

For the Harvest Podcast #3 - Church Growth Life Cycle

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If your goal is to fill a field which all of us as missionaries or as pastors and church planters, our goal should be to fill the field, fill the earth, make disciples of all nations, right? And so think about what you have in this field, certain borders you have to fill. How do I best fill it? Like do I plant one tree and then just fertilizer, fertilizer, fertilize it and try to fill the field by growing one tree really, really big? Or do I plant dozens of trees in the field?

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Welcome back to episode 3 of the "For the Harvest" podcast, where we discuss Bible based strategies for accelerating evangelistic growth globally. I'm here again with John, Paul and David Worcester. And today we're going to jump into a subject that is really for everybody and everybody that has their sights on ministry, whether they've been just starting out, thinking about starting out or they've been in it for a long time, I think you're going to hear some principles that you may have never heard before.

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And I know for me, we're actually, really a relief in some ways and an encouragement and gave me a lot of hope. So I'm excited for all of you to get to hear about this paradigm that I've gotten to hear John share a number of times; actually, in different countries. And I see the same response each time from these different cultures.

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This paradigm explains something that most of us in ministry have experienced during the course of ministry, but really just haven't been able to put our finger on exactly what's going on. And sometimes we even feel guilty about it. And so I pray that some of that guilt will be kind of diminished today and actually replaced with hope and encouragement.

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And so, today we're going to talk about the church growth life cycle. So, John, you've been doing ministry for 50 years or so. When did you first start to pick up on this or understand this paradigm?

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Well, very early in my Christian experience, you remember the other podcast I might have told

you about how I came to Christ, and I started to start a group and it grew really, really fast.

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That first summer, three months went from me to about 30. So new growth grows fast. I experienced that, and I also visited some churches that have been around for years and years. That same summer. And then after that, most of them basically were not growing anymore. They were plateaued or declining. And so I've noticed that there's a big difference.

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And the season of life that a church is in. And so we want to think about that. And the way I try to summarize it is that new thing... I base all this on just looking at nature, also history, but especially looking in nature. When God creates life, it starts small, real, small... like one cell, and very much gets fertilized.

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It grows fast for a period of time. But after that growth period varies from different types of organisms. You know, rabbits grow to their mature size a lot faster than elephants do, but they grow fast for a while and then they plateau. And it's not like a bell curve. It's a plateau where it stays at that similar size for a long, long time.

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It bumps up a little bit, goes down a little bit, but it doesn't actually go anywhere. Similarly it works for humans, you get a certain height like, you know, 5-10 or 6ft, and you don't grow to seven feet, but you might grow other ways... But we're not going to get to that... But anyway, so it grows fast for a while, it plateaus and eventually life declines.

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That's it. It dies. And the Church of Jesus Christ lasts forever. But the local churches have a life cycle, and we see that, and they tell me that the average church worldwide lasts about 80 years, which is kind of similar to the span of a human. So anyway, I thought that that's the big concept of this.

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Okay. I'm curious, you know, Paul, David, you guys probably were aware of this concept early on, but how have you seen that, kind of show up in your ministries?

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Yeah. I mean, especially a lot of people on the front end of a ministry, starting a new ministry. You do see a lot of growth and a lot of people reaching for Christ and a lot of excitement.

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Sometimes it starts very small, you know, and that first initial push isn't as fast, but there's a certain point, almost like you can compare it to the teenage years where you start to get a little momentum and things really take off and you think, oh, it's just going to be up and to the right forever. And so we had some seasons like that in Chico, where I guess you could compare it to your teenage years, like it's just blowing up.

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It's just like all sorts of things happening. But we did eventually kind of level out. And there's a lot of theories, my personal theories I have about those things, but some of it is just the town or the community that you're trying to reach. Sometimes your church plays that certain role in it. And, like you can almost in some churches, even milk all that it's worth

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From out of the town or a city or a campus. I have a friend that started a campus ministry, and he was one of the top leaders you could imagine. And he grew that thing to about 70 students, but he did everything you could imagine to get it to that point.

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And then he went to a different city, different context, and planted a megachurch, you know, because it was more he could work with and do different things. So sometimes your context plays a factor in it. But I'm kind of getting ahead of myself in this conversation.

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What I've experienced personally is, when I start a ministry, there's a typical size of me as a leader, my DNA of if I'm planting something from scratch, this is about the size that I can grow it to.

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And I think that's another factor too. And kind of what he mentioned with different, different animals, they have different DNA and in their DNA it's kind of built like a rabbit is only going to be a certain size or a tiger's only going to be a certain size. And so I believe that it's similar with leaders too that there's certain leaders that have that innate capacity to grow a ministry to a

certain size.

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And then it's most likely going to plateau. And, you know, God can do whatever he wants to do, whenever he wants to do it. Right? And so you can always do something crazy, but in general, that's kind of the way life works is like God gives. So I've seen that play out in my life.

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So I guess I'm gonna ask a little bit of a leading question here, John. As you know, it's at first this sounds depressing, because you're telling me and any ministry leader, you're saying that like, I've got a cap, that I can grow my ministry, and then I'm stuck and I'm not going to have any more impact.

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That's not what you're saying. But that's how it could feel. So what if you're looking at nature or what's the solution to continue having a kingdom impact?

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Well, think about what's maturity for? Maturity is for multiplication. So as a person gets to their DNA size, or rabbit or an elephant, when they get to their size, the way they obey God's command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

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By having babies, I mean that's physically and that spiritually. And so that same principle applies to churches. And so part of the answer and there may be, like these guys already said, there may be other reasons, leadership factors or some stupid you're doing. You stop doing the stupid thing and you can get back to growing again.

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You know, that kind of stuff. So there are those factors that if you eliminate them, you might keep growing. But even if you do everything right, you're probably still coming to a DNA size. And that's sort of the issue that we're talking about here. Does that make sense? Everybody tracking with me okay?

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So let me kind of push back on one thing I hear a lot is, you know, they use the statement of

Jesus, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And they say that if a local church dies that's actually dishonoring to God, you know, that they kind of use that like that's proving that verse. So what would you say to someone that's saying that?

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Well, I think you differentiate between the church that Jesus was talking about. He's talking about the universal church, all people, all the time, Jesus is building his church, he's going to continue building the church, come hell or high water. He kind of breaks barriers. He's going to grow the church.

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But that's different from a local church, the local church, the individual thing is in a place and has a leader and has people. It will historically show that it has a life cycle and that fits with individual organisms that are around the world as well. And I want to throw something else into something you said Paul, you know, earlier on you said something about, growth spurts as a teenager.

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Well, that's true. There are growth spurts as a teenager, but that still doesn't compare to the birth of something new, the start of something new. The baby in the womb is many, many times faster than anything a teenager can ever think about. When you look out over the months and the early stages, you have the best yet.

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Now, you might not grow in early stages because you might not be doing the right stuff. You might not be doing discovery evangelism, you might not be doing the right kind of meetings. There'll be all kinds of reasons why you don't grow. And another factor is, the younger any kind of life is, the more fragile it is.

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So it's easy to kill a little baby sprout, it's harder to kill a tree. It's easy to kill a tadpole. It's harder to catch and kill a frog. I mean, it's just the size that makes a difference. And so doing the right things, the right size, being a healthy, young church, you have the best opportunity to grow really, really fast.

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I mean, look at Jesus's ministry. I'm getting ahead of myself, too. I think we're going to come to

that. But when you look at Jesus' ministry, the first three days, he went from 1 to 5, calculate out the annual growth rate of going 1 to 5 in three days... If you're a math person. That gets pretty astronomical.

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But also the early church grew really, really fast in those first two first years, you know, we see thousands coming. Same thing with the church in Jerusalem when it was born. The early days you see really fast growth. But as long as you keep multiplying the fast growth new starts, you can continue to keep that going. But if you just try to just grow the one church or the one ministry, you're limiting your ability to fill the earth, to fill the field that God's called you to fill.

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One of the people has, like a mentality of, you know, there's the statement that healthy things grow. You know, that's the statement. And I think that what I've seen often is churches, they buy into that heart and soul. And they put all their effort into tweaking like tons of little things in their ministry.

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And then they don't put any effort into multiplication. So why do you think that that statement is such a powerful motivator for people, leaders of existing churches, that if they could just tweak the right thing and all of a sudden it's going to blow up. Why do you think such a thing?

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I think that's a great question. This is what I call the church growth myth. Okay? Those healthy things just grow and grow continually. But the fact is, healthy things, healthy life grows fast for a while, and then it doesn't. That's the truth of it. But people don't want to think that way.

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I mean, in America especially, we can do anything. We can be anything we want to be. And, you know, nothing, no limits. I think sometimes you just have to look at reality. And one thing you've seen and studied and most people have experienced is listening out there. If your group has already plateaued in size, maybe it's been going for four years and it's 50 or 60, and it's staying at 50 or 60, it's very hard to get that going to another growth level.

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But that same group could pull together a team, a planter and a team to go out and plant something else and get up to the 30 or 60 just in the next six months. And I've seen that happen

over and over again. In my ministry it's not only what I've done, but also guys I've sent out. They've been able to grow things, and that early stage is much, much quicker.

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You alluded to this idea of filling the field with healthy churches rather than filling a room. A lot of us have that mindset of success. How many people can I pack into this room? It's filling the field with gospel seed and churches and groups and disciples, not just filling a room with people, hearing you talk, you know?

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Another analogy of that is if your goal is to fill a field which all of us as missionaries, or as pastors and church planters, our goal should be to fill the field, fill the earth, make disciples of all nations. Right. And so think about what you have in this field, certain borders you have to fill. How do I fill it? Do I plant one tree and then just fertilize it, fertilize it, fertilize it, and try to fill the field by growing one tree really, really big?

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Or do I plant dozens of trees in the field? I mean, it's a no brainer. The dozens of trees are going to fill that field and produce a lot more fruit than no matter how big that one group becomes... Now again, when I say this, I'm not saying I'm just for small churches. I've been a part of big churches, and we've seen some of our churches grow pretty good size and so I'm not limiting the size, but I'm pushing from multiplication.

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And so if you want to, if you, if you have the capacity to grow a huge church, grow a huge church, but don't just stay a huge church, multiply other huge churches or even smaller churches. That's kind of how I would, I would want people to be thinking about this.

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What would you say to someone who says this perspective is kind of a lack of faith? That you're kind of limiting God and what he could do in the church with, like, saying that, it's plateaued so I guess we're not going to try to grow any more. And, you know, we're not going to believe that God could grow anymore.

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Well, I'll give you two things. Even if a church gets to its plateaued size gets to the normal size, 150 or something is a pretty common kind of size in a church it'll get to if it's really growing well.

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Or 30 is a really common size around the world. It gets to that size, it has to grow by 20% a year just to stay the same size. The statistics are in America. On average, one out of five people move every year, let alone some people die. And so just to stay at your 30, you've got to add 20% more people.

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So you've got to continue to push on evangelism, but to have a fast enough growth rate to keep it growing way beyond 20% to 40, 50, 100%, that's what this is. Let me throw something else out here now too. Just a little bit of statistics, a group that starts a church and goes from five people to 50.

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What's the annual growth rate of that? You figure that out. It's 1,000% annual growth rate. How fast it's growing now. Not How much, not how many people but how fast? 1 to 50 or 5 to 50. But then you go from 50 to 100 saying add 50 people. What's an annual growth rate, 100%. All, you mathematician, you got that right away.

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It's 100%, but you have a church of 10,000 and it grows by a thousand in a year. Wow. Amazing. Growing over a thousand people, 500 baptisms, a thousand growth, whatever it is. That's amazing. It is amazing. And we want to celebrate that. But do you know what the annual growth rate of that is?

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10%. Let those statistics kind of sink in, how do we most quickly, we're talking about a lot in this podcast about accelerating evangelistic growth globally. Well, how do we accelerate it? Well, one of the ways we accelerate it is through reproduction, it's through multiplication. And that's where the exponential speed of growth comes when new things are planted, many new things.

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You gotta have the right leader. You have to do the right stuff. I mean, it doesn't grow automatically, but it has the best chance because it fits in with the way God designed things. Life.

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It's good. That's good. And it kind of answered David's question, too. If there is an aspect, if you're a pastor or a ministry leader, you want to steward your own gifts and your own block and your own ministry with as much diligence and success and, maximize that opportunity and squeeze as much kingdom impact out of it as possible.

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So there are ways to grow in your preaching, grow in your leadership, move things around to kind of help things grow. And so it's not a defeatist mindset. But also on the other hand, we are called to have faith for things that God has actually promised in His word. So if God has not promised us a megachurch, he may not have promised you a megachurch.

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And so that's like, we need to be very careful about using faith as like a genie in a bottle to get our own wishes and desires and not live a biblical faith. Our faith is to honor God and actually, you know, Philippians 4:13, I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.

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That's not about dunking a basketball or achieving your dreams. That's about being content in every situation. And so I think even as a ministry leader, sometimes having faith is learning to rejoice in the current situation that you're in and maximize that, if that makes sense.

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It's a really good point. And, one thing dad says a lot is that most ministry leaders are drunk on delusions of grandeur that we're going to be the next big thing.

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Insert your name of ministry idol that you want, you want to be. We think that we're going to be that. And reality is God has given each of us a unique set of gifts and abilities that we need to steward well, do our best, like you said. But I think the challenges, the tension that we feel is people are so focused only on growing their ministry that they don't put any energy into multiplication.

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And I think that's the issue, and then there's the verse that Jesus said, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds. And I think it's the principle that there are some things we all have to die to in our church growth

mindset in order to multiply and in order to prioritize multiplication.

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And I think that's what this church growth cycle is all about, is prioritizing multiplication through the entire process.

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And I want to throw something else in here, as we're thinking about this, Take an existing ministry. We're talking about planting churches or planting new campus ministry stuff like that. But there's an element of planting new things that can be for a church, planting new groups if they're starting right, or planting new campuses.

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I've seen a lot of large churches that have plateaued at 2000 or something like that, and they just can't get to about 2000. So they start a new campus and they'll grow that new campus to another 500. And so they get the growth. It's a form of multiplication. Now I'm biased towards church planting.

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I think there's some real advantages to that. But I think you can also multiply. An older church can multiply groups as long as you're just not regathering the saints and new groups, you're really doing the kind of group that is targeting the lost, working with them, you know, is a new wineskin thing. I think we talked about the last podcast. You might look back at that if you want to.

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Yeah. I mean, we saw that in Chico. We kind of reached this point in our campus ministry, our college ministry, where we had a bunch of really solid leaders, and we were still seeing a lot of people come to Christ, but our size was kind of capped out and, so what we did is we started new groups, they even had their own brand, their own club on campus.

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We started a fellowship of Christian Athletes. And because we kind of treated that almost like a partner ministry with our other ministry, and we saw that environment. We sent a small team to go start that, and we saw lots of fruit from athletes coming out to that. And then we started a Greek ministry to fraternities and sororities and an international ministry.

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And so we kind of started these little sub ministries that were still part of our overall orbit. And we would partner together with the main college ministry. But that's a simple way to kind of expand if you have too many leaders. Like, remember we talked about the ratios in a previous episode, but that's a good problem to have to have too many solid leaders.

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But if you have that, a lot of times plateaued churches have some people that are really bought into the vision. And you can divide and conquer and even start new groups that are evangelists. And you can kind of spread it out. So. Amen. Good word Paul. I love it.

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John, you mentioned this earlier and said you might have been getting ahead of yourself a little bit.

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So, scripturally, I know you've done a lot of study on this, particularly how this kind of stuff showed up in Jesus's ministry and Paul's. So could you just tell us a little bit about where you see this kind of idea show up in Scripture?

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Well, in Scripture, it's really kind of interesting because in Scripture we only really have the, a young church movement.

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Most of the churches were young. We don't even have a lot of information on them. We hear about three years of Jesus starting his ministry, going from 1 to 10,000 or more disciples that were in those fields. And now I'm not talking about disciples like the 12. I'm talking about disciples like everyday Christian disciples that's also disciples.

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But anyway, that's another story. But, Jesus grew his ministry really, really fast and at the end of his ministry, he had allotted and Paul did the same thing. The Early Church did the same thing. But we only really have a lot of detailed information about those early stages of starting up. We don't have, you know.

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Well, what do you do with a church that's eighty years old? I mean, you just don't have those around yet. So it's hard to get information, but you can get a lot of good information on how to get them started and get them going. But you're going to have to figure out some ways to follow the Holy Spirit and use the principles to help your mature churches do the right thing.

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But I think one of the things about the mature church that we have to keep in mind is how it does the right thing is not just how it grows itself bigger, but how does it multiply? How does it rise up? A question I get is: Well, if our church has been plateaued for a while or we're getting close to that, when should we plant a new church?

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And usually they're thinking about size. They're thinking, well, I should plant a new church when I get, you know, 50% larger. You know, I'm 150. I gotta get to 200 before we could plant a church. Or if it's a 500, as you usually say, we gotta get to a thousand before we plant a church.

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You know, it's always somewhere out there, so it's nuts. But I'm going to tell you, I believe it has nothing to do with size. Yeah, other ones say I'm not going to plant a church or a new ministry and let's have a lot of money, excess money in the bank and my budget. I can't plant it. I can't plant it right.

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So therefore I'm not going to do it. And I don't think that's right either. And that's not the factor and frankly, it's not even the health of the church which some people will say that, they'll they agree with me on these first two, but they'll say, well, the church gotta be healthy before it reproduces itself.

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And I can see some logic to that, but it's really not the church that's planting the church. It's a church planter that is planting the church. Paul planted Philippi, not Antioch. Antioch sent Paul, but Paul was the church planter. He's the one the Holy Spirit used and got on site and actually grew that church.

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And so, he planted it and grew it. So that's important to keep in mind.

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So what you're saying is that really the only main factor is with the leader. The leader is really the only requirement for planting a church.

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The right leader. Because the right leader will get the right team. The right leader will raise the money that they need. So like, you know, the John Maxwell quote, "everything rises and falls on leadership." So you get the right guy. And then, you know, the other factors don't matter nearly as much.

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That's right. That's where I was going with this. And so the illustration I like to tell guys is this: you can make a small church, ten people, dirt poor, not even that healthy. Got a little bit on, un-health in the church, but you can have the next greatest church planter in the world.

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You get the next Apostle Paul in that church. They're going to release him and send him out. He may start a whole movement. So it all has to do with the leader's readiness. Yep. Everything rises and falls on leadership, like David said and John Maxwell says, but especially church planting, church planting and starting ministries is very leader intensive.

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So we work in a mature church. If it starts, it starts to plateau, start working on how do I develop the next leader to send out, how do I put them through and get them so I can begin to start sending out? And hopefully you're sending out regularly? Our goal is to reach people in the harvest for the harvest.

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And very, very few churches actually do that. Most people that plant churches, even, they get somebody from the seminary or they get somebody from another church, they hire them. I hire them to come in and plant their church for them, which is fine. I'm glad for that. Guys need to find a place to plant a church, but what we really need to be working on is how do we raise up harvesters and planters from the harvest for the harvest?

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Yeah. A piece of that puzzle is dripping in the vision for multiplication even at the start of a church. And so you're constantly sharing about the need not just of our church and our community, but look at all these other places that need the gospel. And as a leader you are casting that vision and you're creating a culture where that's celebrated.

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And if you don't have your own planter, adopt another planter that's nearby and show that your congregation cares about planting and say, hey, we're helping. We're coming along to this guy that maybe even is five, ten minutes down the road or whatever it is that can send a powerful message to your local congregation is like, okay, we're kingdom focused.

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We're not just about building our own kingdom. We're God's kingdom. It's God's kingdom. And I even recommend, especially collegiate leaders, create a top ten list of ten campuses that you want. Or if you're a church planter, ten communities that you want to see new churches started in in your area. And just like pass it around in your ministry so we've had to add that.

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And it's funny, the list that I made and started passing around, we've had two teams that are committed to planting ministries on that top ten. They happen to be called to that. So we're slowly working our way down that top ten list of campuses that we want to see new ministries. So UC Santa Cruz.

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And now we're sending a team to Reno soon. And so it's just kind of fun to kind of think through. There's something without vision, the people perish. And so we need to constantly be casting that vision, towards multiplication.

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I like that a lot, Paul. I thought you were going to go with a different kind of top ten list, though.

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I thought you were gonna say, in your local ministry what your top ten list are the most likely planters in my ministry. And I can start to invest in and work with and develop towards it. And how where are they at in their process and how do I make a leadership funnel out of my church? So I thought you're going there. I think that's probably true, too.

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Yeah, I probably do both. Yeah. Yeah, I think one of the tensions that you feel is that in order to grow just a little bit more is a different set of processes than it is to develop those ten leaders or whatever. And so I think what you see a lot in churches is there, there's so much focus on growing a little bit bigger that they don't put the unnecessary energy into developing leaders in the way that they should.

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And so one of the things that, you know, we're passionate about, all of us in this podcast are passionate about, is making sure that we prioritize that time with the top leaders that can multiply. And I think that's the key. That's what we see Jesus doing. He had the large movement going, but he had his 12 guys that he was investing day and night in.

00:31:02:08 - 00:31:09:02

And so I think that's really the key to multiplication is what kind of leaders are you developing.

00:31:09:02 - 00:31:21:20

That's right. And think about this one thing we like to talk about in our ministry is as funnels, right, is we reach a lot of people on the top of the funnel. Picture that in your mind, a funnel in the top of the funnel being evangelism.

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When you start something, you put all kinds of energy into evangelism and it's all about the first few years of a church. It's all about evangelism. You're trying to reach people. But Jesus was all about evangelism throughout his whole three years. But then he also had a bottom of the funnel. In the bottom of the funnel was the 12, and to a certain extent, the 70, that he poured his life into them at the bottom of the funnel so that they would someday go out and reproduce.

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I like to think about this way and a funnel, if you divide a funnel into three categories. The top one is evangelism. So Jesus caught many and evangelized many. Then the middle is that he touched some. He healed the leper. You know, he cast out the demon here. He touched individuals and the situation, but he didn't spend a whole lot of time with them.

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He did it fast and he spent a lot of time in the bottom of the funnel. So if you focus on the top and bottom of the funnel, and then he had systems which we want to talk about in one of our future podcasts, he had a system. So how do you take care of the people in the middle of the funnel?

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They don't become disciples. They don't become leaders. I mean that's a really important thing. And there's a lot of churches that focus all their energies on the middle of the funnel. They're so focused on the middle of the funnel. They never get around to doing the top of the funnel or the bottom of the funnel.

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You get sucked into the mushy middle and you just don't really, you don't maximize evangelism and you don't maximize leadership training. So that's just something else, but you do have to take care of those people. They're sheep. They need to be loved. And you will be helped. They need to be processed. Some of them become leaders.

00:32:56:03 - 00:33:06:05

Some of them won't, but you need love and care for and feed all the sheep. But you train some. So teach many, touch some, train a few.

00:33:06:05 - 00:33:19:07

And a great use of those leaders at the bottom of the funnel that you're training is to give them experience, shepherding and leading the people in the middle. So that's a good way to kind of point them back up.

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Hey, these are some people you can lead, maybe lead a group, maybe disciple some people that help you with evangelism, too. So there you're putting these leadership training is not classroom. Of course. It's boots on the ground. Come with me. Do discipleship the way Jesus did discipleship. He appointed 12 to be with him so that he could send them out to preach.

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It wasn't like, let's go to the desert, study the book of Isaiah, talk about our struggles. You know, that wasn't the way he did discipleship. You know, he took them with him to every town and village, saturating their target areas with the gospel and so he was showing them how to do ministry. It wasn't just like this kind of small discipleship group type thing.

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So I think that's in our leadership, even when we think about leadership development, it's giving them reps and then coaching and helping them get experience that way.

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Yeah, I've heard someone say, don't get so focused on petting sheep that you don't have time to raise new shepherds. If you raise up shepherds, they can help you pet the sheep. They can help you take care of the sheep. But yeah, that's a good one.

00:34:31:11 - 00:34:46:05

You know, I know our time is probably getting close to getting done with this podcast. I want to bring up one other thing, though. How do we make this practical? How do we really bring it in? And what I call this is I call this "the wisdom of the when."

00:34:46:07 - 00:35:24:07

When you do certain activities or certain procedures, it makes a difference when you do them. Certain things you do in the early stage, you have to prioritize to really make the most of it. They're some things you do in a later stage in all of the stages, but there's certain things, you guys know, you have probably memorized the verse in Ecclesiastes where it talks about wisdom and kind of definition of wisdom, the person who's wise, he knows the proper time and procedure to do the activity and so you've got to if you're in there starting a church plant, you don't focus on stuff that mature churches ought to be focused on

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You focus on stuff you need to be focused on, which is evangelism. Basically, and training a few leaders in your team and keeping your team healthy. But you're really focused on evangelism in the early stage. But if you get too focused on reproduction, filling and, you know, planting churches, you kind of miss your opportunity.

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You're getting your energies in the wrong place. But at the same time, if you are a later stage, a mature stage of church, if you put all your energy just on trying to evangelize and get your group growing, and don't put any of the right kind of priority time into developing leaders, then you don't maximize what you can do at that stage, because at a later stage you got more people, you got more resources.

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You really can do some great leadership training and give them opportunities to start new things. And there's stuff like that. So the wisdom of the wind makes a big deal. I see a lot of planters make this mistake. They go in, instead of emphasizing evangelism, they emphasize discipleship or leadership training. And, well, I'm just going to disciple the people.

00:36:25:08 - 00:36:48:00

I'm going in. I'm not going to evangelize. I'm just going to disciple the Christians that I can gather up to get them to evangelize. I say, baloney to that, that's not the way to plant an evangelistic growth church. You go in and you go after people. You go after lost people. Win them to Christ, and then you disciple the ones you win and train a few leaders along the way.

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If somebody wants to join you to kind of help catch fish with you, that's fine. But we're not starting the church to be the best, you know, discipling church around. We're starting a church to reach people, and then we're going to disciple those people and develop leaders in the process.

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Yeah, evangelism really separates. When you're starting a new ministry, especially if someone, a Christian wants to join your ministry, the best response is, okay, yeah, we're looking for people to join us in reaching this community for Christ.

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And I'm starting this evangelistic Bible study, or I'm going here to do this evangelism. Are you coming? When are you going to join me to do that? And so if they want to join, they have to join the cause, not just to get the care from you, you know. So that's a good way to kind of like, keep that DNA in the early stages of your ministry, white hot towards evangelism.

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If a Christian wants to join that, maybe that's a good thing. Maybe not.

00:37:49:09 - 00:38:04:05

That's right. It might mess up your ratios. Remember we talked about ratios last time. You get too many Christians. Then the new believer has a hard time fitting into the group. So we just shoot ourselves and a foot for evangelistic growth too often.

00:38:04:05 - 00:38:24:08

Well I think just the way that I've heard you explain it is the different stages. So like the early stage is the fast growth stage. Like then the plateaued stage is basically you're being like, frequent kind of multiplication and sending out leaders. And then the declining stage is for faithfulness, being faithful.

00:38:24:09 - 00:38:48:14

multiply out churches. And so I think even just that picture of the kind of the plateaued, You rise really fast at first and then kind of flattens out for a while. But then when it's flat, you're sending out new pods and new ministries, and then when it's declining, that's the time to spoil your grandkids and go back and invest in the stuff that's growing quickly and fastly.

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And so I think it's helpful to see, like the entire picture. I don't know if there's anything else that you would add to it.

00:38:54:06 - 00:39:05:08

I will add something to that and something you'll probably like. David being the preacher type that you are. I got 4 F's for you. The first one is growing FAST.

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Fast growth early stage, that's your early stage. Then secondly get FIT. You want to get strong. You want to disciple the people the second stage is getting fit. The third stage is multiplied FREQUENTLY. That's your reproduction stage. And then the last one is give FAITHFULLY. And so what do you give as a declining church? You give your resources, your wisdom.

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Maybe you're building over to a young church. It's just you're in a giving mode when you're in your decline mode. And you should be. I think if we really are serious about filling the earth, the churches are declining. Okay, the reality was declining. How can we use our resources when we have our last opportunities?

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How can I make a lasting impact and leave a legacy? I just think that's huge. And we see a lot of churches around America in our denomination and stuff like that that are dying like that, but they're giving a lot of their churches over to young church planters. They have a growing thing. But some of the churches that I started that's happened.

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They've got buildings, not because they built their own building, but because somebody gave them a building, because this church was growing and that one wasn't anymore. And that's great for the kingdom, that's kingdom growth.

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And in my role with the North American Mission Board, I get to go into some of these older churches and established churches and things.

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And it is, it's a joy to see how excited they are about hearing the stories of what God's doing on campus or their missionaries overseas. And, you know, that's really significant. You know, it's really significant to bless and to have a vision for. And, so we never want to minimize something that's significant for God's kingdom.

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And so I think God is very honored by dying churches that are being faithful to give and to use their last breaths for his kingdom. And so I think that's something we need to keep in mind, is that it's not like, oh, this tragic story. No, it is honoring God to give and even to die for the glory of God in some way. So, I don't know, I get emotional.

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That's right. But thinking really practically, I wondered if you could share, just what at each stage. What's the one thing they need to focus on? Maybe it's using that word again, but it's really practically like, what would you say is the focus for each stage? For a leader that's listening, if they diagnose themselves that, hey, I'm in that plateaued stage, what do I do?

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Alright. Well, I think it's growth, but not just growth. Any kind of growth. First stage? Growth. But I say evangelistic growth, you know, accelerate evangelist growth and make the most of that first stage.

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Second stage. You are now continuing with that. I mean, you never stop trying to grow evangelistically, but it's going down. Now, you put more and more time and discipleship and to

deploy and to ground the people who come to faith. And that's your still growing that kind of teenage years. And then when you get to the mature years, the young man, what are they supposed to do? They're supposed to get fit.

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They're supposed to get strong. That's their glory. So, young man, get strong, physically and spiritually. And then for the mature stage it's multiplication. You are raising up leaders to send out to start new groups, campuses, ministries, something... You're starting something new. And then the last stage, it's the faithful contribution of what God has blessed you with, whether it's wisdom or whether it's you're really you're living your life for the next generation.

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That's yeah that's what the older stage does is that they pour their life out and they like David said, they spoil their grandchildren. And help their children who are still multiplying to multiply more. So not just the grandchild, but it's helping the children to multiply more.

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A helpful example of this is I have some friends that lead this group called the Salt Company in Iowa, and they reached a certain point.

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They were actually reaching hundreds of students, and they grew a large church as a result of the students they're reaching. They grew basically a megachurch. And I remember talking to them and they said they had this cool statement. They said at a certain point, we could have put our energies into growing a marginally larger megachurch, all of our energies.

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But we decided there were all these campuses, and we had all these young leaders coming up that we shifted our efforts into picking out these new campus communities to start churches in. And so now they're on 30 something campuses across the nation. And they just had that shift like, and that was just recently probably, you know, I don't know how many years ago, but they've been able since then to multiply to about 30 major campuses across the United States.

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And so they're a good example of even a successful ministry, reaching a plateau, so to speak. But using that for serious intentional multiplication. And they had this conference every year where they call it the Salt conference. And they have thousands of students at this conference

from all the different ministries. And every year they're celebrating where they're going next.

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So they say, okay, we're going to the University of Florida. And they even like to get students to go with them. And they kind of had these teams. And it's kind of this cool momentum builder that they have there. So they're just a good example of what we're talking about with frequent multiplication.

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And that reminds me of the phrase that dad uses is that plateaus are for planting. So if you're in the plateau, the plateau is for planting, you're sending out people.

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I think that's a good point. It's kind of funny. It's a lot easier to, you know, pull a tiller along a flat ground than it is a hill. So that's funny. Well, thank you guys. This has been a great, kind of deep dive into the church growth life cycle.

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Again. I hope it was as encouraging to those listening as it was to me when I heard about it for the first time. And I think for me, just provided this new focus on, okay, I now know where I am and I need to get after the multiplication because I've already hit this plateau. So it's time to go, do some multiplication.

00:45:41:09 - 00:46:07:20

So that was encouraging to me. So. Well, thanks for joining us on this third episode of the For the Harvest podcast where we've discussed another major strategy in how to accelerate evangelistic growth globally. Join us next time.