

Lessons learned in Multiplication

Josiah Venture – 2012 GYI Forum

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Since this GYI forum is in India, we will no doubt see first-hand some amazing examples of effective multiplication. In Eastern Europe, where we serve, growth is slower and numbers much smaller. At the same time the lessons we have learned might be of value in other similar environments where secularism and post-Christian thought has taken firm root. Here are eight insights that have been helpful to us as we seek the expansion of Christ's Kingdom in our area of the world.

1 - Knead vision, mission, and DNA

One of the myths of an anthill is that the queen rules the nest. Actually, she is just an egg machine who insures there will be another generation of worker ants to slave away foraging for food. Though she carries much personal responsibility for procreation, she never wastes time ordering others around, hearing reports, doing inspections, or planning for the future. In fact, no one ant in the nest coordinates the whole. What insures order and amazing skillful output is the fact that each is operating according to the same basic set of instructions. And each is always communicating with all of the others.

Any living thing that multiplies passes on the basic instruction set to its offspring in the form of DNA. This internal map insures that duck eggs do not hatch into dogs or squirrels give birth to chickens. In insects like ants, it also includes instructions on how to serve, what is the goal and strategy of the nest, and how best to communicate with their fellow ants.

In a similar way, vitality and synergy in a growing movement is deeply impacted by a common God-given vision, mission and DNA. Leadership bears a key responsibility for discerning before God what these core non-negotiables are to be. In Josiah Venture, this was hammered out at the beginning of our ministry 18 years ago, and then expanded and revised when we became a mission organization 10 years ago.

What we have found, however, is words written on paper have little impact if they are not reviewed over and over again. I just returned from our winter board meeting where I opened our meeting, as I have every board meeting for the last 10 years, by reviewing our vision and mission. Then I spent 30 minutes telling stories of how the JV team is living out our DNA and putting flesh to our key values out in the trenches of ministry.

The board has heard this more times than I can remember. But they need to hear it again, as do our staff in the field. Vision leaks, and God's servants become distracted. Our efforts can easily become diffused and scattered, and soon, without really knowing why, we are like an overgrown tree with lots of branches and little fruit.

Because of that, Vision, Mission and DNA need to be "kneaded" into everything you do, just like yeast is kneaded into bread. Over and over again, in small amounts, leadership needs to return to the basics,

and then work them in, much like a baker works in ingredients to every part of the dough. Personally, this is something I often tire of, and often feel that I am just reviewing the obvious. However, I have learned that I should take what seems sufficient to me, multiply it by 10, and then maybe, just maybe, it will be close to minimum!

2 - Prepare the path

Pioneers by nature enjoy the challenge of finding their own way to the goal through uncharted territory. Because of this, they can assume that everyone likes to come up with their own path, and thus not give attention to preparing the way. Most people, however, when presented with a goal, and even energized with motivation, will not last long without some kind of clearly defined path.

I know this firsthand. If the path through a website is unclear, I will quickly look for another one rather than keep going in circles. My time and energy are limited and I don't like the frustrated feeling of not making progress or feeling lost.

Good paths offer the most direct route to the destination, taking in the constraints of speed, energy and difficulty. They are clearly marked, carefully prepared, and designed to remove barriers and smooth out the way.

Sometimes small things make a huge difference, like the way a question is asked, or the placement of key information. Missed steps cause people to turn back, or get lost. Good paths take hard work, and need to be reviewed over and over again to catch the key spots where people are blocked or lose their way. Well-designed paths are characterized by elegant simplicity.

Here are some paths we have worked hard on in recent years.

- Evangelism paths – how to more effectively share the gospel
- Disciplemaking paths – how to move people more quickly to maturity
- Recruitment paths – how to add the right people into our team
- Financial paths – how to resource the work of God
- Communication paths – how to get the right information to the right place at the right time

A very helpful resource has been the book “Switch, How to Change when Change is Hard”, where the authors, Chip and Dan Heath, give a brilliant description of the elephant (our emotions), the rider (our mind) and the path.

3 - Persevere in prayer

As we know from our study of Christ, extended times of prayer preceded many of his key moves of expansion. In the same manner, strategic changes of direction in Acts were revealed to the Apostles, often as a surprise to them, while they were in prayer.

As I look back over these past 18 years of ministry in Eastern Europe, I see that the most important decisions we made were not ones that we could anticipate far in advance, or incorporate into a strategic plan. Rather they came out of times of waiting on the Lord, or experiences of him breaking through our normal activity with opportunities that had been prepared by him.

I remember one time where I prayed for months that God would provide a gifted administrator to our Czech team. Towards the end of that time, every time I prayed, God would bring to my mind the name of a man in Prague, who I had actually never met, but only heard about through a mutual friend. I asked the Lord to give us an opportunity to meet, and just a few weeks later he introduced himself at a seminar I was teaching at in a church in Prague. I asked him out to breakfast the next morning, and then invited him to come for a visit. Somewhere along the way, I told him about my prayer, and asked him to consider leaving his job and joining our team. This was absolutely illogical for him to do. He was in a prestigious company in the capital, earning a very generous salary and on a fast track to the top.

He promised me to pray, convinced that nothing would come of it. However, two weeks later, waiting for a subway, he distinctly heard the Lord tell him to respond to our request. At very great personal cost, he joined our core team, and has been mightily used of the Lord to advance the gospel. Though it seemed like an irrational move, he looks back on that decision now as one of the most important in his life.

No part of that story would have happened without persevering prayer.

4 - Focus your feedback loops

Three years ago we did a study of the 11 countries where Josiah Venture staff serve and found that less than 1% of the young people living there were evangelical believers. In many countries the percentage was much worse, even as low as 0.1%. In the light of the many to be reached, our efforts seemed very small indeed.

We prayed about what we could do in response, and decided to ask the Lord to double our fruitfulness over a period of three years, a vision that we began to call the "2X3 vision". To make it more specific, we identified four areas where we wanted to see doubled fruit, in evangelism, discipling, leadership training, and healthy reproducing churches.

The team was enthusiastic about this vision, but as we pressed forward several key weaknesses became clear. We didn't really know how to measure fruit in these areas, and were not regularly asking the questions that would help us make adjustments along the way. This would be like a business desiring to grow its profits, yet not really knowing how much money it was making, or a marksman shooting at a target without being able to see if his bullet actually hit the mark.

It seems we were decent at measuring activity (how many events we led) but not very good at accurately tracking outcomes.

My brother, who is an educator and non-profit consultant, often reminds me that, “an organization grows in the direction of its most persistent inquiry.” We realized that we were not persistently inquiring about the quality and quantity of our fruit, and did not have easy ways to quickly evaluate and respond to what we found.

Realizing that this was a key weakness, we began to develop patterns of persistent inquiry in the four areas of fruitfulness we had targeted. These included regular questions to our country leaders, surveys at our camps, questions to churches about the long term fruit of various events, and regular evaluation after every training event or conference. We found that this evaluation and feedback had to happen quickly, and then needed to be recorded in a form that was easily accessible for the future. Someone had to take the time to evaluate it, and then to pass on the analysis to the others who were involved.

We are currently working on an integrated database for all of our countries that is web accessible and will help us regularly collect information that can help us stay on track. On top of this, my brother has provided pilot training for one of our teams in qualitative research and their experiences have already been a huge benefit to the whole.

At best we are half way to where we need to be, but I am very encouraged by increased focus and fruitfulness that has come as a result. Now that the three year push for increased fruit is at the end we can see that God has indeed brought doubled fruit in all of those areas, and increased our expectation for what is possible. Because of that we are asking him to do it again!

Here are some things we have learned about feedback loops

- Define what is most important to you
- Work to discern how you can best evaluate and measure it
- Develop systems and strategies that are easy to maintain, quick to evaluate, and immediately helpful
- Strive for feedback loops that quickly correct problems and constantly focus your efforts
- Gather information and engage with problems in the most human and relational way possible. The church is a body, not a machine. Remember, however, that highly effective bodies have brilliantly elegant feedback loops.

5 - Outsmart ceilings and brakes

Most things that move and grow have built in limitations, a given capacity and a maximum speed. A car will accelerate smoothly to its top speed and then resist any attempts to go faster. A cup will hold liquid securely until it reaches the brim, then spill the rest over in a wasteful mess.

Ministry structures have similar built in limitations. There is only capacity for so many relationships, only so many hours in a day, only a limited amount of energy. Because of that, growing things often stop growing because they reach their natural ceiling. Ministry multiplication slows down as it encounters the resistance it naturally creates.

One of the fruitful tools of evangelism in Eastern Europe has been English camps. It is not difficult to attract non-Christians to these events, and typically 10% of the non-believers are saved and in a church one year later. When I approached our camp leader in Czech with the challenge to increase the number we were doing, he responded with a weary sigh. “I can’t do any more without ruining my health and trashing my family”, he said. “You are just unrealistic in your expectations.”

Often when growth reaches its limits, those who are asked to take it further respond with just two options. The first is to work harder, and pack more into the same space, risking damage to people and relationships. The second is to concede that more is just not possible, and that we can only strive do a better job within the limits we currently have.

I often press people for the third option – the one that both opens the way to increased growth and increased reserve for those doing the work. When an engine is straining at its top RPMs, you can press harder on the gas, or disengage the clutch, and re-engage in a different gear. When a car is full of people you can try to pack in more, or recognize it is time to hire a bus. I’ve found that people don’t naturally think in these kinds of ways, and must be encouraged to see their limitations as opportunities to step back and redesign their basic approach.

It took an extended conversation with the camp leader to find out the key points of limitation, and then work to redesign his ministry and engage in a different way. He systemized the preparation so that it was paced out throughout the year. He streamlined the process, so that in place of multiple weeks for camp, there were just three standard slots. Building a team, he delegated out much of the routine work to others, and invested his energy in keeping the big picture and maintaining key relationships. He changed his funding model so that growth fueled the capacity for more growth. In two years he had doubled the number of camps and did it all while bringing increased health to his family and creating more personal reserve.

One of my key mentors often reminds me that when ceilings are reached, you have to change certain habits, structures, and relationships to open the way for further growth. Just working harder and investing more energy often yields limited results. What is needed is to step back and give careful thought to outsmarting ceilings and brakes.

Empower your apostles

Not everyone has apostolic gifting. The few that do have a special ability from God to open new territory, create new kinds of ministry, and mobilize others in very effective ways. These people can see the future and picture the path to get there. They are quick to respond to changes in the environment, and know how to self-correct.

People with apostolic gifting often don’t fit well into standard systems and structures, and are motivated by different things than the average believer. For Paul, his clear ambition was to “preach the gospel

where it was not known”, so that he would not be “building on someone else’s foundation” (Romans 15:20). This driving passion opened up city after city to the transforming power of the gospel. Because of the focus on the expansion of God’s kingdom that comes with an apostolic gifting, these people are extremely valuable on your team.

At the same time, they take a different kind of leadership in order to be most effective, and need both lots of space and plenty of support for them to achieve their maximum potential. It is easy to mistake their godly ambition for personal striving, or their dissatisfaction with the status quo for a critical spirit. They need a customized approach and special care in order to thrive on a bigger team. When they don’t get this, they will often forge off on their own, cutting themselves off from the resources of others, and limiting their influence.

Jesus gave special attention to his Apostles, and spent much time with a very few, in order to reach many. In the same way, we need to have Spirit-empowered eyes to spot these people, and commitment to give them the investment that will maximize their potential. If we do, they will carry entire sections of the ministry with their gifting and enthusiasm, and open key new territory for the gospel.

The corollary is also true. Without someone with this gifting, a new ministry thrust will often flounder and never reach the potential of multiplication.

Double the act

I am fascinated by the book of Acts and the story of the expansion of the church. It is amazing to see what the early believers accomplished in just one generation, all in the midst of difficult conditions and relentless opposition. The book is named The Acts of the Apostles, but some have said it is really the Acts of the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit moves to expand Christ’s church in often unexpected ways.

In a recent study I began to wonder if we need to understand the significance of both “acts”, the acts of the Holy Spirit as God sovereignly moves through key events and supernatural guidance, and the acts of the Apostles as they respond in faith and dependence to move forward when others would shrink back. Often these two “acts” happen at the same time, with the acts of the Apostles responding to the acts of the Spirit, or the Spirit moving in response to the acts of the Apostles.

The Spirit descended at Pentecost, and Peter preached. The disciples were scattered, and they spread the news wherever they went. Paul and Silas were thrown into prison, and they sang their way to freedom. Paul’s ministry was limited by chains, and then expanded to countless millions through his letters.

What would have happened if the act of the Holy Spirit did not generate a corresponding act of the Apostles? Where would the church be if they had not set aside Paul and Barnabas for the work of ministry, or not preached the gospel in prison, or not obeyed God rather than men? How would the

trajectory of expansion been altered if they had not responded correctly to unexpected events in ways that energized new growth?

In the light of this, we have begun challenging our team to “double the act”. We must begin by discerning the “act” the Holy Spirit is doing to expand his church. Often his activity can appear at first glance like a threat, an interruption, or a mistake. However, when it is coupled with our faith-filled response, often that same interruption can be the key to a “trajectory change” in the growth of the church.

God in his sovereignty allows a world-wide financial crisis – how do we respond to advance the kingdom? A key denomination begins to view our work as a threat – what is the faith-filled act that the Holy Spirit wants from us in response? Health limitations put us in “prison” – what other work does God have for us in that confined space?

Don't forget your deacons

I am not gifted in administration. Not only that, but once something new is figured out, the skills required to maintain and maximize it are tedious and difficult to me. Left to myself I would probably start a string of innovative new projects that would cease to function as they grew, or fall into disrepair as I moved on to the next new thing.

A friend of mine is an executive pastor at a church of more than 20,000 in the United States. Recently they were engaged in a discussion with their key leadership team and asked the question, “what does someone in the discipleship fourth chair (go and bear fruit), really need?” The others were responding with observations about the importance of theological training, and skillful coaching. My friend was quiet for a while, and then added his one word - “infrastructure”.

The others laughed, but he was dead serious. Coming from a key role in a large company, he had experienced first-hand how important good structures and systems are to the health and expansion of a ministry. Enthusiasm and vision can motivate the troops, but if they don't have regular supplies and food, if fresh ammo doesn't make it to the front lines, if their equipment is broken and dysfunctional, many will become discouraged and quit. Entire wars are won and lost by the strength of the logistical supply chain.

As another friend of mine has said, “You can run on your raw giftedness for a while, but if you don't build functional systems, you will kill your heroes.”

Some people have special gifting from God in this area, and their work is so important that they were given a special office in the early church, that of deacons. These men and women were to have the same character qualifications as an elder, and needed the same filling of the Spirit for their work. Their job was to administer the work of God in such a way that the needs of God's people were adequately met, and those with the gift of teaching and shepherding could devote focused energy to the Word and to prayer.

I've learned that Spirit empowered administrators are essential to the work of expansion. Ministry suffers without their skillful care, and expansion grinds to a halt without the systems that they design and maintain. I've come to have a deep appreciation for these gifted servants, not the least because they possess so many skills that I don't have. Without their unique contribution, much potential is lost.

Don't forget your deacons!