

One of the primary means for understanding global cities is to understand the economic dimensions of a globalized city. Sassen claims that one of the characteristics of the global city is the widening distribution of resources. Economic polarization is descriptive of these dynamic cities. With an increase in urban gentrification and a kind of gravitational pull of the global city among cultural elites, there is a larger portion of high income residents and commercial enterprises finding their home in global cities. As a result, there is an increased need to supply low-wage service sector jobs, therefore attracting low wage earners, to meet the service demands of this high end population. In addition, with the decrease of the manufacturing sector, there is a decrease in these employment opportunities coupled with the increase in the service sector (Sassen 2001:8-10). Mark Abrahamson illustrates polarization in the global city this way:

New York, like other global cities, has a lower class that provides luxury services for upper class professionals and their families. One New York historian observed that “when the upper class catches a cold,” as in the aftermath of the World Trade Center destruction, “those who rely upon them catch pneumonia” (2004:24-25).

C.M. Hamnett argues that Sassen's case for such extreme economic polarization may be true for New York or Los Angeles but is not the case for a wider range of global cities (1994:401-424). However, I do not find Hamnett's case to be compelling. There appears to be wide agreement on Sassen's theory of economic polarization. Even Hamnett agrees that such economic polarization is a factor in New York City, the setting for our study. After surveying the pertinent literature, I believe that cities like New York and Los Angeles simply represent the most extreme cases due to their attractiveness to elites and opportunities afforded to those who serve them. It is likely that some degree of economic polarization is taking place in most global cities, and therefore, this aspect of life in global city environments will be relevant to a wide range of readers.

Global cities are command and control centers, and much of the unjust economic practices on a global scale may be linked to these urban centers of power (Abrahamson 2004:107). It is a widely accepted theory that global cities produce significant polarization between the social classes. While cities such as New York contain large affluent populations, global cities also "tend to have large, dense groups of very poor people" (Scott 2001:285).

While polarization is a reality for the global city, this dynamic will have an impact on the efforts of church planters in the city. It may increase the strategic relevance of organic church planting among the rather large populations of urban working class and poor due to the high costs of living associated with these urban settings coupled with low wages. This urban environment challenges the potential church involvement of the working classes and poor, and small organic churches are intended to be adaptable to this challenge. In New York City middle class populations are squeezed by the cost-of-living conditions, and during the last decade a large exodus of middle class residents have fled the city (see Giles 2009). While outgoing populations may be replaced quickly by incoming immigrants, such out-migration from the city will likely

cause strain on many church planting efforts due to high turn-over in urban populations. For example, Bronx Fellowship and the Bridge have both experienced significant turnover. For the Bridge, this turnover is due to targeting a transient population among international students studying in Ivy League institutions. However, Bronx Fellowship has experienced a significant flow of individuals and households attributed to these economic factors in New York City.

Nevertheless, an organic approach has low economic requirements. Buildings and high cost programs are not likely to be easily reproducible by local people among poorer populations. An organic approach relies heavily on the resources available to local populations. In addition, organic processes in urban space may nurture realism leading to contextualization that reflects indigenous culture in light of the stresses of urban life. Often imported church models mirror a context that is foreign to the new host culture. In a global city context the demands of an urban lifestyle may impact the shape of volunteerism, team development, and time available for mentoring. Organic approaches assume that the gospel is planted and adapts naturally within the streams of the indigenous culture.

Equally challenging, urban elites are accustomed to receiving services, and serving through the basin and towel will be a significant paradigm shift for affluent urbanites. The polarization of the global city may indicate that church planters will find themselves in the tension of extreme wealth in juxtaposition of struggling poor, the uneducated, and immigrants. However, God does not show favoritism. The gospel will challenge the wealthy and achieving professionals to live a life of service and share equal status with their working class neighbors.

As a challenge to church planting, high economic demands may have an impact on the availability and energy level of the average citizen due to an intensive environment of productivity in a highly competitive economic system. This tension challenges

disciple-making since it is a life-on-life activity. Urban life presents demanding daily realities. For instance, New York City boasts the longest average commute of any city in the United States. New Yorkers spend one week per year commuting to and from work (Buckner 2004). If discipleship development and training takes place through hands-on mentoring, then the lack of availability of the urban resident could potentially slow the process of church development and multiplication. However, organic processes do provide for a degree of fluidity to move church planting into space where various life rhythms are already taking place. An organic approach to disciple making may allow for creative processes and fluid structures to develop. Organic church planting raises the possibility of developing Christian community in the context of the marketplace, and evangelistic initiatives following organic processes may flow through economic streams of relationship.

### ***Immigration and Urban Diversity***

While Sassen establishes the profile of the global city primarily on the foundation of economics, Abrahamson makes a significant contribution to this study by attempting to use a wider lens in order to understand global cities and their impact. “One of the defining features of most global cities is that they are destinations of large numbers of highly diverse groups of immigrants. The major exceptions are in Asia, notably Tokyo and Singapore” (Sassen 2004:48).

As immigration streams continue to impact New York, a quintessential global city, a cultural dynamic emerges. When I first moved to New York City, I met with an experienced Christian leader and missiological thinker in a Queens neighborhood. While this leader has gone on to be with the Lord, his impact as a coach of numerous church planters is still felt today. As I sat with him, I asked about his observations of cultural dynamics in New York City and the implication for church planting movements. One of

the issues that he highlighted was “a constant state of assimilation.” There is a constant spectrum of cultural change shifting from first generation immigrants to the succeeding generations. He pointed out that many of the church planting movements described in Garrison’s research take place in more traditional societies or more monolithic people groups—at least monolithic relative to the New York cultural environment. In these monolithic people groups the gospel must move through relatively few cultural changes. However, New York City is in a constant state of change across a broad cultural continuum (Reitz 2001).

Roger Waldinger makes the point stating: “the time frame for assimilation extends across generations” (2001:312). As immigrants flow into global cities, they often live between cultural worlds. They raise families in a host culture while reaching across an ocean through transnational activities. Simultaneously, subsequent generations represent a continuum of cultural adaptation, conflict, and hybridization. This continuum of diversity means that cultures are in a regular state of change. When immigrants are living in a city, their existence equals the emergence of new cultural groupings and social interactions in that space (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000).

One example of this “constant state of assimilation” is found in cultural approaches to time. Michel S. Laguerre describes the dynamics of “diasporic temporalities” in New York City. He explains that immigrants assimilate to a host culture at varying rates and often create a hybridization mixing the dominant culture with the immigrant culture, and often two approaches to time—the diasporic and the dominant—exist side by side. Laguerre observes that temporal adjustment and hybridization is often an indication of the degree of assimilation among immigrant groups. He explains:

One must pay attention to the immigrant’s time because it informs the rhythm of socialization in the new country, the speed with which adaptation occurs, group conflicts between different perceptions of time,

generational conflicts among immigrants between parents and children, diasporic holy days and holidays, and the recognition of different temporal perspectives within a given nation (Laguerre 2003:11).

New York City is a center of immigrant culture and constant assimilation. Simultaneously, it is a hub of transnational activity. Martin Albrow describes the phenomenon of transnationalism:

One of the key effects of globalization on locality—namely that people can reside in one place and have their meaningful social relations almost entirely outside it and across the globe—means that people use the locality as a site for resource for social activities in widely differing ways according to the extension of their sociosphere (1997:53).

This reality is important in reflecting on the affects of organic church planting among diaspora populations such as West Africans, Albanians, and international students. Each of these church planting activities discussed in this paper are interacting with global flows and in some cases experiences evangelism, church planting, and leadership outcomes across transnational connections. These findings are significant for missional flows in a globalized world. In addition in a post-colonial society traditional—and perhaps false—missiological dichotomies between “home” and “mission field” become less relevant in the ebb and flow of the global village.

### ***Cultural Influence***

“People from across the world are now simultaneously exposed to the same movies, media, and related products” (Abrahamson 2004:122). The world is connected in new and innovative ways. Much of the power for influencing media bytes that are sent around the globe in seconds is based in a handful of urban centers around the world (2004:121-159).

Because global cities are hubs of power and influence in a global urban network, the potential for the gospel to cross not only cultural barriers but also great distances is a

reality. Global society is increasingly linked through technology as well as the movements of people. David Clark writes:

Such [urban] modes of thought, relationship and behaviour are carried and spread by movements of people and flows of information and ideas well beyond city boundaries so that they influence and may be adopted by populations across the world (1996:13).

Common mediums of communication connect populations around the world; however, much of the ideology and creativity emerges from the world's leading cities. As a global city, New York is "the leader as a cultural and media innovator and as an educational center" (Abu-Lughod 1999:290). Organic church planters in New York are making disciples and catalyzing Christian communities in the midst of significant cultural influence that potentially touches nearly every corner of the globe.

### **New York City as a Global City Context**

As a global city, New York City is a center of economics, internationalism, and cultural discourse. Due to the convergence of global flows in urban space, organic church planting is confronted by the realities of this convergence. In New York, by definition, organic church planters communicate the gospel and contextualize community within urban diversity and influence.

Planting churches in New York City includes both challenges and opportunities. As the gospel enters into spheres of extensive cultural influence, Christian community is formed in the midst of extreme diversity. Disciple-making, as a relational activity, adapts to the street level impact of economic dominance in the global city. As a result, these communities are often faced with unjust economic systems. Organic church planters in New York City are agents of missiological advancement in the West as they confront and embrace the implications of the global city environment.

### *Summary*

Organic church planters in New York City are making disciples and developing Christian community in a changing and complex context. Post-Christendom is emerging as a reality in North American cities, and post-colonialism influences cultural attitudes among diverse human interactions. As globalization becomes a normative backdrop for urban life, global cities emerge with significant challenges and opportunities for mission.

The paradoxical nature of organic church planting is the way in which it employs simple approaches to disciple making right in the middle of a globally complex urban space. Organic church planters develop simple approaches to disciple-making as a process of addressing global complexity in urban space. As a multiplicity of cultures interact and evolve in the context of the city, organic processes call for indigenous communities to emerge that reflect the cultural streams of diverse urban life. Organic church planters are wrestling with the economic impact on daily life in the city and in some cases are demonstrating dynamic interaction with transnational realities embedded in the process of globalization. Later in my research findings chapter, I will highlight organic church planters' response to the global city context.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODS AND COMMUNITIES PROFILED**

In this chapter I highlight my approach to this research as a missiological practice. Also, I present a brief description of each of the organic church communities that I utilized as case studies in this investigation.

#### *Research Methods*

Social researchers possess a range of research options from which to draw. My particular research will involve the inductive approach, and my write-up will be largely descriptive in nature.

My first step in this process was to review the precedent literature drawing from a variety of applicable disciplines including but not limited to: missiology, church growth, urban studies, globalization, and emerging church literature. Once I established a base of knowledge in the area of organic church planting, urban dynamics, and its connection to a wider body of missiological literature, I conducted a set of interviews with organic church leaders cutting across culture and geography within Metropolitan New York City. In addition, I interviewed a small sampling of participants disciplined in organic church settings in the Bronx. These participant interviews provided me with access to the viewpoint of new and emerging believers in the organic church setting. After analyzing these interviews, I report my findings in Chapter 4.

### *Selecting Case Studies*

Keeping this study focused on selected organic church planting efforts, I used specific criteria to determine communities that are included in this research. Selection was a relatively smooth process as I am already in relationship to varying degrees with virtually all of the communities surveyed in this study. While I share a previous relationship with the leaders of these ministries, I sought to align my selection of ministries with specific criteria. As a result, there were also ministries that may have fit most but not all of my criteria, and were therefore necessarily left out of this study.

### **Organic in Nature**

Communities chosen for this research project are organic in nature. They are small communities planted without pre-determined templates, and not every community can be accurately described as a house church. While most of these churches meet in homes, one rents a storefront space while another has met both in a home and in a library of a church building. While sharing a strong affinity for meeting in the setting of apartments or houses, their alignment with embracing organic processes was given priority in the selection process. Each of the communities studied can be described as organic churches established with a relational paradigm for ministry.

### **A Missional Impulse**

Each of these communities studied were planted with an impulse for mission. Actual outcomes resulting from this missional impulse vary from community to community; however, every church planting effort in this study may be described as possessing a desire to participate in God's mission in the city. Although some of these churches or networks are being facilitated by indigenous leaders, all of the communities studied have also been influenced by missionary church planters. I have determined their

missional impulse by evaluating whether they are involved with incarnational outreach efforts and share a vision for church multiplication.

### ***Incarnational Outreach***

Each of these communities can be described as reaching out through an incarnational approach. I define incarnational outreach as an intentional effort to evangelize and offer compassionate action to others through relationships with a high degree of congruence to the host culture. In the context of this study, most church planters live and work within proximity of the people or community they are reaching, and coaching for church planters has generally taken place within the indigenous church planters context within a ministry partnership characterized by mutuality. There is an honest attempt for the means or methods of outreach to match with the cultural context where churches are being planted. While the cultural mosaic in New York is easily considered to be complex, sincere efforts to incarnationally reach out to others was taken into account when selecting organic church planting ministries to be included in this research.

### ***Multiplication Impulse***

The leadership in every community that I studied views multiplication as an important part of their missionary practice. Some of the communities surveyed have multiplied and now exist as a network of organic churches. Some of the organic churches studied have yet to multiply; however, each of these communities includes an articulated value for church multiplication. Even though some of these communities have not realized their desire for multiplication, all of these communities share an understanding of ministry that is decentralized. While the amount of efforts applied toward

multiplication and multiplication outcomes vary, a general positive attitude towards multiplication helped determine selection for this investigation.

### ***Communities Profiled***

In this section I will briefly describe each of the case studies surveyed in this research.<sup>1</sup> Each community profiled is located in or around New York City, and each community exists as an outcome of organic church planting.

### **The Bridge**

I conducted multiple interviews with Kevin King, planter of The Bridge, and I also interviewed additional leaders in this church network. When King began working as an urban missionary with World Team, a non-denominational mission organization, he faced the decision of what kinds of churches he would be planting. The target group that he was seeking to reach for the cause of Christ was international students studying at Columbia University and New York University in Manhattan. His goal was to reach students who came from some of the nations that are most unreached by the gospel and train them to become evangelistic workers as they returned home to their country of origin. Unlike many immigrants, many of these constituents will likely return home or relocate to other far reaching parts of the world because many international students studying in prestigious Manhattan universities, such as Columbia University, are being sponsored by their families or an organization back home with the intention of returning to work in multinational corporations, academia, or government.

Informed by this goal, King explained to me that he realized that it would be important to model a form of church structure that is easily reproducible by lay persons in

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<sup>1</sup> Each of the case study interview referred to in this paper are listed in Appendix B.

countries that lack a strong institutional church presence. Knowing that internationals returning to locations across Asia would likely lack a large core group, experienced praise bands, or sizeable church planting budgets, he decided on a church experience that would model a simpler form of Christian community. From these simpler forms of community, internationals could conceivably contextualize appropriately for their home environment. King emphasizes that in the beginning he did not have any particular bias towards organic churches meeting in homes. He simply realized that he had to plant the kinds of churches that could be easily reproducible by believers in their indigenous context, and he recognized that reproducible approaches to church needed to be experienced by those who would carry the gospel with them. Learning needed to take place through experience rather than only receiving information. By generating churches with a low infrastructure or ongoing organizational maintenance or need for heavy funding, he sought to model church in its basic form to allow new converts to experience an organic approach to Christian community.

The Bridge has normally involved between two and six house churches. Because The Bridge seeks to convert, mentor, and train individuals who are intentionally transient and will move on from New York City to other parts of the world, the number of house churches increases and decreases with regular fluctuation. At times, when a person is trained to lead a house church and is a potential candidate for planting churches in their indigenous context, it is often time for them to graduate from their degree program and move on. While this inward and outward flow of people is congruent with the overall evangelistic goals of The Bridge in light of its vision for a more global impact, it results in a regular rhythm of transition in the life of the community. In order to communicate the vision of The Bridge, King regularly hosts central teaching times in his home in Manhattan and in a home in Queens as well as teaching seminars. In addition he

consistently repeats the values of The Bridge network in an effort to continually shape the worldview of The Bridge participants.

The Bridge is a network of small organic churches that meet in homes currently located in Queens and in Manhattan. During the process of this research, a new church joined the Bridge and soon after multiplied into two churches and later merged back into a single church after releasing some believers who lacked a strong identification with this community. This church was formerly a cell group that transitioned into an autonomous house church, but the leaders regularly felt that it was important to connect with others beyond their church. According to King, this new identification with The Bridge caused some changes in the dynamics of the church network as it now encompasses churches that represent a more established indigenous expression of the New York City population in addition to the international students and educated immigrants that have been the evangelistic focus of The Bridge leadership. Since this research, The Bridge has also begun to expand its efforts to incorporate some of the church planting movement practices mentioned earlier in this paper. As a result, church planting among already existing social groups among international students on campus is beginning to take place.

### **Iglesia de Cristo**

I conducted interviews with Rafael Rosario in the East Elmhurst section of Queens. Rosario is a Dominican immigrant, and while living in Queens, he was a bivocational minister preaching for a small Spanish-speaking Church of Christ located in a predominantly non-Spanish speaking section of lower Manhattan.

When Ben and Susan Cheek graduated from Ohio Valley University in West Virginia and were planning to move to Jersey City, New Jersey, they began conversations with Rosario about working together. Immediately after relocating to Jersey City, Cheek began commuting to Queens and meeting with Rosario and his family, and as a result, a

new church was formed meeting in Rosario's home. After a few months of involvement, Cheek began working with new churches being developed in Bergen County, a suburb in New Jersey, and later in Bayonne, New Jersey. Rosario, who is indigenous to the Spanish-speaking language group and one of the ethnic groups that make up this fellowship, continues to lead this community. After completing his work in New Jersey, Cheek and his family relocated to Flushing, Queens and was involved as a part of this fellowship sharing some of the teaching—with translation—along with Rosario. After some extended involvement with Rosario, Cheek and his family relocated again this time to suburban New Jersey where he is working to develop missional business and worships with an organic church meeting in a home in New Jersey.

Rosario planted this church in his home and has seen this church emerge as a network of small organic churches. Most of the second generation of churches in this network are much smaller missional communities meeting throughout the week and involve a mix of people—some who also participate in the Sunday gathering in Rosario's home and others who only participate in the next generation churches planted in various sections of Queens and meet at various times through the week. While the church meeting in Rosario's home on Sundays represents a primary hub for the network, small organic churches meeting throughout the week serve as an opportunity to form Christian communities among disenfranchised immigrants whose work schedules and daily life demands are consuming and often require responsibilities on the weekends when the initial church plant meets in Rosario's home. Rosario indicates that a decentralized approach to church formation is more realistic when working with the scheduling demands facing this population.

## Saint George Church

Sal Vasquez has experience working with Nicky Cruz Ministries and was himself converted from a gang lifestyle as a youth. He later worked as a youth pastor with two different churches in Staten Island. Ben Cheek and Sal Vasquez met in a monthly church planter training course in New York City and developed a relationship that continued. While living in Jersey City, Cheek continued to assist Vasquez in whatever outreach efforts he could as they spent time discussing church planting processes that could be organic and missional in nature.

Vasquez began his outreach to unbelievers on Staten Island by starting a monthly poetry slam called *Come Vibe With Us* or *The Vibe* at a local coffee shop. The coffee shop, in need of increased patronage, offered the space free of charge. The Vibe is an outreach bringing believers and unbelievers together in safe space. In other words, it is provided as a neutral ground where all voices are welcome and all opinions respected with the hope that the Christian influence will make an impact on those who participate. The Vibe is an artistic outreach that began as a poetry slam but has developed to include music and visual arts as well. Following through on this concept of welcoming all voices in a neutral setting, Christians also tolerate messages often considered offensive to evangelical believers. Vasquez and Cheek have confirmed that young participants have come to faith in Christ through the relationships established at *The Vibe*. Through the relationships established at this venue and from among previous connections already established because of his experience as a youth minister in Staten Island, a gathering was started in the Saint George neighborhood of Staten Island.

Saint George church is designed to draw and engage young adults who are not likely to enter an established church. Vasquez invites the participants to a meal and informs them that there will be spiritual discussions involved. At the time of this writing, they have not instituted any central teaching time as a group during the dinner

discussions, but rather the believers are encouraged to engage in intentional spiritual conversations with the seekers, unbelievers, or recent converts with whom they are sharing the meal. Some of those who were participating were non-Christians while others were Christians who were exploring different forms of ministry.

After some tension between the felt needs of Christians and the felt needs of unbelievers, Saint George's church put its dinner meetings on pause for a time of evaluation. It became evident that many of those who were already Christians were communicating a desire for more conventional forms of church and were struggling to support the vision of a gathering focused on reaching the lost through fellowship and dialogue. According to Vasquez' observations, those who were already Christians were either not well-equipped or unwilling to engage un-reached people during this gathering. As a result, some of the Christians with church backgrounds joined another church plant already in partnership with Vasquez and his efforts.

Saint George's church has resumed its dinner meetings and is largely made up of new converts, seekers, adherents of other religions, and unbelievers. Vasquez is continuing to be involved in The Vibe while initiating additional venues to connect with seekers and unbelievers on Staten Island. He and his wife have launched a multimedia presentation for seekers entitled Awaken.

### **Bronx Fellowship of Christ**

The beginnings of Bronx Fellowship of Christ<sup>2</sup> are traced back to the members of a small church planting team arriving in New York City in summer 2001 and at the beginning of 2002. After some early outreach attempts with limited results, the group eventually did begin to develop relationships with a small sampling of individuals in the

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<sup>2</sup> Bronx Fellowship of Christ is included in this study, and it is a church network that my initial team planted. While I have a direct first person perspective of this organic church community, I have also interviewed participants who have been discipled within the context of Bronx Fellowship.

Bronx and soon assembled a small group of people in a living room in a Bronx apartment.

At that time the leadership conducted church services following a predetermined order of worship and an appointed teacher who would usually use a combination of lecture-style teaching and interactive discussion. After six months of sustained growth and participation from local people, meetings were moved into a rented space in a public school. Shortly after the move, a sense of momentum was lost. While overall attendance dropped for a period of time, a qualitative loss was recognizable as well. Some of the early character qualities that were present at the start of the church were strained after moving into a larger space. However, it didn't take long for the number of attendees to increase once again. A few months after meeting in this setting a new cluster of people came and joined with the church. The number of participants in the church was back up to a level that a new missionary could feel good about. However, even after a numeric resurgence for this new church, other strategic options were considered for both long term sustainability and to move towards the qualitative goals of the church plant.

The church planting leadership had experienced different approaches to church formation—meeting in the past with a house church network when living in San Jose, Costa Rica, working with a cell-based church in West Texas, serving with a large program-driven ministry in inner-city Houston, working cross-culturally with a parish-style church plant in one of the most violent sections of Memphis, and serving with varied involvement with small and medium sized traditional churches both in English and Spanish in various small towns and big cities. Because of these diverse experiences, the leadership team worked through multiple options for the future direction for this community. The group debated internally even as the church was already in process of being planted and growing into a community.

The leadership considered a more organic approach to church planting including advocating for a relational, simple structure to describe church planting activities. Considering the demands of urban life in conjunction with the ministry's theological values for empowering the priesthood of all believers, smaller communities increased the ministry capacity of leaders grappling with demanding urban lifestyles. Understanding that many of these same believers may be completely absent from significant ministry involvement if required to manage heavy organizational infrastructures in light of their availability as citizens of a global city, smaller house churches seemed to be a strategy fitting for developing leaders in an urban environment. After a time of prayer, dialogue, and reflection, the young church plant began to move into functioning as a decentralized network of small house churches meeting mostly in homes. Moving towards a more organic framework has evolved as a process while leaders continued to learn and develop new skill sets needed for involvement in an organic approach to church planting and ongoing missionary activity.

The number of churches—or new groups being developed but not yet identified as churches—in the Bronx Fellowship network has ranged from three to six over the past five years. The dynamics associated with the transient nature of the working poor, struggling immigrants, urban youth culture, and related factors in the Bronx has played a part in regular flux and change in the network. The high turnover among working and middle class populations in New York City has had a significant impact on this community. A large number of participants, including some of the most involved, have relocated outside of the city. In addition, organic churches are sometimes the entry point back into a Christian community for individuals who were hurt by previous religious experience and, admittedly, would not likely venture to join a conventional church body, and eventually some of these individuals migrate back to traditional church settings after a period of growth or emotional healing.

As I report on my research, I have the ability to reflect on observations in this church network. However, because I am directly involved in the direction of this community, in order to include a more holistic reflection of ministry experiences in this network that extend beyond my own reflections, I have interviewed a small sampling of individuals indigenous to the Bronx who are being disciplined within the context of this church network. Though the identity and character of Bronx Fellowship has evolved over the years since its start, it now functions fully as an organic church network.

### **Community of Faith**

Henry and Millie Gomez were members of Manhattan Church of Christ, and with the beginning of Bronx Fellowship, Gomez was inspired to launch a new church plant in Bayonne, New Jersey. Looking back, he confesses that he wanted to find a way to use his own gifts of public speaking and leadership, and he had felt that there were few opportunities to do so without launching out on his own. He explained to me that he feels that his early motivations weren't pure because they were based on his own desires to satisfy his own sense of fulfillment or personal importance rather than God's intentions. Early in the development of this church, its life together shifted to an organic orientation. He feels that his experiences in Community of Faith have helped bring his motives to light, and he says that he repents of what he sees as incorrect motives for ministry.

Community of Faith began in a room in an addiction recovery center in Bayonne. Ben Cheek lived in nearby Jersey City and began to partner with Gomez near the beginning of the church plant. Gomez explained that during the early meetings he would preach to the small group assembled in the room. However, with Cheek's help the church meeting began to become a more discussion oriented and participatory meeting. They changed from preaching to facilitating group discussions. Both Cheek and Gomez have witnessed significant transformation in the lives of those involved in Community of

Faith. They are the only organic church within the scope of this research that has chosen to meet in a rented storefront. Community of Faith sponsors outreach activities such as intentional spiritual discussions for addicts and conversational English courses for immigrants. They have attempted to start additional groups in the past, such as a Bible study in a barber shop and other small group meetings, but these attempts have not yet resulted in church multiplication. When asked about the potential for multiplication, Gomez stresses that it is part of their vision as a community and that he believes it will occur naturally through the missional service of the community. However, he does express an interest in intentionally starting Spanish-speaking churches.

### **Albanian Mission**

Pete is working among Albanians in New York City. Albanians—usually either Catholic or Muslim in religious background—present a unique set of challenges as a people group in the city. I conducted an extensive interview with Pete. We began our interview in a Kosovo café specializing in Burek and finished our interview over cups of coffee in a nearby diner served by an Albanian waitress. So throughout our interview, Pete would switch to conversations in Albanian. From my perspective as the researcher, this dynamic added cultural richness to our interview.

Pete served five years in Albania as a missionary in a church not very unlike churches one might find anywhere in the United States. Following this missionary service, Pete realized that a more family oriented and organic approach to church would likely be more effective among Albanians. After returning from Albania he moved to New York City and began to build relationships and move through the social networks of Albanians in New York's boroughs.

Pete knew from experience that this was a challenging people group when it came to evangelism. Because of the turbulent history of religious and political conflicts that

have taken place in this region, he stressed the importance of building trust among the members of this ethnic community. He spent six years laying foundations among Albanians in New York City. During these six years he utilized partnering churches and volunteers to sponsor social events and traditional Albanian holiday celebrations. Through these and other activities, he began generating significant relationships and connections to the Albanian community.

When Pete initiated the church planting stage of this ministry, he planted two Albanian churches in two separate New York City boroughs within a few months. During the process of this research, while continuing to work with these Albanian churches, he became the senior pastor of a church in New Jersey where he is developing a partnership with a Turkish organic church planter and establishing an additional base of operations for outreach among Albanians. With Pete's leadership, this church in New Jersey has become somewhat of a base of operations for organic church planting among ethnic immigrants and facilitates participatory assemblies on Sunday morning. Pete and I have also discussed the possibility of establishing a Christian community among Albanians in my Bronx neighborhood where one of the largest clusters of this people group resides. However, these conversations have yet to translate into reality.

### **West African Outreach**

Bob works in a project researching unreached people groups in New York City and is producing a text highlighting the unreached people groups residing in New York. He is simultaneously conducting outreach efforts among West African Muslims living in the city. I interviewed Bob on two occasions—once in his Manhattan office and once via telephone.

Bob began reaching out to Muslims by approaching street vendors and other West Africans working in public spaces and sharing Bible stories with them through oral

storytelling as well as distributing audio CD's of oral storytelling drawn from Christian Scriptures in the various West African tribal languages.

Although the disciple-making relationships and groups being planted continue to evolve, at the time of our initial interviews, Bob had formed a few different groups. One group is a multicultural gathering that came together through some of the natural relationships that were formed after moving to the city and beginning outreach efforts. This group is primarily made up of Christians and is what his family considered their church during their early months in the city. In our second interview, Bob informed me that this group had stopped meeting, and he had transitioned into meeting with additional West African groups. Most of the groups are made up of Muslims with whom Bob is in dialogue about the Christian narrative. The majority of Bob's evangelistic activity and community-building takes place predominantly among Muslim West Africans. He also has begun to mentor a West African immigrant pastor and is helping this pastor learn and apply the principles found among church planting movements. This church plant is nearly fifty percent Muslim background people,<sup>3</sup> and the vision for its development will likely apply church planting movement principles to a cell-based approach involving an assembly that will serve as a central hub and any number of organic cells or house churches made up primarily of Francophone West Africans converted from Islam and meeting throughout the city.

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<sup>3</sup> Bob, as a people group researcher, points out that there are very few outreaches that truly identify with Muslims in New York City. According to Bob, most ethnic outreaches among typically Muslim people groups in New York are oftentimes actually working among the Christian minorities of the various African, Asian, and Eastern European cultural groups. Bob points out that this West African church with approximately fifty percent Muslim-background participants and the ministry to Albanians led by Pete described above are the few rare examples of missional work among Muslims.

## **Christ Communities**

Paul and Teresa Gomez moved to Manhattan with the intention of starting organic churches. Upon arrival, Paul Gomez, a veteran church planter from Texas, served as an associate pastor with a new presentation-style conventional church plant appealing to the arts and young professional community in lower Manhattan. After assisting this new church, he accepted an offer to serve as the church planting director for a Southern Baptist organization in New York City. While serving in this position, he gained a co-worker who had previously been serving as a strategy coordinator with the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptists in Central Asia. Together they attempted some outreach efforts in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in partnership with a local church in that community. After reconsidering their involvement there, they each started a new church meeting in a home in their respective neighborhoods. Gomez' partner in Brooklyn began a church mostly among younger Christians whom he mentored and coached while he developed relationships with his Muslim neighbors living in Brooklyn. Gomez started a new community in their home mostly involving seekers and unbelievers meeting in Battery Park City near the bottom of Manhattan. Most of our interview focused on this church that was being planted among a predominantly non-Christian and mostly secular community in Manhattan.

After a two year initial commitment, Paul's partner relocated to Florida while another married couple participating in the church in Brooklyn moved to North Carolina where they began preparations to relocate as missionaries to an undisclosed country in the Middle East.

I met up with Paul Gomez, founder of Christ Communities, in a coffee shop in Manhattan where I conducted my research interview. However, he eventually moved out of New York, and due to the early stage of his organic church planting efforts, Christ

Communities ceased to exist. Nevertheless, my interview with Gomez makes a significant contribution to this investigation.

### *Limitations*

Among the potential limitations involved in my study is the youthfulness of organic church planting as an approach within North America. While it appears to be a growing trend, it is still quite new in its current form as applied to North American culture. As a subject of study, there is not a lengthy historical timeline involving organic church planting in any North American urban setting. This means that there is little ground for testing well-established church networks that demonstrate a long history of an evangelistic impact over the course of time.

In addition I am largely limited to the perspective of church planting leaders. While I have access to some organic church participants, this access does not cut across the entire spectrum of organic communities studied. In some cases there is a language barrier. In other situations making an individual the subject of a study may be considered sensitive by the related church planter due to evangelistic processes in the midst of a post-Christendom worldview. Therefore, I made the choice to primarily interview organic church leaders. However, I also involved some organic church participants in the setting of the Bronx.

### *Strengths and Weaknesses*

There are inherent strengths and weaknesses involved in the research process. I find that the most evident strengths and weaknesses are connected to my own role in the research. While my own status as an organic church planter brings with it a certain bias, it also affords me a level of trust among other organic church planters. As an insider among organic church planters, I am well connected on the local as well as the national

arena with many respected leaders involved in organic church planting. This insider status is helpful for researching organic church planting. Some organic church planters have felt ridiculed or pressured by outsiders to the organic church experience in North America. This feeling of being under the microscope as to the validity of their methods could either cause church planters to feel they need to validate themselves or to cut off access to such research altogether. However, as a fellow organic church planter, it is difficult to view me as an outside critic. I am an organic church planter and on occasion a trainer of organic church planters. This will allow me to develop a level of honest dialogue that may be difficult for an outsider to achieve.

Simultaneously, my insider status affects me personally as a researcher, and this creates certain weaknesses for this research. Cultural outsiders and cultural insiders possess different lenses. The interviews that I conducted often reflected prior knowledge of the subject matter, and I could often anticipate the interviewees' response. While I may command knowledge of the data, it is certainly possible that this same knowledge may cause me to miss some observations or insights that a cultural outsider may be more apt to discover due to a more critical lens or simply the need to listen more carefully. Due to the lack of understanding, a cultural outsider will seek to learn things that I am in danger of taking for granted.

### *Summary*

Each of these communities represents a piece of New York's diverse cultural mosaic. These communities are taking an organic approach to church planting in urban space. I interviewed leaders from each of these ministries, and the data collected from these interviews serves to build an understanding of organic church planting in New York City.

**PART II**  
**ORGANIC CHURCH RESEARCH**

In this section I present my findings resulting from research interviews with leaders and participants in organic churches in metropolitan New York City. I build on the common characteristics discovered through experience across these diverse communities with an in depth survey of the emerging missiological theory concerning organic church planting, and I will describe the practical implications for organic church planting found in a global city environment. Finally, I make recommendations to organic church planters in order to enhance the way the forward through involvement in the Mission of God. I believe that this research makes a valuable contribution to church planting practitioners in New York City as well as other urban centers.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

While investigating organic church planting in New York City, I discovered common characteristics shared by these communities. Simultaneously, each of these communities possessed its own unique traits as well. This diversity should be expected in such a multicultural setting as the city of New York. While unique characteristics are taken into account, I am primarily focusing on common traits true for multiple communities in this study in order to gain a general understanding of organic church planting in New York City. In addition I will address how organic church planters are responding to the challenges and opportunities of the global city context.

#### *Common Characteristics*

In this chapter I describe the common characteristics I identified by analyzing the data that resulted from interviews with leaders in these communities. These traits and issues were drawn from recurring themes, and in many instances the common traits were clearly described as part of the self-understanding of these communities. The characteristics identified are consistent across a spectrum of communities surveyed.

#### **Organic Processes**

As I interviewed the church planting leaders, I quickly identified an obvious trait that surfaced throughout the interviews. Each of these communities is easily described as organic. Whether they meet in an apartment or in another type of space and whether they

represented an ethnic outreach or a multiethnic community, these churches are oriented around organic processes. The interviewees only occasionally used the term “organic” when describing themselves. However, organic descriptions were implicit in their narratives, and they often described their ministry practices as occurring naturally. Their approach to disciple-making, outreach, and church multiplication were described as following what was most normal and natural. There was a clear organic orientation found within their descriptions of common practices.

In many cases organic means allowing space for a natural process toward contextualization. For Sal Vasquez, approaching church planting as an organic process indicates a culture of ministry experimentation. Vasquez explains that they experiment with different approaches because of their evangelistic impulse. They embrace a practice of experimentation as a process of discovering what will work for reaching unbelievers in a manner that is natural to them.

As a church planter, Kevin King chose to embrace an organic approach with the future in mind. He explained that he chose to start simple gatherings in homes while reaching international students at Columbia University and New York University in order to model an approach to church that may be naturally reproduced by these international students when they return to their country of origin. In order to facilitate a spontaneous expansion of the church through international students returning to nations in what missionaries often refer to as the 10/40 Window,<sup>1</sup> King chose organic church planting in order to model a reproducible approach to church formation. Much of the description King uses for The Bridge involves intentional but relational growth processes that can be described as organic.

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<sup>1</sup> The 10/40 Window is the region of the world between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator. It is identified as the least-reached section of globe by the Christian gospel.

In addition King describes a missional impulse characterized by an organic approach to church planting. He says:

We're not trying to pull people into a building, but we're trying to go out and seep into the nooks and crannies of society and allow church to happen in homes and cafes and parks and campuses and offices and so forth, so that we actually go and identify with them, whether it's in the ping-pong club where all the Chinese people hang out, or whatever it is, we're trying to enter into their culture, into their world, and see churches started. So if you have a building mentality, a temple mentality, it's a little hard to be incarnational. Because basically you're attracting people into your church culture<sup>2</sup> (Jan. 17, 2008).

Pete is working through organic processes in order to contextualize the gospel for Albanians. After serving among Albanians for several years, he concludes that “they’re not going to drift into other ethnic churches; they’re not going to drift into the apparatus of Christendom. They’re just not going to do that. They don’t see any relevance or importance to it.” Like Vasquez’ experimental approach for reaching secular unbelievers, Pete is working through organic processes in order to develop prototypes for church planting among the Albanian diaspora. He explains:

You do have a set of core principles, but there’s not a rubber stamp. There is not a model that you replicate. It’s a set of principles that you just have to wisely apply in every situation, even in the same people group. Every situation is different, so we’ve had to really stay principle-centered (Apr. 28, 2008).

Bob uses a very contextualized and relational approach to reach out to West African Muslims. He meets them in their context and shares the teachings of Scripture through oral storytelling. When I asked him about meeting with vendors out in the street during bad weather conditions, he responded: “We’re out there. The rule is if they can sell perfume and cologne I can talk about God’s Word in the snow. So we definitely do

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<sup>2</sup> Despite this missional perspective, much of the church growth of the Bridge has in the past resulted from reaching out to unbelieving international students and drawing them into an existing house church gathering. Personal evangelism involved going to unbelievers, but church planting maintained a somewhat attractational trait. However, recently King has begun to experiment with church planting methods that reflect Watson’s missional approach. As a result, three new groups were initiated among three different Asian people groups on the Columbia campus.

that, and we'll usually stay huddled in front of a store, or we'll just be out there" (on the street).

For the church planters interviewed, organic processes lead to natural steps for forming community in context and a way for discovering effective approaches for missional engagement among unbelievers in their cultural setting.

### **Relational Communities**

Organic church planting involves a significantly relational approach to ministry. There is not an antagonistic opposition to formal classes or organized outreach activities among organic church planters in New York City. Rather, there is an apparent opposition to programmatic ministry activity taking the place of relational processes. There is no substitute for building relationships. The overall character of ministry among organic churches and church networks is the relational nature of these communities.

Robert Sheridan, who was baptized in the Bronx and now hosts a church gathering in his home, expresses an inherent value in the relational nature of organic church. He explains that it has helped him mature in his faith because he understands "that Christians are also real regular people too. They have quirks and faults and weird personality things, and stuff like that, and to be able to not have to idealize Christians and then be constantly disappointed by them, but rather experience them and experience the fact that their lives have changed. It's inspirational to me" (July 14, 2008).

### ***Relationship as the Primary Ministry Medium***

Based on my research findings, in these organic churches relationships are the primary—and in some cases the only—medium for evangelism and ongoing ministry. Whether formal or informal, organized or spontaneous, all ministry activity emphasizes relationship.

During my interview with Tara Fernandez, a participant in the Bronx Fellowship network, I asked her to describe the impact that involvement with this church community has had in her life. She responded saying: “It has given me a more intimate approach of learning about God.... It shows me a more family approach. It’s not—how do you say—as sterile, I guess is a good way to put it. It’s not as sterile as a regular church environment.”

During the analysis of my interview with Fernandez, I observed how the medium of ministry was beginning to shape her experience with God—at least as reflected in her language. Within a short time frame during the interview, she described her experience with the relational approach of organic church using a noteworthy repetition. She described her church experience repeating statements like: “it’s more one-on-one, more personal,... it’s more interactive, one-on-one basis,... It shows me more personal one-on-one.” She reflected on the ability to experience one-on-one contact and repeated this quality three times within a short period of the interview. Immediately afterwards when asked about faith in God, Fernandez transitioned to describing her faith development by explaining: “I’ve learned to meet God on a more one-on-one basis.” Based on my analysis of her interview, I believe the relational shape of ministry has informed how she relates to God. As relationship functions as the primary medium of ministry, relational understandings have begun to inform her worldview in matters of faith. Form and function have been very integrated as relational ministry has given shape to her faith development. This observation raises questions that can’t be fully addressed in the context of this research. However, it may be helpful to highlight that future research could potentially explore the affects of mediums of ministry upon the theological formation of new believers. Further study could offer helpful insight to missiological endeavors.

As I interviewed Paul Gomez, I raised a point of criticism concerning organic church planting. One concern that I've observed about organic church planting is a perceived lack of continuity, so I asked Gomez, who has served as an organizational director of church planting in his denomination, to address the criticism that originates from leaders outside of organic church planting circles. His response points to the strong emphasis on relationship as the medium for ministry among organic churches. According to Gomez, relationship as the medium of ministry transcends an institutional continuity. He explains:

The fluidity of relationships, I think, provides some sense of continuity. What I was thinking was that when critics say that, they may rightly say that in the sense that they don't see a gathered body the way they thought they would. One of my best friends used to say that to me regularly. He would talk about Neil's strategy and say, "The only thing I don't like about what Neil's doing is that they may have a group of people they call a church, and they'll use it for six months, nine months, and then it will no longer exist. So I don't really like that." Well, what doesn't exist? The people still exist. Their relationship still exists. They maintain a discipling relationship, even though they may not be in the same gathered community. That's the whole thing. And that really shifted my thinking entirely. When I realized my goal is not to create communities that have an unending relationship, that's not the goal. How many of Paul's churches still exist as far as we know, right? No. But what we are trying to do is extend discipling relationships throughout the world. And how do you do that? Well, you penetrate relationship networks (Apr. 3, 2008).

Relationships are the fundamental unit of ministry in all activities. Even as various service initiatives are utilized, I observe that the emphasis continues to be on relationships as the basic unit of ministry and disciple-making. While Bronx Fellowship of Christ, the Bridge, and Community of Faith have each utilized English Second Language classes as an outreach activity, the focus is upon developing relationships with the students and stimulating spiritual conversations to emerge in those relationships. In addition to serving the immigrant community, these ministries are motivated by the opportunity to build relationships. Vasquez has utilized artistic gatherings in order to bring people together including a presentation-style meeting for spiritual seekers as well

as an open microphone meeting. However, a key motivation for these gatherings is to develop a relational dialogue in safe space with unbelievers. As a result, unbelievers and new believers are invited into a dinner gathering laced with intentional spiritual conversations. A dinner party is a natural—that is, organic—environment for individuals who have little or no church background.

As Kevin King describes The Bridge network, he points out that nearly every participant involved in their churches are involved in one-on-one relationships. Many are active in—both formal and informal—one-on-one relationships that lead to discipling. It's often informal, but this kind of relational approach to ministry activity is intentional. Cutting across the spectrum of organic churches examined, relationships is the key medium for evangelism and ministry.

### **Belong Then Believe**

Late in the process of analysis, I picked up on a theme within the content of the interviews. Outreach is often integrated with the experience of community. The ministry philosophy of the organic church planting efforts associated with Christ Communities is “Belong, Believe, Become.” As a church planter, Gomez set out to develop a sense of community predominantly among unbelievers and seekers. As a sense of community emerges, spiritual conversations evolve and participants begin to discover faith in Christ. As a result, new believers living in community begin to become a practicing follower of Christ. They first find belonging in community, then discover faith in the Risen Christ, and finally grow and develop an active faith experiencing personal transformation. During our interview, Paul Gomez described this motion not only as a vision statement or ministry philosophy but as a process that he was seeing unfold in the reality of his community.

While Paul Gomez articulated this philosophy most intentionally, I eventually recognized this approach in other organic church communities as well. King explains that people become followers of Christ in the context of participation in a church. They become a believer while participating in the setting of a community context, and he explains: “most of the people in our house church are in some kind of discipleship relationship with someone else in the house church.”

Vasquez seeks to build a welcoming community in Staten Island where unbelievers can discover faith in Christ and personal transformation in the context of community. He says: “We want people to belong. We want them to know that they belong with us. No pressure, they belong. And then from that place we want them to become. Start becoming the person that they are called to be.”

Planting Bronx Fellowship, the leadership team did not expressly articulate a belong-then-believe philosophy early in the church’s development. Nevertheless, the church was practicing this approach to community and outreach without creating or identifying a description for the practice and then later discovered this philosophy was being articulated by other communities. The leadership eventually realized that Bronx Fellowship was embracing the belong-then-believe approach to community-based outreach. Jovan Fernandez, a participant in the Bronx Fellowship network, points out that when he first came into contact with this community, he thought the believers he was interacting with “were crazy.” He simply didn’t embrace a commitment to Christian faith nor anything remotely close to a Biblical worldview at that time. However, he recognizes that his perspective has completely changed. Through participation in the discipling process connected with this community, he has been experiencing significant personal transformation.

With or without their prior realization of the principle, each of these communities is attempting to incorporate the principle cited by Sergeant in a previous chapter. That is,

these communities are seeking to group unbelievers and then convert them rather than convert them and then group them. In many cases the approach to group evangelism is still experimental, and often church planters have to adapt the approach to the environment of heightened individualism.

### **Participation**

As communities that are oriented around organic processes, these churches are participatory. It is common to find meetings built around an atmosphere of dialogue much like anyone would discover in a setting of natural human interaction. While community meetings may be facilitated by a leader or members of the community rotating as facilitators, every member of these communities is welcome to become involved in contributing to the church gatherings. When I interviewed participants in organic churches in the Bronx, participation was positively cited as an attractive characteristic in organic church settings.

George Saunders, a twenty-year-old organic church participant in the Bronx who planted a church when he was seventeen, describes the attraction of being part of organic church gatherings:

It's really cool because it's not just listening to someone talk the whole time, you know, falling asleep in the back rows. It's more intimate, it's more interactive. It's more beneficial for the fact that everyone's interacting, everyone's in the Word together as a community, and everyone participates (Jan. 15, 2009).

Wilfredo Lopez and his family now live in Jersey City, and they were among the original outreach contacts as a new church plant in the Bronx and were the first participants in Bronx Fellowship during the earliest stages of the church planting effort. For a time, they were actively forming a new community while living in Staten Island. Describing the benefit of participation in the organic church setting, Lopez explains: "The advantage that I got out of an organic church is that we're able to gather more as a

family.... We could interact with individuals on a one-on-one basis, and we could be more open and honest with each other.”

For Sheridan, the participatory nature of organic church gatherings has had an impact on his faith maturation. Participation in church gatherings has a formational impact on his life. He explains:

I think it's empowered me to be able to talk about my faith because I'm forced to, which I wouldn't be forced to in any other church, a more traditional church. It's actually empowered me to be able to instruct people, which I never would have thought I would be able to do, period. I didn't think I'd be able to do that for twenty years. So in a way I think that my Christian life has grown in leaps and bounds in the last four years, and obviously including getting baptized, you know, really making a commitment to it. But it has made me a much more mature Christian, and I really think that if I was in a traditional church setting, I could have been basically exactly the same as I was four years ago (July 14, 2008).

As Sheridan describes it, full involvement in the church gatherings has actually helped to equip him for articulating his faith to others. Encouraging participation, the meetings of the church are an important part of the formation of the new believer. Learning takes place in the context of community through interaction and practice rather than through passive listening and observation.

Henry Gomez openly confesses that his motives for planting a church on the other side of the Hudson River in New Jersey was more about finding an opportunity to preach to a congregation than to transform lives. However, he explains that—along with coaching from a ministry partner—his church transitioned early in its existence into a participatory assembly where everyone gets involved. His role transitioned into becoming a facilitator of the community. While Gomez attributes the life transformation in Community of Faith to the involvement of the Holy Spirit, he also emphasizes the experience of inviting full participation among the group members as having a transformational impact on his own life and in the lives of others. Gomez points out that

a participatory meeting allows the opportunity to “experience Christ and hear Christ in the voices of the other members as opposed to just one person who has all the answers.”

Rafael Rosario celebrates widespread participation in the Iglesia de Cristo in East Elmhurst. He recognizes that preparation for service and leadership begins with including someone in a community that is active. Rosario sees this aspect of community life as a liberating factor for the participants of an organic church. Rosario explains:

It makes the gospel attractive. We don't need to follow protocols. We are all part of the service. Everyone feels that they have a voice. People are part of it because they have a voice. All genders and ages can express themselves in the moment. Everyone can exercise freedom of expression that we didn't have before (Nov. 19, 2008).

Rosario describes his church gathering using language that reflects a sense of liberation. He believes people find their value as participants in a community. He celebrates that even a nine year old girl speaks up and shares her thoughts with the rest of the group. Rosario explains that their church gatherings—meeting in homes in Queens—are “more like a conversation.” Keeping everyone involved in dialogue is a natural outcome of the orientation around organic processes. Conversational approaches have a more natural orientation. A monologue approach to theological instruction is seldom utilized. A conversational and participatory atmosphere—even when there is a teacher taking a dominant role in the dialogue—characterizes organic churches in New York.

Working with Albanian immigrants, Pete describes how their meetings remained intentionally participatory when a gathering in Brooklyn moved from a home to a library in a church building. He describes the setting:

We were sitting around in a circle, still very focused. And that was just a big living room, you know, in another place. And that's become a pattern that they're accustomed to. Because it's all discussion and question and answer oriented, so that's where their faith is being [formed] (Apr. 28, 2008).

While it is apparent that King has a strong teaching and vision-casting role in The Bridge network, he describes the value for participation among their churches. He says,

Our meetings are very participatory. You know, you look at the New Testament church, and there are not a whole lot of passages that describe what the actual meeting looked like in the New Testament. But there are a few, and probably the clearest one, on what their corporate meeting looked like, is probably First Corinthians 14:26. “What should I say then, brothers? When you come together, let everyone have a song, a hymn, a word of instruction, a tongue”—and it goes through the list. But we emphasize three things out of that. One is “everyone.” Everyone has something. Everyone is getting involved. It says come intentionally prepared. And it’s for the strengthening of the body, so we really encourage that everyone participates, come prepared, thinking of yourself as a priest and I’m coming intentionally to build up this body (Jan. 17, 2008).

For organic churches in New York City, participation is a natural characteristic of relational communities. This participation by every member valued by church leaders, and organic church planters have seen significant qualitative growth as a result of facilitating full group participation.

### **Decentralization and Multiplication**

Not every community surveyed has multiplied. However, every community included in this study does share a desire to multiply. The Bridge, Bronx Fellowship, Iglesia de Cristo, Christ Communities, Albanian Outreach, and West African Outreach all represent communities that involve more than one group networked together to varying degrees. At the very least, groups share a common relationship with the catalyst church planter but most share an identity as a network, and often these networks include some degree of interaction. At the time of this writing, Saint George Church and Community of Faith have not realized their hopes for multiplication, but share a desire and a vision for natural occurrences of church multiplication. The West African outreach is decentralized but also is in its embryonic stages of early outreach and growth. Organic church planting in this study that has resulted in multiplication now results in networks of organic churches. The churches connected through networks relate to one another to varying degrees from network to network. Some are only connected through a common

missionary leader while other networks bring together the various groups in regular network gatherings. In addition, those organic churches that have not multiplied envision multiplication that results in a decentralized networking approach.

Craig Fee recalls his previous experience as a cell groups pastor. He explains that in his previous experience as a staff member of a large church, there was always pressure to identify groups that are slow to multiply, apply pressure, and coordinate targeted multiplication. When their church joined with The Bridge, King came and shared the vision of multiplication with the group. Soon afterwards, this church multiplied from one to two house churches. I asked: “Why was this different from your previous experience?” Fee’s answer was simple but straightforward. “Kevin presented vision. Not pressure.” The value for multiplication remains strong for many of these communities, but it is not multiplication for the sake of multiplication. Multiplication is rooted in the practice of organic processes. It is multiplication that naturally results from growth. King describes the value of multiplication in organic church planting. He says:

If you value outreach, if you value expansion, you’ll value multiplication. You know what I mean? If you value community, you’ll value multiplication. Why? Because the larger you get, your community begins to break down. You begin to lose intimacy. So if you value community, then you’ll therefore value multiplication. If you value ministry, which means allowing everybody to use their gifts, you’ll value multiplication. Why? Because if you keep growing, it just naturally happens that one or a few people are elevated just because there’s too many people. And everybody else falls and becomes passive. So if you value people using their gifts and the priesthood of all believers, you’ll value multiplication. Same with discipleship and training and so forth. So why value multiplication? Well, because we value all of those other things, and multiplication is the natural result of those values. It’s also the natural way that God has planned the physical universe, with seeds growing and multiplying and spreading, and I think those same laws and principles apply to the spiritual world as well (Jan. 17, 2008).

The actual or tangible pursuit of multiplication varies from community to community. However, each of these organic church leaders appear to view multiplication

as a natural alignment with organic processes. Organic churches acting missionally naturally point to multiplication.

### **Missional Impact**

One of my concerns addressing organic church planting specifically in New York City is my hope for seeing church planting efforts reflect a motion forward that is missional. As a researcher, I want to know if organic church planting is making a significant difference as participation in the *missio Dei*, or are we simply creating a new and awkward opportunity for increased transfer growth inviting individual believers to shift from conventional church models to house churches and the like? I personally understand the debate over church structures and experientially grasp the inherent value of meeting in small group environments, but these discussions and disagreements are only helpful if they take into account the larger story of the kingdom of God, God's mission of redemption, and an eschatological vision of the global church gathered around the throne of the King.

While I believe that insight into missional outcomes is important for missiological study, it is also helpful to recognize that there are multiple ways to determine progress—including evangelistic growth. While church planting and church growth is often measured by adding up a total number of participants, I prefer to evaluate the actual involvement of unbelievers, the uncommitted, and new believers and the transformation of life taking place in a community. Determining involvement of new converts, seekers, and the spiritually uncommitted is more helpful for evaluating evangelistic effectiveness than counting the number people sitting in the same room. In addition, I know that it is uncommon for organic church planters to keep statistics, so numerical means for measuring progress is limited. However, because of the small and relational character of

organic churches in New York City, it is realistic that organic church planting leaders are capable of providing accurate estimates of overall involvement in their network.

Furthermore, in this section I will give special attention to the way that many organic church planters determine positive outcomes. That is, reflecting on narratives of life transformation. This approach is a purely qualitative means for evaluating outcome and requires listening to stories of change in light of their encounter with the gospel and a Christ-centered community.

As I interviewed organic church planters, I asked about disciple-making and evangelism practices and outcomes. Evaluating their responses, I found two forms of relevant evidence that exhibit the missional impact of organic church planting. First, there are the estimates of evangelistic church growth. These estimates are one manner of measuring evangelistic progress. Rather than counting sheer numbers of attendees, I inquired concerning percentages and ratios of new believers and participating unbelievers in relation to established believers involved in organic churches. Second, the narratives of life transformation are to be found in every ministry surveyed. In the context of organic church planting, narratives of transformation provide a way of interpreting the depth of the gospel's impact through evangelistic engagement. Reflecting on narrative is also better aligned with the manner in which organic church planters themselves evaluate outcomes in their own communities.

### ***Evangelism Growth***

There are different types of church growth. First, biological growth represents the children of believers who are added to the church. Second, transfer growth describes Christians switching from one church to another. Finally, evangelism growth is the addition of new believers to the Body of Christ (Wagner 1990:36-37). As I conducted

these interviews with organic church leaders, I was interested in discovering if organic church planting was leading to evangelism growth.

During the initial interviews with organic church planters, I asked the leaders to estimate the percentage of non-Christians and those that have become new believers verses transfer growth into their church or church network. Due to the nature of the responses, exact statistics do not arise from this study; however, church planters' feedback can be considered to be a positive estimate regarding evangelism growth.

Three church planters estimated an approximately fifty-fifty ratio. About fifty percent of those involved represent new believers or the currently uncommitted exploring the Christian faith. Three church planters estimated that the majority—more than half—of those involved were new believers or tentatively uncommitted to Christian faith. Two of the communities surveyed reported low percentages of new believers or those exploring the faith for the first time, but these same communities described a significant degree of life transformation among their participants. While reporting low numbers of increase that can be strictly defined as evangelism growth in the traditional sense, they shared some of the most dynamic stories of life transformation. I will discuss the significance of these descriptions in the next section.

If church planting strategists are committed to evangelism growth as a church growth priority, small organic communities, such as these, need to be considered a viable option for the missionary enterprise. Multiplying these types of communities may potentially lead to substantial evangelistic growth. Focusing on planting large numbers of small relational communities may provide an effective alternative for missional engagement while requiring a minimal amount of physical resources relative to conventional church planting practices in North America.

### *The Narrative of Transformation*

One of the contemporary church leadership discussions that I have observed occurring in multiple settings is concerning the evaluation of popular metrics for measuring ministry success. Among organic church planters in New York City, ministry success is emphasized by the stories of life transformation that have resulted. Numerical figures for church growth are often left out of the discussion. When I asked for figures or percentages, church planters' responses can be described as frank and transparent. They were clearly estimates—even if accurate estimates. While leaders easily shared estimates of evangelism growth, the metric that is emphasized among these leaders themselves is the narrative of life transformation. As leaders make disciples and plant churches, success is determined by stories of transformation that emerge.

I asked Cheek about evangelism in the communities he has assisted. While he affirmed that he saw individuals coming to Christ in the communities he worked with in New Jersey, Staten Island, and Queens, he also shared a perspective on evangelism that brings the issue back to discipleship rather than focusing on issues such as church attendance. He explains:

The whole churched, unchurched thing is confusing the issue, in my opinion. And to look at it that way is, you know, to count and say we're successfully churching America if people didn't go to church and now they do go to church because they've gone through a conversion. It makes us think that if we just got all of America to church we'd solve the problem. And no, if we got everybody to Jesus we'd solve the problem. So were there a lot of people "un-Jesused" that are now "Jesused?" Yea, definitely. Even people that have gone to church for a long time (Jan. 28. 2008).

In my first interview with Cheek, he described the personal transformation of organic church planters with whom he had partnered. These leaders were previously involved in church leadership, but as they entered into organic processes for initiating and leading Christian community, they themselves experienced personal transformation. Some of these leaders had experienced painful traumas as they served in previous church

leadership and began to experience change to various degrees. As organic church planters, they are growing in their relationships and are experiencing healing. Describing one indigenous organic church planter, Cheek says that the leader has experienced transformation as he is “having to confront his human-ness, having to live out the gospel in a very tooth-and-nail, get your fingers dirty kind of way, has led him to heal his relationships.” One of the dynamic stories that have emerged from organic church planting in New York City is that the organic church planters themselves are experiencing transformation, and they ascribe their own life change to their involvement in these authentic faith communities.

In a second interview, I asked Cheek if the transformation that he described was only true for the church planters and leaders or whether this was a more widespread experience. Cheek immediately began telling stories of genuine transformation among the participants of organic churches. He described a young man with cerebral palsy who is now a teacher for the church’s English Second Language outreach. He highlighted marriages that have been saved through involvement in their church community, and he explained how an alcoholic was brought to repentance through a communal approach to church discipline. Cheek recounted story after story of changed lives.

As I reviewed the transcripts of interviews with organic church participants from the Bronx, one of the most consistent features I observed in the body of the interviews was the testimony of personal life transformation. Saunders says:

It’s had the biggest impact on my life. I really don’t know where I’d be right now. I mean—Bronx Fellowship of Christ has had the biggest impact on my life and if it wasn’t for BFC—I really don’t know where I’d be right now because it’s really just changed by life. I’ve been taught so many useful things that I can use and go out and just plant churches everywhere I go and just taking Christ’s love with me everywhere (Jan. 15, 2009).

Jovan Fernandez is taking a new look at himself and says that his encounter with the gospel has taught him “to be a better husband, a better father, a better man.” He

explains, “It has showed me to stop blaming and start looking within.” Simultaneously, his wife, Tara, explains that her experience has changed her previous perception of church. Her spiritual outlook is much more positive, but the gospel has also brought change at a much deeper level. She describes her ongoing transformation:

It’s actually changed me as a person, which has changed the way my family is. I’ve been a more patient person. Things that I wouldn’t normally be patient about, or understanding about, I’ve noticed I’ve changed a lot in that aspect. I’ve become a lot more patient with things that I wasn’t before. I’ve learned to try different things, like as opposed to being so confrontational about certain things. I’ve learned to sit back and try to see the other person’s perspective, to try to be more understanding and more compassionate about what they’re feeling and what they’re going through. And a lot of that has been from learning about God and different things that we’ve learned in the Bible (Jan. 24, 2009).

Robert Sheridan describes a healthy shift in his life. He says:

I think the main area that I’ve changed is that in terms of my own inner dialogue, I think, has gone from kind of personally depressed much of the time, but yet outwardly seeming affable, to really having an inner dialogue that was hopeful and really for the first time as an adult I had a real hope that was generated from within (Jan. 9, 2009).

Bob describes West African Muslims living in New York who have come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Although they continue to identify themselves as Muslims largely due to significant cultural pressures to do so, they are experiencing substantial shifts in worldview. Although they are hesitant to make a formal switch of religious affiliation, they have professed they believe in Jesus as the Savior, and they articulate profound truths about what it means to have a gospel-centered life. They have begun to identify Bob as their spiritual leader, and one of these Muslims accompanies Bob to teach other Muslims about Jesus. While their present connection to Islam is largely a cultural identification, they have begun to think and speak from a Biblical worldview.

Rafael Rosario shares the narrative of a woman who was previously filled with anger and bitterness. She was a violent person and was opposed to the work of the gospel

entering her home. However, Rosario went anyway to visit her repeatedly. He went and spent time in conversation with her in her home. In only a couple of months' time, he observed anger and bitterness melt away as this woman became a person of peace. Later, as she made a painful discovery in her marriage, she called Rosario seeking counsel, and he points out that previously she may have acted out violently. However, instead she sought counsel as the fruit of self control entered her life.

Henry Gomez openly shares the kind of impact planting a church organically through relational processes has had on his own life as a leader. For Gomez, he sees the impact these processes have had on others' lives, but for Gomez, he realizes the change in himself most clearly. He recalls:

I had started to see how wonderful this thing was, and I think it goes back to I Corinthians where Paul talks about one person may have a teaching and another person may have a prophecy, and it was just the ability for all of us to come together and share our gifts. And that started to really impact me. I thought I was going to be impacting people and I thought that this was going to be something that I was going to be able to help people with, and it turned out that I was the recipient of most of the help here. It started to loosen my fingers and my grip on things, and enabled me to learn about being less manipulative and more trusting of the Spirit and what the Spirit can do. And also allowed me to actually experience healing.... I was able to see people very insecure become more confident because of God, and express themselves in ways that, you know, we have got people who have been diagnosed with cerebral palsy who are some of the sharpest people we have now. So little by little I started to come to grips with the fact that I don't have to necessarily sit or stand at a pulpit and preach. Leave it up to God, and God showed me that my desires for ministry and His role for what needed to be done may not have been exactly aligned [with Him].... What I've learned is that the most important thing is that allowing God to come in and make the disciples through us by participating in their lives, but not manipulating or controlling the way I used to do (Nov. 18, 2008).

### **Leadership**

It's my observation that one cannot enter into discussions about church planting without eventually having discussions about leaders and leadership development. While academically trained missionaries are involved in organic church planting in New York,

the majority of ongoing leadership development takes place in the context of the community interactions. However, significant strides are made through special training as well. King explains this balance:

I think the leadership development of people is primarily accomplished in individual house churches as they lead, in a sense. So one of the things that we talk about in leadership meetings is releasing people to leadership, and us stepping back and us not running the show. You know what I mean? So I think leaders are trained that way. You know, we do things for instance, like the leadership seminar we did with Neil Cole. We took a group of people to that, so we look for opportunities, we look to encourage people, we look to foster new leaders, and that's pretty much it (Jan. 17, 2008).

Observing organic church planting, the lines between discipleship and leadership are at least somewhat blurred. Leadership development begins with making disciples.

### ***Discipleship***

Reading Roland Allen, Neil Cole, and others it is apparent that the basic unit of discipleship is essential for effective church multiplication. Listening to David Watson and Curtis Sergeant reflect on their experience with church planting movements, effectively making disciples is a crucial ingredient for organic church multiplication. Listening to organic church planters in New York, a basic understanding of discipleship is integrated into the applied organic principles. In most cases disciples are made through the relational processes of mentoring, Bible study, and spiritual conversations. Participation in the context of church gatherings encourages an understanding of discipleship as active—rather than passive—involvement.

In an interview with Cheek I asked him whether the communities he has assisted involves any individuals who are really not interested in an active understanding of discipleship or church participation. I inquired about the involvement of those that would come with a more passive understanding of church attendance or perhaps approach involvement in the community as religious consumers. He responded positively. In his

experience in this church context, he has encountered religious adherents who come with a more passive or a more consumer oriented understanding of church involvement and discipleship, but he explained that they don't last long. In his experience the longest someone that keeps this orientation might stay involved in an organic community might be a year, but after a certain period of time, they migrate somewhere that requires less from them.

Before joining an organic church in the Bronx, Sheridan had been transitioning from atheism to a belief in Jesus. As his faith discovery evolved, he visited a number of Christian churches of various types. He was searching for a community where he could experience spiritual growth. He visited a great variety of churches and felt dissatisfied with his quest to find a corporate gathering. Reflecting on his search for a community, he offers some observations that demonstrate how an emphasis on discipleship may relate to organic church planting. When expressions of church are reduced to their most basic level and community is formed organically, many of the alternative motivations for being involved in a church body have less of a hold. Maturing as a disciple of Jesus becomes a central concern in the setting of an organic church since little space is afforded to other motivations. Sheridan explains:

People want to be there [church gathering]. And I think that there were a number of churches that I visited where the people went because they were supposed to, or they went because they grew up in the church, they went because now they had kids and they felt they were supposed to, and I think that that's not the same level of voluntary commitment. People also went to get dressed up, went to find a wife or a husband, and I think that one of the great things about a start up organic house church is that everyone who's there is really there purely out of wanting to be, or needing to be, and not out of some sort of social expectation or a desire to get ahead, or greed, or a lot of other motivations that I found.... It doesn't provide a social status to go to our church. It's not a great place to find a mate. If you had self-centered reasons, it wouldn't be that great for it. But yet if your reasoning was really to grow as a Christian and be a part of Christian community, it's far superior because, again, as I said before, you're going to be right involved in it (July 14, 2008).

Throughout the interviewing process, disciple-making as a basic building block for church multiplication became clear. Saunders explains that when he identified a household as a potential site for starting a new church, starting from the ground up means beginning with teaching discipleship.

Organic church leaders share a general understanding that discipleship is the foundation and basic unit for spontaneous expansion of the church. However, in some cases this lesson was learned through experience while stumbling through the early and mid stages of church planting. It was learned through trial and error efforts in active ministry and church planting. This learning process seems to point to the reality that older organic church planting efforts in the city are beginning to see signs of their vision realized in more recent stages of the ministry.

A leader with The Bridge shared that the leaders of their church network had never been discipled themselves. He explained that in order to disciple others, they had to learn what it meant to be discipled and to disciple others. They knew that they needed to make disciples of Jesus, but they had so little experience with actually being discipled that they had to learn how to effectively disciple others through their own trial and error experience.

### ***Priesthood of All Believers***

An important value of organic church planters is to pursue structures and practices that promote the priesthood of all believers. King sees simple church structures as an important ingredient for instilling the priesthood of all believers into new disciples. He insists that people's experience teaches them that they are a priest and that church planting is within their ability to do.

King explains:

Connected to this whole thing is that everyone is a priest. I mean, in the Great Commission, Jesus says go. We really try to emphasize that you're a priest. Lead people to learn, proclaim the gospel, you baptize them. We tell people often, anyone can start a church because we view the essence of church planting is simply to make disciples. And we try to strip away all of the other stuff that had surrounded, all of the strategies, and building programs and budgets, and bylaws.... But if people don't have this idea that they are a priest, they will never go back to their country and say, "I can start a church." We have to give them a concept of church that they will say, "This is a church. I can start a church." We have to redefine their understanding of church and empower them to not only do it here, but to go back to their country and say, "Yea, I can start a church" (Jan. 17, 2008).

### ***Missionary to Laity Transitions***

Organic church planting emphasizes the priesthood of all believers and that any Christian can potentially be a church planter. This emphasis echoes the reproduction of disciples and churches by local believers in the context of church planting movements. Leadership is meant to be catalytic as local believers are raised up to serve in transformational ministry.

Organic church planting in New York City has been significantly influenced by missionary church planters. Bronx Fellowship exists because a missionary team arrived in New York City with the intention of planting a church. Paul Gomez relocated to New York as an experienced church planter with the intention of planting churches. Missions among Albanians, West African Muslims, and international students in New York City are taking place because missionary church planters came to New York to work among those groups. Cheek came as a missionary worker who has worked in conjunction with more indigenous leaders in urban and suburban communities.

However, transitions from missionaries to local people have not taken place to the extent that these missionary church planters hope. One can argue that these transitions are simply taking longer due to the influence of the New York context. David Watson (2008) points out that where there is a strong traditional church presence, church planting

movements take longer to get moving, and he also informed me that most church planting movements in developing countries take an average of four years from the initial missionary contact to becoming a rapidly multiplying movement. In addition there are significantly fewer church planting movements taking place in urban settings with a history of Christendom. Cuba is a noteworthy exception (Sergeant 2008). Based on my observations, I believe that context may be one factor to consider. Transferring leadership to new believers in a global city facing an emerging post-Christendom culture may simply involve a longer or more nuanced process or may involve a more intense degree of intentionality. In addition, much of what has taken place so far in these settings has been largely experimental and involves struggling with the tension between conventional church planting practices and more organic approaches.

Church planters may have influenced slower or more complicated transitions to local believers by modeling their church planting approaches after common church planting practices that do not actually model organic reproduction. Bob, also a missiological researcher in New York, describes that the pressure felt by many church planters to produce something quickly in New York often affects how they carry out their ministry. During the first two to three years of Bronx Fellowship, leadership closely resembled the role of a local minister as opposed to a missionary catalyst. In the years that have followed this role has evolved to become more focused on planting, mentoring, and leading in order to mirror a more catalytic and mentoring leadership style that better matches a decentralized approach. The focus is now much more intentional on seeking evangelistic relationships with potential people of peace and on mentoring and training local people that demonstrate a desire to be a missionary presence in their community. Organic church planters may be faced with the need to re-learn new leadership practices in order to set the stage for local indigenous leadership. As Watson explains, for

missionary workers hoping to spark exponential multiplication, ministry practices are generally “counter-intuitive” (2008).

The organic churches and networks where there have been relatively immediate transitions to local leadership are those that involved one or more local leaders from the beginning. Cheek moved to New York City as a missionary church planter and took a different approach to church planting. He came alongside indigenous church planters. While he represents a missionary influence, the lead church planters in Community of Faith in Bayonne, in Staten Island, and Iglesia de Cristo in Queens were indigenous to the cultural groups involved in the community.

Despite typical missionary practices, another question is raised. How important is it that missionary church planters completely phase out their involvement in a global city context? Missionary church planters leave after they have established self-governing and self-replicating churches among a certain people group. Once the gospel has penetrated that people group, they leave the continuing work of the gospel in the hands of the leaders of churches within that culture. However, once a missionary church planter establishes a gospel presence among a targeted people group in a global city, they may begin a new church planting initiative by moving to the next block. In addition, in the midst of global diversity a missionary church planter may quickly assimilate into the multicultural mosaic of the urban population. In a global city environment the meaning of indigenous exists on a continuum rather than a more dualistic reality such as when a missionary crosses boundaries to reach a particular tribal group in the group’s cultural home. Furthermore, Kevin King is reaching out to international students who are displaced from their home as university students with the hopes that they will return to their country of origin as messengers of the gospel. While international students are certainly part of the diverse cultural fabric of New York, King is a missionary who stays and sends out new missionary church planters that are raised up from the harvest.

Despite the questions raised, a further inquiry into the complexity and difficulty of missionary to laity transitions in New York could prove helpful.

The issues surrounding missionary to laity transitions appear to be more complex in the global city setting. There is a range of experiences being accumulated among organic church planters in New York City, and leadership development issues are not least among them. Missionary to laity transitions in light of the issues surrounding global city contexts deserves additional attention. Future research surrounding the complexity of multicultural urban environments would likely make a significant contribution to missiological practice in such urban settings.

### **Ecclesiological Tensions**

It is difficult to avoid discussing the ecclesiological tension faced by organic church planters in New York City. This tension was a recurring theme throughout the interview process. One of the challenges of organic church planting in North America may be that “they are not perceived as legitimate by established church culture” (Moore 2007:373).

Regretfully, I uncovered findings describing ecclesiological tension cutting across nearly every interview. Organic church planters in New York City appear to face internal and external tensions over ecclesiological style. Even in my interview with David Watson, Watson pointed out that the biggest distracter for catalyzing church planting movements are individuals that insist on doing things the same way they’ve been done. He has observed that in cultural contexts where there is a strong established church, it takes longer for church planting movements to get off the ground (2008). Some of the obstacles to church planting movements previously cited from Garrison’s report are rooted in church practices already present in the culture that may hamper natural multiplication processes.

Vasquez has constantly wrestled with the tension between his popularity and ability to gather lots of young believers on Staten Island and his desire to reach unbelievers. Based on his experience working with multiple organic church planting efforts, Cheek suggests that Vasquez is reaching out to a significant number of secular or unreached people—more so than most of the other organic church planting efforts that Cheek could identify. Simultaneously, due to his youth ministry background, Vasquez is well known among many young believers in Staten Island. While attracting many believers who hope to explore fresh Christian practices, Vasquez is working to connect with unbelievers and bring them into discipleship through incarnational relationships.

Addressing this tension, Vasquez invited a ministry partner to come in and facilitate a class that especially catered to those who were already believers. Thinking it would be appropriate for the unbelievers to come and experience the class together, they invited them to come and participate. He explains that, as a result of the experience, most of the unbelievers left. He said that the content and experience just missed where the unbelievers were in their spiritual journey. At the same time the believers that have come to participate in his ministry do not seem to function well in the missional activities that are tailored more for reaching and influencing secular people. Vasquez explains that what they were doing was “just a little too edgy” for the Christians attempting to participate. Vasquez found himself starting out with a cultural gap between those coming from an existing church culture and those that were from a secular worldview. Because the Christians did not know how to relate to the secular crowd and because the programs tailored to existing believers appeared to repel the unbelievers, they eventually encouraged the believers to go and join the church plant of one of their ministry partners.

A similar scenario took place in The Bridge network. One of the churches was formerly a cell group that continued to function as a church when the cell-based church of which it had been a part abandoned its cell-based emphasis. While this church

meeting in a home in Queens was beginning to connect with new people, they also had a fair number of people that were utilizing their house church as an extra small group meeting. The leader became increasingly frustrated because he wanted the participants in the church to fully live out life together as a community, but some of the members saw this group as supplemental to their faith experience rather than as their church community. They lacked a small group community which they found in this house church; however, they lacked the dedication that was desired by the leaders of that church. When they changed the schedule of their church gathering to a time that conflicted with established congregations in the area, they discovered which participants were there as an extra small group experience and which ones were there to pour themselves more fully into that Christian community. King explains:

So what they decided to do is they decided to move their meeting to Sunday morning and cut their losses.... And that was a hard move to make, but a very cleansing move to make. It was a great move to make because now the people who are part of the church really view it as their church. And there's just a different feel when it's the people who view it as their church.... So we're saying if you're part of that church, pour yourself into that church (Apr. 30, 2008).

Vasquez hoped to involve existing believers in the process of disciple-making. He emphasized that they expected believers to get involved in conversations and relationships with unbelievers attending artist venues or the dinner meeting involving intentional spiritual conversations. Vasquez reflects on his efforts to develop active disciples: "I'm into theology and getting deep into things with the Word and stuff like that, but we were just talking about doing it. Let's not sit here and talk about it, let's do what it is that we feel the Lord is calling us to do." Vasquez explains that as he advocated taking action and sharing the gospel with others, the response from believers was inaction or even resistance. He says, "They won't connect with people, or they'll even voice that they don't feel like they know enough." For Vasquez, although he emphasized responding to the gospel with obedient action and making connections with

unbelievers as opposed to spending time talking about potential action, their response reflected a lack of security to do so. In some cases, believers indicated that they felt insecure about their level of knowledge.

Rosario reflects on his encounters with individuals in Queens. He hopes to call believers to Christian action but runs into opposition. As he encounters believers in his community, he enters conversations encouraging discipleship but discovers a different spiritual DNA in many of those already exposed to a Christian message. “A lot of people that I talk with, they tell me, ‘That’s not what I understand. I mean, I understand that God told me He wanted to save me. And specifically He’s not saying to me that I have to be responsible for anything else.’”

King reflects on his own evolution from a conventional church setting to organic church planting resulting in a house church network. He recalls:

When I first started doing house church, coming from the traditional church, I used to think, “Is that all there is? Just a few people sitting around?” Now when I go to a traditional church—and I speak at them almost every month – now I go and I sit in the service where they sing three songs, someone prays, and then I hear a sermon, and I think, “Is that it? There has to be more than that.” I’ve grown to have a deep appreciation for the intimacy, the real-life ministry that goes on, confession, honesty, people being real and sharing their struggles, praying for each other and praying over each other. So it’s just much more organic and spiritual and it’s just a much deeper experience for me personally (Jan. 17, 2008).

Bob explains that the expectations for missionary service overseas is simply so different than in the United States—and more specifically in New York City. A missionary arriving in West Africa must learn the language and the culture. There is a period of bonding with indigenous people and learning how to communicate in the worldview of the host culture. However, he says, when a missionary worker comes to New York City there is simply such great pressure by financial supporters to produce something quickly. As a result, often potential missionaries to unreached peoples in New York either opt to go somewhere else altogether, or they arrive in the city and respond to

the pressure placed on them by assembling a group forming a new church entity that is made up mostly of believers. Therefore, many would-be missional workers in the city end up refocusing on professional survival rather than working out contextual and thoughtful approaches to reaching the unreached with the gospel. Bob explains that “the infrastructure isn’t as such where we allow people to grow and know how to minister to unreached people.” In order to gather unreached people into new churches, church planting strategists in New York will need to consider alternative structures that apply principles learned from overseas missionary practices.

### ***Global City Context***

In this study I am interested in how organic church planting interacts with the issues involved in the context of New York City, and how this global city environment impacts organic church planting. The characteristics of the global city present challenges and opportunities for organic church planters. I will articulate these opportunities and challenges more fully in chapter five. However, in this section on research findings I will draw out some of the affects that a global city environment has had on these communities.

### **Economic Polarization**

As a global economic center, time and availability become significant factors. Due to religious pluralism within shared urban space, precedence given to special religious days are held in tension—Fridays for Muslims, Saturdays for Jews and Adventists, Sundays for Christians (see Laguerre 2003). Simultaneously, I argue that, although Sunday may be given priority as a special day in the public sphere, secularization is the dominant force when it comes to priorities of time in New York City.

As a result, most organic church planters initiate communities that meet during a range of times and days throughout the week in order to contextualize within this cultural matrix.

Many organic church planting efforts have included church or outreach gatherings outside of the traditional time allotted for church services. It is commonplace in New York City for individuals to work long hours, commute over long periods of time, and also to find themselves scheduled to work when church gatherings typically take place. A key strength of organic churches is their natural flexibility to become mobile in light of time and space constrictions.

Simultaneously, daily life in a global city is simply filled with challenges. Sheridan points out that it takes a significant commitment to be part of a church in New York City because people just don't have much time. To participate in a church, means to sacrifice something else. Saunders describes the dilemma of attempting to start organic churches in the city based on the availability of others. He says: "It's just busy, very busy and fast-paced. So you got to find some people that have at least a bit of reliability, to actually come to Bible discussions, and you need some down time in this city because it's really fast and trying to keep up with everything is pretty hard."

### **Global Diversity**

Diversity resulting from the migration flows of globalization provides an opportunity for mission. During this research, I discovered church planting efforts that are interacting organically with the transnational flows among migrant people groups.

After serving for five years and learning the language and culture in Albania, Pete moved his family to New York City in order to reach out among Albanian immigrants. Unlike many church planters, he spent six years laying foundations. With the help of volunteers from local churches, Pete coordinated social events and hosted ethnic holiday gatherings in the Albanian community. He spent time building relationships among

Albanians in Staten Island, Brooklyn, New Jersey, and the Bronx. After six years, he started a church meeting in a home in Staten Island and quickly initiated a second church meeting in Brooklyn.

Pete insists that missiologists need to gain a new understanding of evangelizing people groups. He points out that seventy-five percent of Albanians live outside of the country of Albania. Church planters need to gain a transnational perspective as they encounter diaspora peoples. Pete works in New York and also travels to Albania and Kosovo to train leaders. While continuing to facilitate organic church planting among Albanians in the city and to travel to Albania and Kosovo to train leaders, he now simultaneously works with a multiethnic church in New Jersey while also reaching Albanians in New Jersey and New York City's boroughs. He also partners closely with a Turkish church planter in New Jersey who is engaging organic processes for evangelism.

Bob is actively reaching out to West African Muslims. He is incorporating methods very similar to what missiologists use in Africa. Many Africans in the city work as outdoor vendors or work in storefronts selling ethnic products as well as jewelry, perfume, and other items. He uses a storytelling approach to tell the narrative of God and communicate a Christian worldview, and he utilizes volunteers to distribute audio discs of Scriptural storytelling to West Africans. Through this approach, Bob has organically formed small gatherings of West Africans for oral instruction through storytelling and spiritual dialogue.

Bob has witnessed evangelism take place spontaneously through natural flows of transnational relationships. He is consistently working with West African Muslims in the city, and while they have accepted that Jesus is the Messiah and that the Biblical story of God is true, they are hesitant to make a formal conversion. Bob explains that because these West Africans have come to the United States and are sending significant amounts of money home to Africa, they have become "big men" in their communities in Africa.

West Africans working in New York City are not only responsible for their individual decisions. If they decide to publicly declare themselves as Christians, they are doing so not just for themselves but for an entire household of perhaps twenty, thirty, or forty people. There is a burden attached to the decisions that they make because they are deciding for a group. Therefore, even though these West Africans whom Bob is teaching believe in the Biblical story, they are slow to make a declaration of faith. If they declare themselves as Christians, they are deciding for dozens of others in their *oikos*.

Bob is following the flow of transnational relationships. Because of his relationship with African Muslims in New York City, he traveled to Africa and stayed in the homes owned by his African friends in New York. In some cases the wives still living in Africa have become followers of Jesus, and partnering missionaries in a predominantly Muslim country now have a Bible study in an affluent home that virtually never would have been accessible to them without involving Bob's relationships with African New Yorkers. Evangelistic practice is taking place across continents through natural transnational flows of relationships.

From early on, a key focus of The Bridge is to reach international students, model a reproducible expression of church, and commission them to return home as church planters. The early stages of this ministry didn't see this vision realized. King expresses that these early years were essentially a time of learning. However, in recent years, church planters are beginning to emerge. A Taiwanese student at Columbia University left to Japan and partnered with a Japanese Christian to plant churches in homes. Then, after his company transferred him back to Taiwan, he continued to serve planting churches in his home country. King utilizes Skype technology to coach and continue training this disciple living on the other side of the planet. In addition another Taiwanese studying at Columbia hoped to plant churches after moving to California, but because he and his wife's time in California has been cut short due to a job transfer, they are

relocating back to their home country of Taiwan and hope to plant churches there as well. King shared that these are currently the only known examples of church planters acting upon what they learned while part of their church network in New York, but he believes that two more—both from mainland China—are likely to return to Asia as bi-vocational church planters.

### **Cultural Engagement**

In this research I found very little engagement with the cultural dynamics of arts and media. The only community surveyed that has interacted with arts and media is Vasquez and his church planting efforts in the Saint George community in Staten Island. Vasquez launched his outreach efforts through an open microphone gathering called *Come Vibe With Us*, commonly referred to as *The Vibe*. He began by gathering artists of the spoken word in a local coffee shop. During one summer utilizing musically talented college-age interns, he also hosted a musical jam session for a short time called *Cup of Jam*, and then later incorporated visual arts in the open sessions during *The Vibe*.

More recently, he has incorporated a seeker oriented presentation called Awaken. It is designed to utilize multimedia in order to generate dialogue about the Christian faith. Ultimately, Vasquez is striving to bring together new believers and form organic churches. As he does so, he intends to continue an emphasis on artistic expressions for the gospel.

The Bridge is reaching university students who are connected to cities and nations throughout the globe—especially cultures in Asia. Missional engagement in colleges and universities in New York City provide an opportunity for global impact. By connecting to international students, The Bridge network is seizing the opportunity to reach out through global flows of migration connected to academic studies.

In my view, the potential for organic church planting in college and university settings is substantial. However, outside the ministry to international students led by The Bridge, very little organic church planting activity has taken place among university students in the academic setting. One hopeful sign that has emerged too late to be included in this research is a new initiative to catalyze planting missional communities among New York university students.

### *Summary*

The characteristics of these communities flow directly out of an organic process of disciple making, leadership development and church planting within the context of natural social interactions within the urban environment of NYC. While wrestling—for better or for worse—through the various influences upon Christian community in the post-Christendom and globalized context, these communities are attempting to contextualize expressions of church within natural social interaction. Inherent within this organic process is a natural, relational, conversational approach which contributes significantly to the ongoing stories of transformed lives.

Key characteristics have surfaced during my research interviews. These types of communities are developed through organic processes. As a result, organic churches are relational communities; the primary medium of ministry is through relationship. Organic churches cultivate natural participation among its members. Organic churches seek to multiply and may form decentralized networks as they grow and reach into new cultural subgroups. Organic churches in New York are making a missional impact, and this is most evident in the stories of life transformation found across virtually every community surveyed. Like any church community, organic churches are wrestling to develop leadership and have discovered that making disciples is the core discipline for leadership development. As organic churches seek to make a missional impact in contemporary

society, these communities struggle with ecclesiological tension as they interact with a plurality of religious worldviews. This approach to church planting seems to exist on a continuum between the cultures of Christendom and an emerging post-Christendom. In addition, organic church planters are working in the complexity of the global city environment. Addressing significant cultural diversity and complexity, organic church planters are applying simple approaches for developing communities among the urban harvest.

Organic church planting narrows its focus to what it means to reproduce, in their most basic form, small communities of disciples living out the gospel in everyday life. As such, organic church planting naturally leads to a focus on discipleship.

These small organic churches experience community at a basic human level of relationships. It is out of this framework of relationships among a community of disciples that all ministry efforts find their point of reference and ultimately their organic expressions. Organic church planting develops Christian community in its most basic form. As a result, it leads naturally to a focus on Christian discipleship. Simultaneously, as organic church planters encounter lingering elements of Christendom, nominal expressions of Christianity, and consumer motivated faith, it generally leads to a tension to varying degrees.

In short, an organic approach to church planting hinges upon a community of mutuality. It does seem that this mutuality is also a contributing factor to the ongoing transformation of individual lives and worldviews, and mutual participation encourages the realization of the priesthood of all believers. While these communities confront their own set of challenges, they also can claim a remarkable dynamism.

**CHAPTER 5**  
**RELEVANCE OF FINDINGS FOR SPONTANEOUS  
EXPANSION OF THE CHURCH**

In this chapter I intend to bring my research findings into the wider discussion of organic church planting in light of Western contexts. Using precedent literature, I discuss the theory and practice of organic church planting especially in North America and making specific reflections on how this larger conversation relates to my particular research.

Recognizing the dynamic growth and expansion of the church in much of the developing world and in light of the increasing decline of the church in the West, Lesslie Newbigin points out that one of the great pursuits of missiologists today ought to be the research of missions in the context of the West and what shape the church might take in order to reach a resistant Western culture with the gospel (Newbigin 1986: audio disc 1, track 1). Newbigin's point is well-taken. Allen's theory of spontaneous expansion and Garrison's reporting of church planting movements inform the philosophical underpinnings of organic church planters in New York City; however, this paper is describing the experiment taking place in real time.

Many people today are eager for the church to make an impact in the North American context, and it appears that many have eagerly accepted C. Peter Wagner's statement, "The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches" (1990:11). It is a simple assumption to embrace. While the church in the West wrestles with measured decline (see Olson 2008), it is sensible that many turn to

church planting as a means for renewed growth. However, Stuart Murray, an Anabaptist scholar and church planting trainer, comments:

Simply planting churches of the kind we already have is not the answer. Churches have been leaking hundreds of members each week for many years. Planting more of these kinds of churches is not a mission strategy worth pursuing. But planting new kinds of churches may be a key to effective mission and a catalyst for the renewal of existing churches (Murray 2001:25).

As I will address in the next chapter, the emerging context challenges the church to adapt to new and emerging realities. Maintaining the same church planting strategies may or may not meet the needs of mission in this contemporary setting. Addressing the common practices of church planting Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch express the concern that “it’s more often the case that Sunday services have been planted rather than missional Jesus communities” (Frost and Hirsch 2003:19). While a study of organic church planting rightly includes giving attention to the churches’ practices when they gather, the emphasis on organic church planting leads me to consider a broader set of issues that yet solely another discussion on worship practices in the assembly. This paper is particularly interest in the missional impulse of these churches so that organic church planting may potentially lead to a spontaneous expansion of the church.

### ***Organic Processes: Towards Spontaneous Expansion***

Reflecting on the work of Roland Allen, Cole writes, “Spontaneous expansion is true power. This is what we all want deep in our hearts. This is also what our Lord wants. Let’s have the faith in the Lord of the harvest and in the seed of His word rather than in our methods and strategies. Let us find a way to believe once again, like a child, in magic seed and miraculous trees” (Cole and Sweet 2005:89). Cole believes that the steps towards spontaneous expansion is not in developing more nuanced methodologies, but rather he insists on a return to basic principles—adding a bit of excitement and

imagination to the task. The organic church planters that I interviewed reflect this sentiment. There was little emphasis on particular methodologies. Rather, New York church planters incorporating organic processes are focused on relational evangelism and growing disciples.

Cole emphasizes that church planters must learn to “think like a farmer.” He refers to the organic nature of Jesus’ kingdom parables, and encourages leaders to stick with these basic principles of planting the seed of God’s Word and nurturing natural growth processes (Cole 2006). Cole places strong emphasis on the agricultural parables of Jesus. Encouraging evangelists to “think like a farmer,” he attempts to refocus the task of the church on organic principles. He asserts that Christians should approach missional involvement as a farmer approaches a field to plant fruits or vegetables. He describes the need for Christian workers to search for receptive audiences as one would seek out fertile soil and to be sure to plant the Word of God reminding the reader that we reap what we sow. With no substitute to the Word of God, Cole reminds church planters of Jesus’ description of seed that is planted and then “grows all by itself.” He encourages Christian workers to allow the seed to grow and naturally transform a person’s life. While church planting may be intentional and purposeful, church planting that represents a spontaneous expansion is a viral activity. New churches are the result of groups of people embracing the gospel and forming a Christian community. Churches are born as believers plant the seed of the gospel in fertile soil and refuse to waste time and energy on infertile soil (Cole and Sweet 2005:61-93).

### **Organic Church Planting**

Cole does not attempt to define organic church planting as yet another methodology. Actually it is difficult to find a one line definition of organic church in Cole’s explanations. He describes the nature of the church as the representative of God’s

kingdom. Much like the word pictures illustrated by Jesus' parables, Cole seeks to use narrative, testimony, and commentary to build a picture of the church as an organic initiative empowered by the Holy Spirit. Cole instructs:

- The church is a living organism, not a static institution.
- The church is so much more than a building.
- The church is not to be bound to a single location.
- The church is much more than a one-hour service held one day a week.
- The kingdom of God is meant to be decentralized, but people tend to centralize.
- We are each God's temple, and together we are also His temple (Cole and Sweet 2005:34-45).

Leonardo Boff, describes basic Christian communities using language that can be easily applied to organic church. His explanation is easily adaptable. I am borrowing this explanation to add to the description of organic church planting. Although first applied to basic Christian communities, I believe Boff's description is one of the more well-articulated explanations of an organic community. Boff writes:

The basic communities mean building a living church rather than multiplying material structures. The communities are built on a more vital, lively, intimate participation in a more or less homogeneous entity, as their members seek to live the essence of the Christian message: the universal parenthood of God, communion with all human beings, the following of Jesus Christ who died and rose again, the celebration of the resurrection and the Eucharist, the upbuilding of the kingdom of God, already under way in history as the liberation of the whole human being and all human beings. Christian life in the basic communities is characterized by the absence of alienating structures, by direct relationships, by reciprocity, by a deep communion, by mutual assistance, by commonality of gospel ideals, by equality among members (Boff 1986:4).

Organic church planting involves making disciples and forming Christian community while neither assuming nor imposing foreign cultural structures. Communities are formed as disciples are made within the most basic social units in a society. Various cultural or structural additives to the faith are left out by the church

planter. For instance, Bob uses a contextualized evangelistic approach of storytelling in order to relate the gospel to West African Muslims in New York City. He simply plants the gospel and invites these Muslim background friends to experience their developing faith naturally within their existing social networks. Similarly, Pete works through the natural family structures of Albanian culture, and King has made a conscious decision to introduce Christian community at a basic level so that new believers can reproduce evangelism and church planting organically within their home context.

To Cole's point, offering descriptions of organic church might be more effective than crafting a definition. We certainly find this true in Jesus' teachings on the kingdom. However, the descriptions in this paper serve as the building blocks for understanding and defining organic church planting. The thick descriptions recorded in my research findings provides a framework for understanding the nature of organic churches in the New York context, and this chapter helps relate these churches to the larger conversation describing organic church planting in the West.

In general, I commonly describe church as a community that (1) is committed to Jesus, (2) is committed to one another, and (3) is committed to shared Christian practices. Of course, what this looks like will vary widely between cultural settings. My understanding of organic church planting is a re-branding of contextualized church planting. Without outside structures imposed on the church's formation, indigenous social forms embody the gospel. Organic church planting involves bringing the gospel into the existing social units of a culture or cultures. While some use the term "organic church" as synonymous with "house church" and while many organic churches—in New York City and beyond—meet in homes (i.e., house churches), organic churches are not identified with a place. For instance, Community of Faith in Bayonne has moved between various locations which has included a room in a church building, an addiction recovery club, and a rented storefront. The Albanian churches have made use of libraries

in church buildings, and African Muslims have explored the gospel not only in homes but on street corners.

These churches are often relatively small, simple, relational communities, and they can meet practically anywhere. While homes or public spaces are most common among organic churches, I suggest that meeting in rented spaces is not out of the question if the practice is rooted in the decisions and natural resources of the indigenous community. Based on my current description of these churches, an organic church planting is focused on being indigenous and reproducible in its church forms rather than entertaining debates over church models. Oftentimes, this means that organic churches will develop as house churches and networks of house churches; however, the larger emphasis is that organic churches are planted in natural social structures of a culture or cultures. Treating church as an organic and relational community, points to the potential for the gospel to seep into the cracks and crevices of society as a missional social reality. Simply put, organic church is church at its most basic level.

### **Organic Nature of the Kingdom**

Cole argues that there is a Biblical precedent for thinking about Christ's church organically. He bases this understanding largely on the kingdom parables of Jesus. Arguing that the church, as an expression of the kingdom of God, should reflect the nature of God's kingdom, he writes:

Most of the metaphors and explanations of the Kingdom of God and the Church in the New Testament use natural concepts for identification and description: the body, the bride, the branches, the field of wheat, the mustard seed, the family, the flock, the leaven, salt, and light. When the New Testament uses a building as a metaphor of the Church, it is quick to add that it is made up of living stones (I Peter 2:5). We would do much better as leaders in the Church to learn at the feet of the farmer than study with the CEO of a corporation (Cole and Sweet 2005:35).

Organic church planters in New York didn't necessarily describe their communities using agricultural language as Cole does. However, their reliance on this principle is clear. Over and over again they emphasized doing what appeared most natural in their cultural setting. They were eager to emphasize relationships and had very little similarity to the CEO type of leader.

### *The Nature of the Organic Process*

Garrison explains that plugging in “prescriptive strategies” are a barrier to catalyzing church planting movements (Garrison 1999:52). Prescriptive strategies simply undermine providing a response to factors produced by the context and surrounding circumstances. An organic approach calls for contextualization and real time learning, and organic community leads to mutual relationships and natural development. Utilizing organic processes contrast with some common approaches to churches as organizations. Not only are missiological thinkers, such as Roland Allen or Neil Cole, reflecting on the shape of the church for mission, but organizational theorists are also reflecting on the nature of organizations and groups in culture. What is occurring in the formation of community may reflect a wider conversation about human organization and community that is taking place among organizational theorists, business leaders, and, yes, churches. Reflecting on the ideas shared by some of these thinkers may contribute to a conversation on organic church planting as it emerges in Western contexts such as New York.

Margaret J. Wheatley mourns previous approaches of organizations that have reflected Western industrialization over relational interaction. She writes:

But in venerating equilibrium, we have blinded ourselves to the processes that foster life. It is both sad and ironic that we have treated organizations like machines, acting as though they were dead when all this time they've been living, open systems of self-renewal. We have magnified the tragedy by treating one another as machines, believing the only way we could motivate others was by pushing and prodding them

into action, overcoming their inertia by the sheer force of our own energy (Wheatley 2006:77).

Sally Morgenthaler believes that organizational practices have reflected a mechanistic worldview reflecting the Industrial era and have had a negative impact on the formation of the church; however, she also sees a cultural change beginning to emerge. She offers a tough critique on contemporary practices and recognizes current shifts. She writes:

Significance, influence, interaction, collective intelligence—all of these values describe an essential shift from passivity to reflexivity. We are no longer content to travel in lockstep fashion through life like faceless, isolated units performing our own little job on an assembly line. This attitudinal shift is nothing short of revolutionary. True to form, Western Christendom seems oblivious to its implications. But it is the entrepreneurial church (congregations of roughly one thousand and above) that seems particularly clueless about the shift from the passive to the reflexive. And this, despite all its posturing about cultural relevance.

This disconnect shouldn't really surprise us. Large-church leaders have trained in the modern, command-and-control paradigm for thirty years. Here, organizations aren't seen so much as gatherings of people with a common purpose but as machines. There is no irony here. Machine parts don't have minds or muscles to flex. They don't contribute to process or innovate improvements. Machine parts simply do their best job, which is, of course, to keep the machine functioning.

The mechanical paradigm of organization largely explains why modern church leaders are trained as CEOs, not shepherds. Sheep have their own ideas of what, where, and when they want to eat. They may not want to lie down by quiet waters and go to sleep at eight. They just might want to check out the watercress down the streambed. Or they might want to head out over the next ridge and see if there are any other flocks out there. Conveniently, machine parts don't get ideas. They just get to work, and they work according to specification (2007:180-181).

Organic church planters in New York have consciously moved away from a mechanistic approach to ministry. Relationships are the medium for ministry, and they desire to avoid being or forcing anyone else to become a “cog in the wheel” of an imposing organizational structure. They desire to see ministry happen naturally. For Rosario, church operating through organic processes is a liberating experience. Paul Gomez explained that by participating as an organic church planter his own perspective

opened up to recognize how mechanical things can become in a church setting. Henry Gomez passionately shares how his own worldview and ministry practices have completely shifted after embracing an organic approach to ministry.

While organic church planting focuses on making disciples and naturally forming Christian communities, organic churches aim to expand through multiplication. Oftentimes multiplication of organic churches results in a network of groups across a city or region. Networking as an approach to organization is reflected in the larger culture as well. As cultural changes take shape, Helgesen argues that groups or organizations that function as networks or webs have the opportunity to recapture organic processes and move away from more mechanical structuring. Networks operate based on relational connections. She writes:

The “dynamic connectedness” of the web means that web organizations reflect organic rather than mechanical principles; that is, they work in the same way life does. This naturally makes them more congenial environments for human beings to exist in; more nourishing, more favorable to growth. This congeniality is important, for as we move away from the notion of the organization as a great machine – rational, static, compartmentalized, and closed – we also move away from perhaps the essential aspect of the estrangement of human beings from nature that took root in the Industrial Revolution: the belief that, to be efficient, organizations must mimic the design and workings of a machine (1995:16-17).

While conversations over organizational theory are seeing a shift from mechanical to more organic processes across a spectrum of organizations, organic church planting locates the same conversation in missiological practice. Organic church planting embraces natural processes based on relational connections in indigenous social settings.

Organic church planting represents the development of Christian communities through disciple-making practices in indigenous culture. Organic church planting in New York City requires intentional contextualization following organic processes in order to allow Christian community to multiply across a number of cultural boundaries.

### **Critical Contextualization**

In New York organic church planters seek to establish churches that reflect the local flavor of the gospel. It doesn't appear that church planters in the city have intentionally incorporated any existing theories of contextualization—at least these were not mentioned in the context of any interviews. Nevertheless, Paul G. Hiebert has developed a missiological approach for teaching the gospel and establishing churches within indigenous culture. His approach may be quite useful to organic church planters who desire to catalyze church multiplication that is both highly contextualized among urban dwellers and may be counter-cultural as communities rooted in the gospel of the kingdom.

Hiebert argues that critical contextualization is necessary in order for mission practitioners to approach culture without “ethical indifference.” As missiological workers, church planters are to “see good in all cultures, because culture is created by humans and humans are created in the image of God. But they also see evil in all cultures and societies, for human sin is not only individual but also corporate and systemic” (1999:111). Critical contextualization involves a four step process. The first step is phenomenological analysis. Second, missiologists make an ontological critique. Third, they incorporate an evaluative response. Finally, the fourth step is to develop transformative ministries within a cultural environment. These four steps are described below. Utilizing such an approach to contextualization may be a helpful process for organic church planters. This approach to critical contextualization embraces an organic process within culture while evaluating the various cultural components in light of theological reflection. Such transformative ministries have the opportunity to be counter-cultural gospel communities within the natural flows of a cultural context or subculture.

### ***Phenomenological Analysis***

Beginning the process of critical contextualization, missionaries study the local culture. They ask questions about cultural practices and discover the values of the people. Studying a culture means understanding the categories, assumptions, and logic the people use to construct their world. In order to contextualize the message of the gospel and nurture communities with congruence to their cultural context, church planting that is organic starts with seeking an understanding of the culture (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiéno 1999:21-23).

### ***Ontological Critique***

By first understanding the culture, a missiological worker is able to evaluate the values of the culture. In order to do so, two approaches are involved in the evaluation process. First, church planters must consider whether the various cultural values and practices being evaluated are congruent with the truth taught in Scripture. Second, individuals are capable of testing reality based on the scientific tools of “observation, rational deduction, and independent verification” (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiéno 1999:26-27).

### ***Evaluative Response***

As new churches are established in a culture, these churches are now able to critique their beliefs and cultural practices through the lens of their new Biblical worldview. They are empowered to make changes to their own beliefs and practices based on their new understanding of reality as seen through the gospel. Church planters can help the people through the evaluation process as it may be difficult for them to see clearly through their own values; however, the indigenous people are at the front end of the evaluation process (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiéno 1999:27-28).

### ***Transformative Ministries***

The desired result of the process of critical contextualization is the formation of transformative ministries. Individuals and communities are changed through an ongoing process (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiéno 1999:28-29). Communities that have congruence to their indigenous culture while simultaneously possessing the ability to evaluate the beliefs and practices of that culture in light of the gospel hold the potential to significantly impact the lives of neighbors, family, friends, and coworkers.

### **Beyond Prescriptive Strategies**

Joseph R. Myers (2007) compares two separate approaches for developing a community. He compares the “master plan” approach versus embracing “organic order.” Myers is contrasting prescriptive strategies with organic processes.

### ***Master Plan***

When an organization is built on the master plan approach, it is a community built on a programmed template. This approach anticipates future actions and plans to control the outcomes. It can be characterized by predictability and control, and master plans layout the future based on a rigidity of what should happen. “A master plan is an adopted instrument of policy intended to control individual acts” (Myers 2007:28-30).

Echoing Myer’s comments, Cole points out that the master plan of attempting to implement a model taken from a different context often causes frustration. He writes:

There are diverse factors involved in finding something that works in a variety of environments. Just because it works for a high-caliber leader like Bill Hybels, in a growing and affluent neighborhood such as South Barrington, Illinois, during the eighties and nineties, doesn’t mean that it will have the same effectiveness somewhere else. I am not singling out Willow Creek as a negative example but making the point that if we simply try to duplicate what worked for one person (an exceptional person at that) and expect the same result in a different context, we will be disappointed (Cole 2009:255).

The Master Plan approach is generally rejected by organic church planters in New York. When I questioned Henry Gomez about his plans for multiplication, he was clear that multiplication was part of the vision of his community but that multiplication would happen naturally as a result of a serving and growing community. There was not a template to follow. Similarly, communities, such as The Bridge, Bronx Fellowship, and Iglesia de Cristo, have experienced a relatively significant amount of multiplication, but this multiplication does not result from a pre-set Master Plan based on policy or predictability. Rather multiplication of churches takes place as receptive people are encountered and as leaders emerge, and this occurs through a great deal of ebb and flow.

### ***Organic Order***

Organic order takes a different approach. It is more focused on the process rather than a predetermined outcome. Myers explains that incorporating an organic order is providing a process for addressing occurrences that may or may not have been foreseen. An organic order accounts for the unpredictable and focuses more on creating an environment stimulating the community rather than programmed and predetermined results. In organic order plans can be edited because they involve less rigidity than the master plan (Myers 2007:28-35). Myers' explanation of organic processes reflects the descriptions of missional experimentation described by Vasquez in my research findings. Rather than assuming a master plan, their attitude toward experimentation reflects a natural approach to discovering contextualized outreach to unbelievers through a trial and error posture that may lead to increasingly effective evangelistic engagement.

Leadership places less emphasis on positional authority, and measurement emphasizes story over bottom line perspectives (Myers 2007:30-35). As I describe in my research findings, organic church planters use story to describe ministry outcomes. Rather than counting heads, organic church planters seek to generate stories of

transformation as evidence of encounter with the gospel. Success is celebrated when lives are experiencing change. The use of narrative as a metric of progress by organic planters mirrors a missional engagement rooted in organic order.

### ***Relational Communities: Formation and Development***

Organic church planting involves forming faith communities that are rooted in the basic social unit of a society. Churches often begin by gathering family members or a small group of friends. While I imagine that organic churches could conceivably grow large, many equate organic churches with simple or house churches due to similar dynamics and a close association in emphasis. In this study, each of the communities surveyed exist as small communities of believers, seekers, and others. This emphasis on maintaining small communities elevates issues of participation, multiplication, and reproducibility potentially leading to spontaneous expansion.

### **The Power of Small**

Organic church planting involves developing new churches that reflect an indigenous social and spiritual expression. Frost and Hirsch explain that the organic nature of the church is often a small community that leads to multiplication. Rather than expanding one large congregation, they argue that the church evolves as small relational communities. They write:

We're increasingly convinced that bigger is not necessarily better. This is actually a modernist assumption. We have come to think smaller is better in the postmodern context as long as it is done with cultural vigor. Bigger means more programs, more programs mean more organization and more control (Frost and Hirsch 2003:65-66).

One of the ten characteristics that Garrison describes as a universal trait of church planting movements is the small average size of churches in a multiplication movement. Churches start out small and gather in a setting that is natural to that environment

(Garrison 2004:191-193). Real estate in New York City is costly. Church planting that is organic in New York often utilizes homes; however, these small communities have also made use of public space such as diners and parks as well as rented or donated space such as church libraries or storefronts.

Just as King explains that multiplication in organic church is driven by the values of these churches, Rad Zdero points out that many churches have a need to remain small because of their values. If the church is nurturing practices that reflect a community that is open, participatory, and a family atmosphere, smaller sized communities are more likely to have the ability to keep up with these practices (2004:94).

### **Evangelizing Existing Social Units**

The extent of the spontaneous expansion of churches as described by Garrison is unrealized in New York City as well as most of North America. I asked Sergeant, drawing from his experience as an American missionary working with church planting movements in Asia, to compare church planting movements with what he sees taking place in the United States. In response he addresses a contrast in how outreach takes place:

The big difference that I see is that the emphasis in the CPM's [church planting movements] is upon pre-existing relational groups. Whether that is, you know, family, friends, co-workers, whatever, but the emphasis is on the community based on pre-existing relationships.... A lot of Western approaches are based on winning individuals and grouping them, rather than grouping unbelievers and then winning them (Sergeant 2008).

As the gospel is embraced by a group of family or friends, they become followers of Jesus, and as a result, they begin to gather as a church conscious of their newfound shared faith in Christ. Church planting that is indeed organic seeks to discover existing social units and bring those groups to faith in Jesus. Rather than establishing a new social reality in the form of religious institutional cultures, organic church planters work

to bring the gospel into existing social units. Through an organic approach to mission, the gospel is embodied through the existing cultural streams. Instead of forming groups that represent a new religious culture in society, an organic approach encourages the gospel to bring transformation from within pre-existing cultural groups.

Based on my research interviews, it appears that organic church planting has been working out these ideas over the course of their existence. Bob and Pete, having served overseas among Africans and Albanians respectively, began with considerable alignment to the approach described by Sergeant. To some degree, Bronx Fellowship and The Bridge have been experimenting with this principle. Nevertheless, some organic church planting efforts in New York still maintained an attractional emphasis and continued to emphasize individual conversions and assimilation into an existing group. However, these organic church leaders have been learners, and in some cases have begun to experiment to varying degrees with grouping unbelievers and locating people of peace. As a researcher, I suggest that it is too early to determine the effectiveness of these attempts by church planters in the city.

In a 2008 interview, Cole describes his experience of discovering this process of developing community where people already are. He recounts:

We organized them [new believers] into home groups that met every other week. They were so eager to grow and be together that they started meeting every week. Eventually we tried to launch a worship service, because that's what I was taught to do. People who had grown up in the church came, but none of the new believers did. I was expecting people to leave life to come to church. We learned that wherever life happens, church should happen (Jethani and O'Brian 2008:36).

Organic church planting is an effort to plant the gospel within existing social settings and see the various cultural groups emerge as new Christian communities. However, I have found that even organic processes often require intentionality. This begins with identifying the concept of the basic cultural unit within a society, and

discerning how to enter that social sphere. The following discussion on identifying existing social units and discovering persons of peace that influence those social units focuses on the dynamics of a missional process for organic church planters.

### ***The Oikos and Identifying Social Units***

Historically, one element of church life that is likely true of early Christianity is that its life together was expressed in small communities. Roger Gehring explains:

One point nearly all NT scholars presently agree: early Christians met almost exclusively in the homes of individual members of the congregation. For nearly three hundred years—until the fourth century, when Constantine began building the first basilicas throughout the Roman Empire—Christians gathered in private houses built initially for domestic use, not in church buildings originally constructed for the sole purpose of public worship (2004:1).

Gehring points out that the *oikos* (household) structure of the first century was the basic unit of society that often served as the starting point for many of the first churches planted in the Roman Empire. However, the *oikos* is distant from our household structures today in the West. The *oikos* was the basic unit of society. It was a home, a family, and an economic unit. It may have included spouse, children, slaves, hired workers, and even clients. Household and the economy were intricately connected. Nothing quite like the first century *oikos* exists in our Western cities today (Gehring 2004:301); however, organic church planting is intended to identify and evangelize contemporary social units. One of the tasks of the organic church planter is to identify natural social units in contemporary urban settings. This approach may bring the gospel into a group of family members, coworkers, friends, or various other cultural groupings.

In New York the strategy of identifying an *oikos* appears quite natural for a church planter like Pete who is working among Albanians through their strong family and relational ties. Bob is able to work among the leaders of social groupings that may number up to forty people. He has traveled between continents utilizing the social

influence of African heads of households based in New York. However, for other organic church planters in the city, the *oikos* of the New Testament world is not congruent with the reality of their current context. Social groups may be a collection of family, friends, or coworkers and may involve many layers of relationships while interplaying with a heightened sense of Western individualism. Nevertheless, the *oikos* as a social concept is being utilized to varying degrees by organic church planters in the city.

### ***Persons of Peace***

Embracing a concept of church as a small organic community raises the possibility of beginning a new church with a single household. The majority of church planters that I interviewed recognized the importance of beginning with the person of peace. In most cases church planters were seeking to learn how to best identify and utilize the person of peace for establishing new gospel communities. By identifying persons of peace and beginning there, church planters “are delivered from sterile evangelistic efforts which consume unnecessary energy and resources.... Discovering the man of peace is looking for God’s fingerprints in a community” (Buitrago 2006:50).

A person of peace is someone that God has already been preparing to receive the message of the kingdom. Because the new group is developed organically as a simple, relational community, a person of peace may be equipped to quickly pass on the good news to others in their social network (Patterson and Scroggins 2002:102). Felicity Dale highlights Jesus’ instruction in Luke 10 and sees Jesus’ instructions as a vision for community formation through people of peace. Evangelists enter the home of a person of peace, eat with them, carry with them the power of the Holy Spirit to address the needs of the household, and proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom. Dale insists that “the

‘person of peace’ is such a key concept for us to understand. These are the laborers whom God is going to use to bring in the harvest” (2003:96-102).

In contemporary Western context the person of peace is a person of influence in a family, group of friends, workplace, or other social setting. In New York the person of peace may have influence in an extended family, but depending on the cultural group involved, they may also be a person of influence for a group of friends, neighbors, or co-workers. The person of peace has the ability to assemble a small group, and they are a person of influence who may potentially share the Good News within an existing social unit. Most of the organic church planters in New York are attempting to locate people of peace; however, there are also challenges in this Western urban setting as individualism among some cultural groups affects the degree of influence possessed by the person of peace and as many households are subject to high degrees of social fragmentation. Nevertheless, finding the person of peace is a natural way for spontaneous expansion to occur as church planters locate a catalyst leader who shares the gospel in an existing social unit. Some organic church planting efforts in New York have penetrated new pockets of people through relationships with a person of peace.

### ***Missional Impact***

Small participatory communities studied in my research have made a significant missional impact; however, in order to measure their effectiveness, it requires a different set of measurement tools than standard church growth assessments. Counting how many people are meeting in the same room is not an effective measurement tool for decentralized communities. I have considered two approaches for determining overall effectiveness. First, is there evangelistic growth? In my findings I sought to discover the percentage of new believers, seekers, uncommitted, and unbelievers involved in these communities. Secondly, in my findings chapter I reported on the stories of life

transformation as a tangible result of encounter with the gospel that have emerged from these communities.

In research conducted by J.D. Payne on missional house churches across the United States, he adopted a similar approach to part of this research by identifying percentages or ratios for assessing numerical growth based on percentages of new believers, baptism ratios, and churches planted. Rather than count overall membership rolls or attendance figures, Payne studies the percentage of new believers or seekers involved in church following a similar ministry paradigm. His research suggests a similarity of outcomes in areas of evangelism and church growth between organic church planting in New York City and the missional house churches surveyed. He identifies baptism ratios and church multiplication. The conversion ratios that he discovered were very similar to what I found in my research interviews with organic church leaders in New York (Payne 2008:73-78). Reflecting on the numerical data he gathered, he reports:

The gravity of these numbers should not be passed over casually. Ratios of this size automatically place these churches among the lowest baptismal ratios in the world. Any traditional congregations manifesting such numbers would automatically be considered the most effective evangelistic churches in North America....These numbers alone place such congregations in the highest category of church planting churches in North America (Payne 2008:75).

Payne only studied house church communities that were indeed missional in orientation. Small relational communities are making a missional impact, and one may even argue that some of the greatest potential for missional engagement in North America may be through organically oriented small relational communities. Multiplying such communities may make a deep impact in a post-Christendom urban society.

### ***The Leadership Factor in Organic Church Planting***

Like any other approach to ministry and church development, in organic church planting the issue of leadership is an important factor for consideration. In an online

interview with Shapevine.com, Watson states that he has been involved in a church planting movement that has started over one hundred thousand churches and has had five million baptisms. He explains that with that degree of growth and multiplication, leadership is crucial. Watson points out that everyone is a priest and an evangelistic witness, but that when church multiplication grows to such a degree, leadership that equips the body on a larger scale is quite necessary. There is a need for leaders to emerge that provide theological formation and maturity for the churches involved. Watson explains that his team describes leadership with a narrow understanding. Leadership is not a matter of administration, but for Watson leadership describes disciples who are actually leading others into discipleship resulting in more leaders (Watson 2009b).

Organic church planters in New York have shifted away from their previous experiences of expecting leaders to lead because they were given a position. Rather, through the process of organic church planting, they have learned to identify leaders by identifying individuals who are naturally leading. It appears that discovering an organic approach to leadership has evolved as organic church planters have learned through trial and error experiences. In my interview with Rosario he strongly emphasized leadership as a crucial issue for organic church planting and voiced concern over the struggle of developing leaders. Churches can only be planted to the extent that leaders are available. From my observation, focusing on locating persons of peace may provide a creative outlet for discovering leaders.

Cole argues that leaders will be discovered when church planters look to the “harvest” rather than recruiting from other ministries. While organic church planting in New York represents a diverse set of experiences, Cole’s point is consistent with the experiences of frustration and the points of celebration for organic church planters in the city. For most organic church planters in New York City frustration has quite often resulted from focusing on recruitment for leadership development rather than disciple-

making in the harvest. As organic church planters focus on making disciples who may mature into leadership, they appear to express greater satisfaction with the process overall. Cole insists that recruiting from other ministries only results in subtraction because it removes a leader from the ministry from which they came rather than multiplying new leaders. Cole says,

The kingdom heroes who will carry the day in this near future may have awakened this morning with a hangover—in the wrong person’s bed! They are stuck in a cycle of darkness and their lives are rapidly circling the drain. When someone reaches out to them with hope, help, and life, they will take hold and never look back. Perhaps instead of looking only at the local Bible institute for future leaders, we should look at the local bar with more interest (2009:138).

Cole argues that the solution to leadership needs is found among those outside of the church. Rather than recruiting leaders from other ministries, he insists that future leaders should be discovered through evangelistic practice. If leadership is to begin with evangelism, then developing leaders cannot be separated from making disciples. In this next section, I examine the emphasis on disciple-making as the core component and a key competency for organic church planting.

### **Beginning with Discipleship**

Cole explains that the process for seeing a movement of spontaneous expansion of the church must begin with discipleship. He describes a flow for organic church planting leading to spontaneous expansion of the church. Cole says that church planters begin with making disciples. Making disciples leads to the emergence of leaders. With leaders, churches are planted. As churches multiply, a movement naturally occurs. Cole (2007) argues that the priorities of this process—beginning with discipleship as the starting point—are important. Discipleship is the basic building block for spontaneous expansion through organic church planting.

Discipleship isn't equated with mere church attendance, only participation in religious ritual, or simply adherence to a particular belief. Disciples submit to the authority of the One they are following and attempt to practice a life based on obedience. As followers of Jesus, disciples seek to imitate their Master. Discipleship signifies that individuals are seeking to be obedient to the teaching of the Christian faith, develop a relationship that connects them to their Master, and attempt to imitate the attitudes and practices of their Teacher. With discipleship as the basic building block for church planting, churches are formed when disciples make more disciples and gather together as a community of faith.

Organic church planters in New York have learned from their experiences that focusing on disciple-making has potential to lead to church multiplication. Solely gathering individuals into groups—whether house churches or any other form—does little to spur multiplication.

Watson explains that discipling begins when a relationship begins. It begins before conversion, continues through conversion, and beyond conversion. From the moment a relationship begins a follower of Jesus starts to bring his or her participation in God's kingdom to bear in the relationship. Even from first contact, a disciple of Jesus may begin to influence another person and become conscious of his or her whole life as a witness of the hope of Christ. Watson also makes the point that discipleship and leadership are not separate issues. Leadership emerges from becoming a follower of Jesus as one of his disciples (Watson 2009b). Seeing disciple-making as a relational continuum beginning from first contact, church planters are utilizing an organic worldview. The seed of the gospel is being planted and watered through the context of a relationship. Disciple-making is an organic process that starts when the first seed is planted. Leadership emerges when the seeds of discipleship grow and mature.

Cole insists that leadership for the church should begin with transformation of life. Changed-lives bring dynamism and are often contagious. He offers this advice: “If your ministry is struggling without leaders, do not reevaluate your leadership development program. It is time to reevaluate your disciple-making system.” He explains that the potential for movement lies in the transformation of lives from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light (2009:138-139).

Some organic church planters in New York depended substantially upon imported workers—both long term workers and interns—to support church planting activities and leadership development. However, it is apparent from my research that significant church planting took place when church planters looked to leaders raised up from the harvest. In the city, evangelism has often proved to be a stronger leadership development approach than recruitment or transfer growth. While nearly every organic church planter interviewed for this research has now reached this conclusion to varying degrees, this realization has been yet another lesson learned through the experiences of trial and error. It is important to note that missionary workers moving to the city, college interns, and similar workers joining these communities do make a contribution; however, they are not the primary source of church multiplication. Cole’s insight for the source of church multiplication being found in the harvest appears to be consistent with experiences observed in New York City.

Discipleship is emphasized as the key component for organic church multiplication and for leadership development in an organic community. For church planters taking an organic approach, a focus on disciple-making will remain a key priority.

### **Starting with DNA for Discipleship**

Organic church planters in New York demonstrate a strong emphasis on discipleship and making new disciples as the building block of any church planting effort. As a researcher examining these church planting efforts, it appears clear to me that the DNA of discipleship is important to these communities.

Cole compares the nature of the church to that of the living organism of the human body. He explains that just as every living cell contains DNA, so does every disciple within the church, and as a result, every church contains this same DNA. To better explain and utilize this concept of DNA, he's developed an acrostic using the letters DNA. The first component is Divine Truth. Divine Truth is the "D" of the DNA. This is understood two ways. A community of faith is to invite Jesus to be present in their midst and acknowledge that he is indeed alive and active in that church, and also churches must see the Word of God as their guiding authority. Secondly, a church should promote nurturing relationships. This is the "N" of the DNA of the church. Members of the group receive care through the relationships they have with one another. It is through these relationships that believers are encouraged, love one another, and experience mercy. The third and final component of this DNA is apostolic mission. As active participants in apostolic mission, the whole church is sent on mission into their world. This is the "A" of the DNA of the church. Beginning at the cellular level, every church is to embrace Divine Truth, pursue nurturing relationships, and participate in apostolic mission. Cole points out that an incomplete DNA equals deformity. He suggests that this human phenomenon is paralleled in the life of the church (2005:113-121).

Consideration of Cole's explanation of DNA raises issues for organic church planters in the city. Organic church planters in New York emphasize doing things naturally. However, what are the implications if doing things naturally incorporates a DNA that doesn't reflect Christian discipleship? If organic church planting is a missional

activity that is planting the gospel, it is likely to demonstrate exceedingly positive results, and in the communities I have studied transformation often results from planting the gospel. However, it may be reasonable to assume that to some degree part of the ecclesiological tension experienced within some of these communities could be the conflicting nature of different sets of DNA as new believers emerge and interact with believers migrating from the Christendom apparatus.

Watson states that the kind of life one is going to live as a believer is often established by the DNA that is set at the beginning of the discipleship process. He offers a critique of many contemporary practices explaining that if someone must be challenged by a confrontational message and then an inspirational experience in order to come to faith in Christ, that experience “becomes a pattern” that they begin to depend upon for their ongoing faithfulness. Rather, Watson (2009) teaches that the DNA for discipleship needs to be based on Jesus’ life and through the nurturing that takes place in a discipleship relationship. He says it is moving people through a “DNA process” as people bring their life into submission to their Creator as a believer invites them to grow through Christ-centered relationships.

The emphasis on DNA directs the church planting focus to discipleship. The nature of the church will be made up of the DNA reflected in its participants. Like human beings, DNA is found at the cellular level. Church can function organically when each of its members is participating with a healthy DNA. Organic church planters in New York have discovered the importance of emphasizing making disciples rather than a focus on establishing external infrastructures. I believe that many instances when they have emphasized a holistic discipleship DNA they have seen positive outcomes leading to life transformation and in some cases church multiplication. Organic church planters working in New York City seldom used the term “DNA.” However, it seems that they have been grasping at this disciple-making principle.

### **The Leader as Catalyst**

Garrison reports that when missionaries launch church planting movements, they do not have a goal of becoming the pastor of a newly planted church, but rather missionaries are attempting to catalyze a movement by reaching and training local leaders to develop and lead churches (2004:186-187). As organic church planting leads to multiplying of disciples and churches, a decentralized network of churches emerge that require the presence of local leadership. If multiplying disciples evolves into the multiplication of leaders, then the initial planters of organic church networks and multiplying movements are essentially leadership catalysts. However, it appears that organic church planters in New York haven't always begun with this role in mind. Though not true in every case, some organic church planters began by functioning in much more of a management role or resembling the traditional senior pastor position. This traditional leadership positioning is not consistent across every organic church leaders, but it has been the case in some efforts in New York. It does appear that when organic church planters function more as missionaries seeking to raise local leaders or as coaches alongside indigenous church planters, they are able to have a catalyzing influence that provides hopeful signs for spontaneous expansion.

Leadership in organic church networks does not necessarily mirror a hierarchical model of leadership. Rather than a centralized, hierarchical approach, organic church planting in Western contexts is often characterized by decentralized, flat leadership structures. While organic church planters in New York have been working through the various tensions inherent in sorting out leadership issues, this decentralized relational approach to leadership is the target for which these planters are reaching.

Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom describe leadership characteristics in decentralized organizations and communities. Their description may be helpful to church planting workers aiming to serve as catalyst-type leaders. In order to explain this sort of

leader, they contrast distinctions between CEO type leaders and that of community catalysts.

While both are leader types, catalysts and CEOs draw upon very different tools. A CEO is The Boss. He's in charge, and he occupies the top of the hierarchy. A catalyst interacts with people as a peer. He comes across as your friend. Because CEOs are at the top of the pyramid, they lead by command and control. Catalysts, on the other hand, depend on trust. CEOs must be rational; their job is to create shareholder value. Catalysts depend on emotional intelligence; their job is to create personal relationships. CEOs are powerful and directive; they're at the helm. Catalysts are inspirational and collaborative; they talk about ideology and urge people to work together to make the ideology a reality. Having power puts CEOs in the limelight. Catalysts avoid attention and tend to work behind the scenes. CEOs create order and structure; catalysts thrive on ambiguity and apparent chaos. A catalyst is usually mission-oriented (Brafman and Bekstrom 2006:129).

As making disciples begins in the context of relationships, the catalyst model of leadership plays a significant role in the task of organic church planting. Leadership in organic church planting is primarily relational and not positional. In this light, the term catalyst becomes one of the controlling metaphors when it comes to understanding and describing leadership when using organic church planting methods and processes.

Cole offers a down-to-earth description of the type of leaders that generate the momentum of movements. He writes:

Movements are like this. They are grassroots, often underground, and they start with crazy people who are willing to believe in the impossible. Movements never start in corporate offices with executives drawing up a master plan. Looking for the best and brightest and recruiting to the work is not how world-changing movements start. If we truly want to see the world changed, we must begin as a band of madmen, welcoming other crazy people who want to be part of something bigger than themselves (2009:130).

As leaders, organic church planters are catalysts. Their goal is to develop grassroots movement by multiplying disciples, leaders, and new churches. Through an organic process they strive to see new believers take their place in the priesthood of all believers and participate in the Mission of God. Rad Zdero explains:

The weight of responsibility and leadership for emerging house church movements should be placed squarely on the shoulders of grassroots volunteers, or so-called lay people.... Professionals—although having a real role as coaches and strategists and mobile overseers of house church networks—need to give way to a new wave of volunteer Christian leaders from the grassroots (2004:114).

Zdero recognizes that spontaneous expansion of the church must be driven by a volunteer force. He points out that there is a place for the highly training missional worker, but these leaders serve as catalysts to mobilize and as mentors to coach the emerging leaders rising from the harvest.

### *Ecclesiological Tension*

In my research findings I explain that organic church planters in New York are grappling with ecclesiological tensions to various degrees. This also appears to be consistent with Payne's research of missional house churches. His research discovered an inherent frustration among leaders of missional house churches:

Some of the church leaders expressed frustration with believers who join the house church expecting it to become like a traditional church. Since by their very nature many of these expressions of the body of Christ are more organic and less institutional, more simple and less structured, more relational and less formal, and more participatory and less passive regarding worship and ministry, many of these leaders find themselves ministering to people experiencing significant cultural conflict (Payne 2008:128).

It appears inherently difficult to follow organic processes as a missiological endeavor without accompanied by ecclesiological tension in a society inherently characterized by a Christendom culture even as post-Christendom persistently emerges in many corners of the same society. While this tension may be real, organic church planters are faced with the need to overcome the barriers created by such tension. I address this issue in more detail in my recommendations section of this paper.

### *Summary*

Organic church planting is a response to the concern for the spontaneous expansion of the church. While organic church planting is certainly not the only avenue for Christian leaders entering this conversation, it is an intentional application of principles involved in realizing the spontaneous expansion of the church in contemporary urban settings. Church planters in New York are experimenting with organic processes in hopes of catalyzing a spontaneous expansion of the church in the city. As church planters apply organic principles and processes to the work of disciple-making in a global city in the Western context, they face an array of emerging opportunities and challenges.

Organic church planters in New York City possess the opportunity to draw from a wider conversation and body of literature taking place around the issues of spontaneous expansion of the church through disciple-making and church multiplication. Garrison's research on church planting movements, Watson's and Sergeant's hands-on experience in some of those same movements, contemporary theory and practice for organizational and church leadership, and Cole's reflections on catalyzing organic church multiplication in North America are informative for organic church planters in New York City.

Utilizing organic processes for church planting as described by Cole, Myers, and others are largely congruent with the practices embraced by the communities highlighted in this study. Organic communities in New York are seeking to experiment with principles and practices that they are learning from church planting movement practitioners such as Watson while addressing the specific issues associated with a global city environment.

The re-emphasis on disciple-making and discovering a healthy DNA for discipleship in organic communities is consistent with the overarching themes of these communities. They embrace practices that reflect church at its most basic level, and they are pursuing missionary practice without heavy external infrastructures. As a result, an

emphasis on Christian discipleship as the key building block appears to be a natural outcome.

Organic church planters are informed by the features of church planting movements, voices such like Cole as well as others, and especially by their experiential practice of trial and error missional engagement. Organic church planters will continue to find these resources useful. In addition, they will learn their greatest lessons through a continued process of practice and reflection as they continue to seek to catalyze mission in their urban metropolis.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In this chapter I articulate my concluding reflections on this research and offer a set of recommendations for the way forward for organic church planting in New York City. These conclusions and recommendations are based on a careful integration of the precedent literature with an evaluation of the data from my research.

#### *Conclusion*

The hope for a spontaneous expansion of the church has begun to be realized in many parts of the globe. Missiological research offers staggering reports of church planting movements in the contemporary world. Many organic church planters are asking the question, Can it happen here in North America? Can it happen in our multicultural post-modern cities?

While organic church planting has had a missional impact, organic church planters' hopes for vast church multiplication is to a great extent still unrealized. Organic church planters have been engaged in an active learning process as they address the contextual impact of a quintessential global city as their ministry space. While they have been informed by principles emerging from observing church planting movements, they are faced with the unique challenge of contextualizing organic planting in the global city. Ecclesiological tensions have often played a role in the struggles and barriers faced by these organic church planters. It is clear that organic church planting has been beneficial to the mission of God in New York City, but it is equally clear that approaches to organic

church planting as a missiological enterprise need continue refinement to meet the demands of a tough urban culture.

An American version of post-Christendom is emerging in North American cities, and this post-Christendom may look very different from the European counterpart as American Christianity wrestles and debates between an identity as exiles or to fight to hold onto the previous era of American-style Christendom. However, outside of the church, the issue is already being decided by hearts and minds of people making a plurality of faith decisions about what is real and a priority for their lives.

Organic church planters are seeking to develop indigenous churches at a basic level through disciple-making activity among those currently uncommitted to Christian discipleship. As post-Christendom emerges, this context sets the stage for organic church planting to exist alongside established historical churches and conventional contemporary church planting based on established precedent. This religious climate can be characterized by pluralistic expressions of Christian faith and requires greater creativity and mutual respect for ministry partnerships to be productive and honor Christ.

Planting organic churches in New York City, disciple-making activity presents challenges and opportunities associated with the context of a quintessential global city. As a central node in global economics, New York City is an intense environment of economic competition and financial hardship. Personal time and energy is regularly stretched. Simultaneously, part of the potential of organic church planting is to allow missional engagement to flow through the marketplace and workplaces without being limited by an orientation of church as place or as an event.

The setting of the global city is a launch pad for wide-ranging cultural influence. Organic church planters in New York City may participate in the mission of God with a global perspective in mind. Through missional engagement with academia, media, and the arts, the gospel can have an influence locally, regionally, and globally.

New York City hosts a collection of diversity and a cultural pluralism representing every corner of the planet. Organic church planters are starting churches through simple organic processes in the face of tremendous cultural complexity. Ironically, greater complexity seems to invite simpler approaches to mission. As church planters address New York's diversity, some missionary workers focus on a single cultural or language group. Other communities end up being multicultural through planting multiethnic churches and by connecting different churches—both homogenous and multiethnic—in a network. Some organic church planters have witnessed evangelistic flows naturally take place through transnational relationships enhanced by global technology and mobility. Organic church planters in New York City are working within an intense economic environment, serve a diverse multicultural population, and confront enormous potential for wide ranging cultural influence.

As this research has documented, organic church planting in New York City has led to communities that are making a missional impact. Following organic processes, missionary workers are seeking to make disciples resulting in new churches. They promote the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers by developing communities of participation. Making relationships the primary medium of ministry, they recognize that the basic unit of church growth and multiplication is discipleship of new and existing believers.

### ***Recommendations***

As a missiologist, it is exceedingly important to include recommendations in this paper. The focus of such research is not merely an isolated academic exercise, but rather it is a quest to discover an effective means for participation in the mission of God. These recommendations emerge from the research interviews complimented by the review of pertinent literature.

Organic church planters in New York City have hoped to experience the spontaneous expansion of the church through multiplying gospel-centered communities. There has indeed been significant missional advancement and life transformation through organic church planting, but the hope for spontaneous expansion resembling a church planting movement remains unrealized. One factor of these unrealized hopes may be due to the challenges presented by a post-Christendom and urban context; however, I am also seeking to recommend intentional practices that may stimulate a move towards more spontaneous church multiplication.

### **Multiplying for Missional Impact**

Organic church planting leans on organic processes that lead to natural dialogue and participation and a focus on discipleship. These processes appear to be overwhelmingly positive for seeing transformation of lives through encounter with the gospel. The narratives of life transformation consistently emerge from these communities. Not only are the lives of a number of members of these churches affected by taking part in these relational and participatory communities, but the leaders themselves describe a personal transformation in how they lead, relate to other people, and reflect on their own spiritual journey. I recommend that organic church planters continue many of their basic practices. Participation of every member, developing communities through organic processes, and relationships as the medium for ministry has positive outcomes and should continue.

However, the sort of rapid growth and exponential multiplication of leaders and churches that some church planters have hoped for has not been fully realized. Based on my observations, many organic church planting efforts in New York still rely heavily on a “frog church” rather than “lizard church” approach (see Garrison 2004). Organic church planting has focused on small communities rooted in organic processes, and a

conscious shift from passive involvement to active participation has yielded positive results. However, in my view, they have too often relied on invitational approaches to outreach. I am skeptical of the potential of simply inviting individuals to church—whether in home, café, storefront, or cathedral—to result in spontaneous expansion.

Church multiplication that leads to spontaneous expansion in other contexts involves intentional church planting practices. Church planting systems such as the Discovery Bible Study proposed by David Watson (2009) involves an organic process while embedding a DNA that includes developing care for one another, witnessing to others, an inductive participatory approach to learning, and a number of elements meant to encourage discipleship multiplication early in the process. At the same time, it is a simple approach that is easily reproduced by a person of peace early in the process. I have begun to hear reports of significant progress using Watson's approach among Latinos in North American cities. Some efforts are being made in New York to apply lessons learned from Watson that are signaling some hopeful signs.

While some systems of disciple-making may or may not fit a particular cultural context, it is worth noting that spontaneous expansion in the setting of significant church multiplication may indeed involve incorporating intentional disciple-making processes of some kind. The DNA planted at the beginning of the church multiplication process requires intentionality. Whether developing or adopting a particular disciple-making strategy, an approach aligned with organic processes may provide an avenue for empowering new believers and shaping the DNA of discipleship early during the discipling process. Surveying the practices of church planting movements, communities experiencing spontaneous expansion are utilizing intentional approaches to disciple making.

I recommend developing approaches that intentionally plant the gospel leading to the formation of contextualized indigenous faith communities. The desire to allow the

gospel to flow naturally does not need to exclude intentional practices. Just the opposite, church planting movements often involve intentional practices and a clear vision of churches planting churches. Church planting processes may vary between people groups or neighborhoods. For instance, Bob utilizes a culturally relevant approach of oral storytelling for working among West African Muslims while Bronx Fellowship and The Bridge have recently begun to experiment with Watson's approach of Discovery Bible Study. The goal is to create a framework or frameworks that develop a healthy DNA for discipleship while placing responsibility quickly in the hands of local indigenous believers. It will be important for church planters to maintain a commitment to organic processes while determining systemic strategies that create a framework for newer believers to begin sharing what they have learned early in their experience. However, putting a particular process for disciple-making and spiritual formation into the hands of new believers will likely help ministry to move beyond the time and resource restraints of a missionary church planter.

### **Alignment with Organic Processes**

As organic church planters consider strategic systems for developing new churches, I recommend that initiatives remain aligned with organic processes. For instance, I currently find the methods introduced by David Watson to be very organic while incorporating a well-rounded DNA from the beginning of the process. It creates a framework for indigenous expressions to emerge through inductive approaches, natural relationships, and groupings of people through a person of peace.

That being said, simultaneously, an organic approach may also call for methods of disciple-making to be developed by local leaders. Hiebert's four-step approach for contextualization among newly planted indigenous churches has great merit for application in a post-modern urban setting. Facilitating intentional practices for

multiplication and local contextualization does not abandon an organic approach. To the contrary, I believe that developing methods for releasing disciples through organic processes needs to be developed.

### **Multiplying Through People of Peace**

Luke chapter 10 has been cited widely and often by organic church planters of various backgrounds. For instance, there is even a social networking site called LK10.com. Applying Luke 10 in contemporary terms refers to the strategy of finding a person of peace and facilitating a new Bible study that eventually becomes a church through contact with the person of peace as he or she influences their social network to learn about the gospel and become followers of Jesus. Following this approach leads organic church planting into missional engagement. Indigenous expressions are more likely to emerge because the gospel is taking root in their own local setting and frees church planting to move into spaces or cultural groups that are unlikely to fit an attractional approach.

As my research into these actual communities coincided with studying the principles and practices of organic church multiplication, especially in the context of church planting movements, I believe that I observed a gap. Organic church planters in New York are informed by these principles but alignment was lacking to some extent. There has been some degree of experimentation with church planting through persons of peace; however, I believe that further experimentation is needed. Recently, The Bridge has made a greater use of this strategy, and three different Asian groups have begun meeting near or on the Columbia University campus. One Chinese, one Taiwanese, and one Nepalese have each begun within only a few weeks of each other utilizing this approach to organic church planting.

The difficulty of applying this strategy is the heightened individualism and fractured family structures of Western society in addition to the pure busyness of life in a global city context. I recommend that organic church planters incorporate anthropological tools such as ethnographic interviewing and cultural observations to determine social structures where church planting through persons of peace is most likely to occur. By locating receptive people among the most connected people groups, spontaneous expansion of the church may still occur across numerous cultural and geographic boundaries in and from the global city setting. Because New Yorkers exist along a continuum of cultural assimilation and change, the gospel has great potential to jump from culture to culture. However, the proper steps for organic church planters may be to intentionally begin among persons of peace among cultural groups determined to be socially interconnected and theologically receptive.

### **Develop Realistic Expectations for Progression**

In my conversation with David Watson, he pointed out that church planting movements in overseas contexts usually require the missionary to work through a four year ramp-up period. After laying the foundations for spontaneous expansion, he explained, these movements build momentum (2008). Watson points out that developing spontaneous multiplication of the church requires counter-intuitive thinking. “To grow big, start small. To grow fast, start slow” (Watson 2009a). Bob pointed out during our interview that missional workers in New York City are under pressure to perform quickly and fall short of missiological outcomes as a result of making strategic decisions based on this psychological pressure to produce quickly.

In my observation church planters struggle with the reality that transformation is sometimes a slow process and many church planters feel the pressure to produce quickly. The infrastructure and expectations of church planting in North American contexts can

cause church planters to rush the process for the sake of financial stability or external approval, but this often results in forsaking a deeper missiological engagement in the city. In addition, I believe that organic church planters need to lay the foundations of intentional cultural studies in order to better understand the context and to locate fertile soil for spontaneous expansion in the city.

If organic church planters hope to see spontaneous expansion in New York City, counter-intuitive thinking and practices—including establishing a more appropriate or perhaps unconventional timeline for disciple-making practices—may go a long way towards an organic and spontaneous expansion of the church. Realistic expectations in New York City will likely include taking into account the post-Christendom environment, the high demands of a global city context, and the organic principles that lead church planters to begin slow and small in the earliest stages of their work.

### **Contextualize for the Emerging Urban and Global Culture**

The environment of New York City has had an impact on organic church planting practices. Global city environments are likely to provide both opportunities and challenges. An emerging post-Christendom is simultaneously raising new challenges in Western settings. Spontaneous expansion is largely unrealized in Western post-modern urban contexts; therefore, organic church planters need to engage in intentional contextualization for these contemporary cultural realities.

### ***The Global City***

The context of a global city presents challenges and opportunities that require fresh missiological thinking and practice. The concept of organic church leads to multiplication that is decentralized and fluid by nature. Rather than a heavy institutional framework, organic church planting affords a vision that sees the church seeping into the

nooks and crannies of the culture. The formation of church is a simple relational process that can literally exist in any segment of urban society. I recommend that organic church planters in New York City continue to develop a contextual practice that sees disciple making and church planting flow through the major cultural streams of urban life in New York.

### **Becoming Missional in the Marketplace**

Gospel movement in the marketplace is not without historical precedent. In 1857 Jeremiah Lanphier, a forty-eight year old businessman and Dutch Reformed Church missionary, started a series of prayer meetings for laymen on Fulton Street in the financial district of downtown Manhattan. Concurrent with a crisis in the financial sector, these prayer meetings were a significant part of what became known as the Third Great Awakening in American church history as 10,000 people answered the call to prayer in downtown Manhattan (Curtis 1989:32-33).

In the global city environment the marketplace is a dominant force, and it is dizzying to imagine the sheer number of cultures and social groups that function within the workplaces that service the population and infrastructure supporting New York and its global economy. I highly recommend that organic church planters in New York City think beyond church planting that solely results in meetings based in homes. An organic approach to church planting calls gospel workers to think beyond church as place. While the regular practice of Christian hospitality should continue and the inherent value found in gathering in a living room or dining room table should be felt by as many as possible, church planting that is organic has the raw potential to extend into every crack and crevice of this society—including workplaces, offices, and break rooms.

As there are organic church planters in the city that are targeting a specific cultural or linguistic group, I recommend that organic church planting efforts in New

York City include a disciple making presence in the marketplace and workplaces that result in organic church planting in offices, on job sites, and in nearby public space. I believe in order to expand organic church planting efforts into these spheres, it will require intentional practices and focused disciple making efforts by organic church planters.

Making disciples that result in organically planted churches in the marketplace will likely require training believers as evangelists who are actively involved in the marketplace. The missional principle of locating people of peace and discipling those men and women of influence as they both receive and then pass on the gospel to others needs to be intentionally applied to the marketplace as well as workplaces in the service sector.

### **Engaging the International Matrix**

Although transnational activities span nations and continents, most of the actual activity takes place in local space (Abu-Lughod 1999). The Bridge network, West African outreach, and Albanian mission each demonstrate the potential for utilizing organic processes for making disciples among international populations in New York City. These church planting efforts are intentionally targeting international populations through relational outreach and community building. Utilizing these organic processes, they have experienced transnational evangelism, church planting, and leadership development. Simultaneously, Iglesia de Cristo and Bronx Fellowship have provided hope and support for poor and struggling immigrant populations in the city. I recommend that organic church planters continue to discover entry points into international people groups in the city where transnational relational networks may become mediums for the spontaneous expansion of the church in the global village.

### **Capitalizing on Cultural Influence**

As a global city, New York is a center of cultural influence. This influence is found in the expressions of arts and media, and it pulses through the influence of New York's many colleges and universities. Organic church planting that flows through the natural cultural streams of the global city will make a wider impact when the missionary enterprise engages these cultural institutions.

### **Moving Through Arts and Media**

Sal Vasquez and his efforts in the Saint George neighborhood of Staten Island represent a gospel witness among artists in the Staten Island community. However, little engagement by organic church planters has taken place overall among those involved in the arts and media. Realizing the large scale cultural influence of New York City as an arts and media capital, church planters should consider ways to engage the arts and media community in the city. As new believers are raised up from within the arts community and empowered as part of the priesthood of all believers, church multiplication may spread through arts and media and find natural expressions for spontaneous expansion in the arts community. As global cities establish regional, national, and international cultural trends, missionary engagement in the arts and media opens up an opportunity for catalyzing a gospel influence in a single urban space.

### **Gospel Influence in Academia**

As a center of influence, New York's colleges and universities have a regional, national, and global impact. I find it difficult to estimate the potential for organic church planting that is contextualized for a post-Christendom setting on college campuses. The Bridge is currently making a global impact through reaching international students. Additional work on New York's Ivy League campuses may reach students and faculty

that will carry the message of the gospel regionally, nationally, and globally. In addition, I believe that organic church planting efforts that engage City University of New York campuses will have a local impact in Metro New York. Many of these students are likely to stay in the New York City area and continue to be witnesses of the gospel.

Recently, an Austin-based ministry has expanded its reach to New York City. The president and founder of this ministry has relocated to Manhattan. This college outreach ministry focuses on starting new missional communities on college campuses. By partnering with local campus ministries, it essentially trains young believers to initiate organic church communities—though they use different language to describe these missional communities to the public—on the campuses. I encourage organic church planters to develop a relationship with this ministry which shares a vision for simple organic communities to result in the transformation of lives in the city.

### ***Navigating Emerging Post-Christendom***

Organic church planters in New York are largely addressing post-Christendom concerns. They are seeking to reach people and see lives transformed that are outside of the cultural structures of North America's version of Christendom. An exception is Bob who is planting the gospel among African Muslims who were never part of a historical Christendom, and in many cases King is evangelizing international students from pre-Christian cultures.

Post-Christendom is emerging in New York outside of existing Christian institutions while there is an increasing presence of various world religions originating from around the globe. At the same time New York has a substantial presence of Christendom culture that still persists despite the large portion of the population outside of church involvement. My research findings demonstrate a tension for organic church

planters to address missional concerns in an emerging post-Christendom context where Christendom culture continues to have a significant influence.

### **Ease Ecclesiological Tensions**

When I began this research, I had hoped to avoid including any discussion of tensions over church forms. Debates on differing approaches to church planting can often be unproductive.<sup>1</sup> However, as ecclesiological tensions surfaced to varying degrees in nearly every interview, it became a necessary point to address in the body of this research. Due to living in a context immersed in a history of Christendom, organic church planters must sometimes teach on the simplicity of church multiplication with a contrast in mind of perceived understandings of church and observed examples of church forms that represent differing sets of ecclesiological values. Nevertheless, I believe that organic church planters can move beyond these tensions.

### **Emphasize Mission**

Much of organic church planting in New York City is oriented around participation in God's mission. In the context of this research it is impossible to determine if this missional emphasis is as true in other cities. I simply lack sufficient data to make a definitive statement on the matter. While ecclesiological tensions are felt, the character of organic church planting in New York is largely influenced by the influx of missionary church planters who have come to New York for evangelistic purposes. As a result, the missionary enterprise has had a significant influence upon organic church planting in New York. Mission is imperative for the majority of organic church planting efforts in the city.

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<sup>1</sup> Although I see positive outcomes from organic processes, I am especially interested in life transformation and seeing gospel movements catalyzed that result in the multiplication of disciples and churches rather than endless debates on church models.

This missional character should continue to be the primary thrust of organic church planting. Organic church planting will allow for critical contextualization in the urban setting, and a central focus on mission will open the door for partnerships with different kinds of churches. Ecclesiological tensions could create rigid theological boundaries, or such tensions—when accompanied by mutual humility—may allow for mutual learning and growth that will benefit the whole Body of Christ. There is certainly much to learn from organic church planters, and there continues to be wisdom coming from the experiences of more conventional church planters as well. In addition, if established churches are exploring practical options for spontaneous expansion of the church in the city, organic church planters will be a significant resource. This is only possible if relational bridges remain intact.

Bob Roberts writes:

One of the best hopes of reaching people in the West is the house church movement. Effective house church movements, however, are not going to come from frustrated “religious professionals” who have given up on church in one form to adopt another. Nor will they come from frustrated people who are angry at the established church. Only those who are excited and in love with Jesus can gather and attract similar others (Roberts 2008:128).

Roberts’ point is helpful. If organic church planters are simply reacting to conventional forms of church or responding to pressures to perform in the shadows of Christendom, they will likely miss having the sort of missiological impact they hope to achieve. However, organic church planters should continue to address post-Christendom culture with humility.

### **Embracing Organic Process**

Although its popularity seems to be increasing, some have questioned the legitimacy of organic church planting as a missiological practice or as an ongoing option for church life in North America. Others are watching steadily for church growth

outcomes to legitimize the organic approach in North American settings. Small faith communities experimenting with organic processes while living in the shadows of contemporary mega churches and historic congregations may easily nurse a case of insecurity.

However, I recommend that church planters who utilize the flow of organic processes do so without apology. A strong Scriptural case may be made for organic approaches to church planting, and a missiological precedent for such an approach has been established during the last century, as I have attempted to demonstrate in the previous chapters of this paper.

Reaching the vast diversity of city dwellers with the gospel will likely require a mosaic of approaches to church planting and evangelism. Organic church planters are making a significant difference in the lives of urban dwellers, and more of these types of efforts are needed in order to expand the potential impact of applying organic processes to church planting in the city. Because organic church planting lives or dies following the practice of making disciples, taking an organic approach to church planting has potential to position disciple-making at the forefront of the missiological work of developing new faith communities. Furthermore, the nature of the city reflects constant flux and change. Organic approaches to evangelistic church planting provide the opportunity for critical contextualization that leads to forms of Christian community that reflect the cultural settings present in the global city. There is significant value in incorporating organic processes, and I believe that organic church planters will serve the mission of God and the body of Christ as they engage in these processes. I recommend that organic church planters continue to embrace their pursuit of the spontaneous expansion and do so boldly.

### **Release Workers Who Cannot Embrace Organic Process**

At various points during the process of interviewing, it became clear that at times it has become necessary to give people who simply cannot or will not embrace various aspects of organic church planting the opportunity to separate and find a more suitable Christian community. While this has taken place in the Bronx, I heard Vasquez, King, Bob, and Cheek all describe similar circumstances.

Organic church planters will not be able to facilitate evangelistic witness and critical contextualization among new believers if they are constantly faced with meeting the religious preferences of existing believers whose self-interests are at odds with the mission of an organic approach to church planting. Some of the feedback during the interviews reflects the difficulty that existing believers coming from established church backgrounds have in relating to non-believers. If religious consumerism and assumptions reflecting a residual culture of Christendom are prevalent in the community, it will be difficult for organic church planters to focus on the missional enterprise of making new disciples from within the culture while simultaneously meeting the perceived needs of these Christian adherents. Believers that are unable or unwilling to embrace organic processes as a learner and become participants in the mission of God through this approach may need to be released to a nearby church or partnering church plant. Believers from a Christendom background that wish to stay involved in an organic community as learners will likely experience significant growth in the area of being and making disciples based on the data presented in this study.

However, while such choices may be quite necessary for the sake of planting churches that will grow indigenously among new believers, it does not remove the difficulty presented by such choices. Because the nature of many organic churches—and certainly those studied in New York City—are small participatory communities, every person who takes part in organic church planting for any significant amount of time is

going to be connected relationally to others in the community. To see them leave the community is to say good-bye to someone who is known by the community members. In addition, it is hard for most Christian leaders to send practically anyone on their way since they often feel that their worth is measured by the numbers of people assembled together—perhaps with little regard to whether transfer growth or evangelistic growth is involved. Nevertheless, individuals who are not going to serve as a blessing to organic church planting efforts may be best suited to relocate to a different faith community. It is difficult to imagine that taking this step is ever easy for any leader, but in many cases, I assume that those believers that are released will bring a unique set of contributions to their new church because of what they received and learned while participating in an organic community. Simultaneously, their absence from the organic community will allow that community to keep its focus on the missional enterprise through intentional organic processes. As a result, the whole Body of Christ is blessed. Organic church planters are liberated to focus on their contribution to the mission of God in their context, and the receiving church is blessed by the contributions of new members that have been partially shaped by the practices of communities characterized by participation, ministry through human relationships, and an emphasis on discipleship among all believers.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

While making a significant difference in individual lives, organic church planters continue to learn and adapt to global and local cultures in New York City. I recommend that organic church planters continue to evaluate, experiment, initiate, and adapt strategies that have congruence with organic processes while seeking to make an evangelistic impact. Thus far, organic church planters have connected church practices with common indigenous life among urban populations. Adopting or developing practical methods for equipping and releasing local believers for mission is paramount.

Organic churches and their leaders will benefit from further engaging in intentional strategies that lead to contextualization that implants discipleship DNA that may contribute to spontaneous expansion.

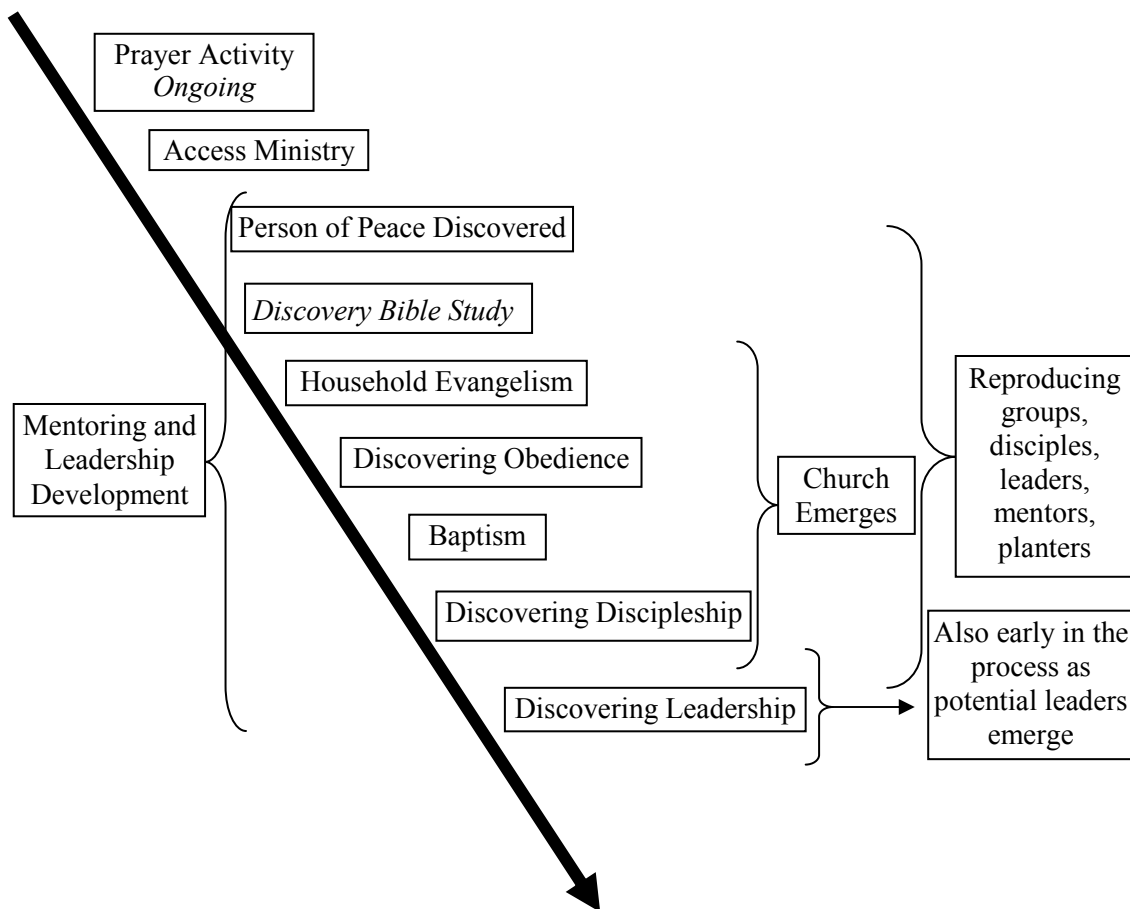
### ***Final Thoughts***

A century ago Roland Allen cast a vision for a spontaneous expansion of the church through indigenous leadership, and today missiologists report church planting movements spreading through indigenous populations in nations around the world. Organic church planting has had a significant impact on individual lives and households in New York City. As organic church planters learn from principles discovered in church planting movements across the continents, they may continue to adapt and apply lessons learned through ministry practice and missiological reflection. As an organic church planter, a missiological researcher, and as a follower of Jesus, I pray that organic church planting will result in an increased number of lives truly transformed and shaped by the gospel of Christ and that churches will be multiplied in every crack and crevice of New York City's diverse cultural landscape.

**APPENDIX A**

**CHURCH PLANTING CONTINUUM**

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**APPENDIX B**  
**CASE STUDY INTERVIEWS**

Bissell, Jonathan (New York, NY), interviewed via telephone on March 9, 2008.

“Bob” interviewed in New York, NY on April 11, 2008.<sup>1</sup>

“Bob” (New York, NY), interviewed via telephone on December 3, 2008.

Cheek, Ben, interviewed in New York, NY on January 28, 2008.

Cheek, Ben (Flushing, NY), interviewed via telephone on March 21, 2008.

Eason, Alyssa (Staten Island, NY), interviewed via telephone on March 10, 2008.

Fee, Craig, interviewed in Maspeth, NY on March 12, 2008.

Fernandez, Jovan, interviewed in Bronx, NY on January 24, 2009.

Fernandez, Tara, interviewed in Bronx, NY on January 24, 2009.

Gomez, Henry (Bayonne, NJ), interviewed via telephone on November 18, 2008.

Gomez, Paul, interviewed in New York, NY on April 3, 2008.

King, Kevin, interviewed in New York, NY on January 17, 2008.

King, Kevin (New York, NY), interviewed via telephone on April 30, 2008.

King, Kevin, interviewed in New York, NY on December 2, 2008.

Lopez, Wilfredo, interviewed in Bronx, NY on January 14, 2009.

“Pete” interviewed in Bronx, NY on April 28, 2008.<sup>2</sup>

Rosario, Rafael (East Elmhurst, NY), interviewed via telephone on November 6, 2007.

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<sup>1</sup> Bob is a fictional name. Due to his work among Muslim people groups and potential sensitivities, Bob remained anonymous for this research.

<sup>2</sup> Pete is a fictional name. Due to his work among Albanians and potential sensitivities, Pete remained anonymous for this research.

Rosario, Rafael (East Elmhurst, NY), interviewed via telephone on November 19, 2008.

Saunders, George, interviewed in Bronx, NY on January 15, 2009.

Sheridan, Robert, interviewed in Bronx, NY on July 14, 2008.

Sheridan, Robert, interviewed in Bronx, NY on January 9, 2009.

Vasquez, Sal, interviewed in Staten Island, NY on January 18, 2008.

Vasquez, Sal (Staten Island, NY), interviewed via telephone on December 18, 2008.

Vasquez, Sal (Staten Island, NY), interviewed via telephone on June 9, 2009.

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## VITA

Jared Looney was born in Columbus, Ohio on May 27, 1973. His parents, James and Shirley Looney, were both servants of Jesus Christ, and his father, James, served bivocationally preaching for churches in South Texas while working for the South Texas Hospital in Harlingen. Both of Jared's grandfathers were full-time ministers. George Dawson preached for Independent Christian Churches in Colorado, Arizona, Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas. After preaching in Virginia and the surrounding area, Clinton Looney began a ministry leading to dozens of new churches being planted throughout Mexico.

At age 14, Jared surrendered his life to Jesus Christ and was baptized at the Eighth and Harrison Church of Christ in Harlingen, Texas. He graduated from Harlingen High School in 1991 and attended Abilene Christian University (ACU). While studying missions at ACU, Jared played a leadership role in a cross-cultural outreach to at-risk youth and served as director of a student-led drama ministry. During his college years, he became invested in urban ministry and served with Impact Ministries, Memphis Urban Ministry, and Camp Shiloh.

In August 1996, Jared began serving as a youth minister with Impact Ministries in Houston, and he led a newly launched youth program. During this time, Jared also attended Houston Graduate School of Theology (HGST) where he completed a Master of Arts in theological studies in 1999. While at HGST, he served as the student senate vice president and was a representative at a regional gathering of the National Conference of Jews and Christians.

After living in San Jose, Costa Rica for a brief time, Jared relocated back to Abilene, Texas at the end of 1999 for additional church planting preparation. While in Abilene, he served with the leadership teams in Mission Church, and developed leaders for the church from within a cell group context.

In 2001, Jared relocated to New York City. While living in the Bronx, NY, he married Hylma Blagrove. Jared and Hylma continue to live in New York City with their daughter Adalia. He led a team to plant Bronx Fellowship of Christ in the Pelham Parkway section of the Bronx. Soon after the church was planted, the new church plant developed into an organic church network meeting mostly as small groups in homes across the Bronx. While continuing to facilitate an organic church planting network in New York, Jared works to encourage new church planting initiatives and train emerging leaders for urbanized global societies.

Upon completion of his Doctor of Missiology from Fuller Theological Seminary in June 2010, he will continue to serve as a missional catalyst in metropolitan New York City.