

A CHURCH PLANTING *Manifesto*

FOR 21ST CENTURY NORTH AMERICA

Drafted by the Send Institute Missiologists Council

INTRODUCTION

“I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” (John 17:23)

North America continues to complexify at an unprecedented rate as indicated by its increasing racial and ethnic diversity, growing diaspora, rising religious pluralism, and shifting cultural attitudes towards faith and church. We acknowledge that in this climate, our prevalent church planting models are seeing attrition in evangelistic effectiveness and cultural influence, particularly among emerging youth and young adult populations. This complexity has created a new kind of mission context that requires a diverse and globally-minded mission force radically committed to disciple-making that is rooted in the Word of God and led by the Spirit of God.

Moreover, the social and political climate of our time often confuses the Church and distracts her from being a prophetic witness to the presence of God’s Kingdom. The theological bifurcation of the gospel into two separate gospels (of the Kingdom and of salvation) has, at times, led to planting churches that are either ineffective at evangelism or negligent to injustices and the needs of communities. Many church planting groups today are wondering how to break out of these old wineskins in order to allow Jesus and the gospel to better reconstruct them for the future.

To one generation, these 21st-century realities can seem like insurmountable challenges in church planting, however, to the next generation, they are opportunities for fresh expressions of gospel ministry. The next few decades will require a generation of leaders with creative vision in pursuit of discerning the activity of God’s Spirit in the world and seeking to participate in it. This generation must raise the bar for diversity in leadership yet be committed to the unity of the Body of Christ more than any previous generation before them. They will be used by God’s Spirit to start new churches and to birth new multiplication movements in the midst of engaging social and cultural domains as they make disciples of the Kingdom both inside and outside of church buildings.

The North American landscape ranges from large urban centers to changing rural communities. It has become a complex mission context where today’s best practices are quickly being invalidated and where few church planting groups are experts. This complexity necessitates a posture of humility and learning where collaboration and innovation are championed for the sake of a waiting harvest. This is a time for different movements to come together through a variety of initiatives to seek and discern the work of the Spirit of God through the conviction of prayer and the humility of shared discovery. Only by learning from one another and from the Church from around the world, will we find fresh insight for missions in North America.

We believe that improving communication and meaningful interaction among different movements honors God and is the biblical intent for the unity of the Body of Christ in North America. Therefore, the aim of this manifesto is to invite

leaders to join together around sound missiological and biblically-faithful principles for planting new churches in a 21st-century North America. We believe this is an opportune time for leaders in North America to collaborate together as a diverse mission force both in intentionality and in intensity. A commitment to these principles, God willing, could result in not merely an increase of the number of congregations in North America, but the emergence of biblically faithful and contextually-appropriate churches led by leaders equipped and prepared for the new realities of North America.

And we believe that greater collaboration will result in a new generation of disciple-makers, churches, and networks across North America participating in God's redemptive work and accounting for innumerable people coming to Christ, immeasurable cultural transformation, and ever-increasing glory to God.

PRINCIPLES FOR CHURCH PLANTING IN 21ST CENTURY NORTH AMERICA

As we enter further into the 21st-century, we offer the following as biblically faithful and missiologically-sound principles, guiding the next generation of church planting in North America towards faithful gospel ministry and contextually-appropriate churches:

01. Prayer and obedience to the Holy Spirit in light of the Word of God take priority over systems and structures.

(Luke 6:12-16; Acts 16:6-10)

We affirm that any genuine church multiplication movement is birthed out of prayer and sacrificial obedience in cooperation with how the Spirit of God is already at work. Over the last few decades, denominations and networks have developed useful organizational tools and practices that assist in efforts toward church planting stewardship – both human and financial. With great appreciation toward this end, we recognize that church planting is not simply about starting efficient and sustainable organizations. Church planting is about cooperating with the heart of God and accomplishing his creative work in a specific context through prayerful methods and means.

We agree to lead our ministries as a spiritual movement, steeped in prayer and communion around the Word of God and the people of God. We call on our churches in North America to seek God for spiritual refreshment and awakening. We need more methods that are inspired by Scripture, but we resist the temptation to rely more on turnkey processes than Spirit-led means.

02. Church planting is both the impulse and the result of multiplying disciples who hear and obey God.

(John 10:27; Romans 15:18)

We affirm that Jesus' primary commandment is to make obedient disciples. Because of the complexities in modern methods, church planting methodologies have often focused more on executing a project plan for launching large group gatherings rather than on developing appropriate disciple-making strategies. However, the missionary task of church planting is to engage a particular context with the gospel in order to bring non-believers into a relationship with God, and believers into the profound joy of a deeper obedience within that mission. Therefore, the multiplication of new disciples from the harvest into biblical community and mission becomes the *modus operandi* and the expectation of a new church.

We agree to orient church planting strategies around multiplying disciples and disciple-makers from the harvest. We avoid any strategy that side-steps or deviates from disciple-making as the primary vocation of the church.

03. Every believer is a disciple-maker with a holy calling and vocation.

(John 4:29; 1 Peter 2:9)

We affirm that while the ministry of church planting is unique and particular, every believer has a holy calling and every vocation that is not sinful can be leveraged to advance the Kingdom of God. The tendency to professionalize the work of church planting can create an unbiblical and unhelpful divide between clergy and laity. This divide often restricts faithful and faith-filled believers from meaningful participation in the work of church planting. It also perpetuates unreasonable pressures and standards onto church planters, creating unhealthy expectations and self-serving motivations.

We agree that the work of church planting flows from God's heart to see all believers mobilized and participating in disciple-making and mission. We resist any notion that church planting is reserved for a professional class that excludes the gifts and callings of a functioning Body. We also resist any organizational culture that commodifies church planting or church planters.

04. Planting contextually-appropriate churches will require much innovation and risk-taking, and much of this new learning will come from the Church from around the world.

(2 Corinthians 4:7-12; Romans 1:8-15)

We affirm that as with the first-century Church, and with the persevering Church globally, our current missiological circumstances necessitate courageous paradigm shifts in order to better align ourselves with the mission of God. Churches in North America need to learn from a humble position what God is doing all over the world. This includes places where rapid disciple-making movements are happening as well as where churches are in decline. Our intention should not be to imitate their methods and models, force fitting them into our context. Instead, we praise God for how he has worked, and humbly and introspectively search for points of cultural adaptation.

We agree that God is mightily working around the world and churches in North America have much to learn from the Church in all parts of the world. We resist "echo chamber" thinking that limits God and our future direction by past and current successes and failures.

05. Planting churches that bear witness to the redemptive presence of the Kingdom of God in the world requires a holistic engagement of the community with the whole gospel.

(Luke 24:19; 1 Corinthians 4:20)

We affirm that the gospel of the Kingdom is not a matter of talk, but of power. Salvation is by faith and not by works, and the serious work of evangelism and disciple-making should not be independent of confronting the evils of society and the structures that perpetuate them. The contextual engagement of any community necessitates holistic engagement with all of the gospel. There is a temptation to bifurcate mission into *word* or *deed*, or to overemphasize one at the expense of the other. But true Kingdom engagement necessitates both *word* and *deed* approaches. To a spiritually hungry world, our good news will clarify, and our good works will verify.

We agree that evangelism and disciple-making through both word and deed is the Kingdom approach to addressing the contextual needs and issues of a community. We long to see people reconciled to God and to one another. We resist dividing a whole gospel by separating Jesus' command to love our neighbor from his commission to make disciples.

06. Multiplication movements require local churches taking responsibility for raising and spiritually parenting future church planting teams.

(Acts 15:1-3; Romans 15:22-29)

We affirm that it is the responsibility of local churches to plant and care for new churches. Church planting movements empower the local church to not only grow through addition, but to also release in multiplication. The gospel trajectory of North America could continue to stagnate unless local churches take responsibility for discovering, developing and deploying church planting teams from within. Healthy and well-supported church planting teams come from local churches that provide care and covering. While at times it has become necessary for denominations and networks to catalyze new churches, we believe that a healthy pattern for ongoing multiplication is through a local church's internal disciple-making processes.

We agree that the initiative for church planting falls on local churches and that denominations and networks exist to support churches in that mission. We discourage any strategies that create orphan churches and that short-circuit multiplication dynamics.

07. Biblical churches that are culturally relevant exist in a variety of models and sizes.

(Philemon 1:1-3; Acts 2:42-47)

We recognize that throughout history, as today, our creative Father has been transforming the world through churches expressed in various models and in a wide array of sizes. But we also recognize that a virtual industry has developed around church growth principles and best practices resulting in exalting particular models. Some new models have emerged in reaction to this to deconstruct rather than helpfully engage. We believe churches should plant churches in the particular way the Holy Spirit leads them, especially as they are contextual to the domains of society and the people they intend to reach and disciple.

We agree to hold our models loosely and to champion how God is at work in all kinds of ways. We avoid rigid models, especially when they are proving to be contextually insensitive and evangelistically ineffective.

08. Honor leadership from the harvest and contextualized pathways of leadership development.

(Acts 20:16-18; Titus 1:5-6)

We affirm that it is best to develop leadership from within the harvest. The many contexts of North America are complicated, but most cities are made up of communities with already existing social structures with their own subcultures. While it is not wrong, and often necessary to import leaders with cross-cultural giftings from other geographies to initiate a church plant, a long-term practice of this is not consistent with what we know to be true about

movement dynamics. The reliance on importing leadership will prohibit young disciples from attaining maturity, stunting any natural pathways for multiplication.

We agree to champion discipleship pathways among our churches that enable new believers to become multiplying disciple-makers. We resist any model of mobilization and leadership that asserts the preference of external leadership over the contextual needs of the mission context and its internal leadership.

09. Healthy communication and collaboration among groups, especially at local levels, is an essential dynamic for multiplication.

(John 17:20-26; 1 Peter 3:8-9)

We affirm that what God wants to do in North America can only be accomplished among all faithful groups, and not only among any particular few. The ideas of free enterprise and start-up culture are useful for innovation, but has often created an isolationist mentality, fostering a kind of competition that is unhealthy. We believe that when church planters and leaders communicate and collaborate from national levels to the cities and communities in which they plant, a more conducive environment is created for the Spirit of God.

We agree to be collaboratively-minded at the highest levels of our organization and especially at the local levels. We avoid any methods that would intentionally create unhealthy competition and isolation among our leaders and church planters.

10. Regular and ongoing evaluation of mission strategies, structures, and systems is necessary for contextually-appropriate methods and models.

(Habakkuk 3:2; Mark 2:21-22)

We affirm that Jesus' commission to make disciple of all nations often necessitates new ways of discovering how God is at work throughout the world in church planting. The successes of the past can often be our greatest hindrances for the necessary discoveries of the future. This means that denominations and networks have to do the hard work of identifying and removing any traditions or structures that are hindrances from obedience to God and effectiveness in mission.

We commit ourselves to the humility of open and reflective self-evaluation. Where constructs such as tradition, structure, or even proven methods become stumbling blocks for aligning with how God is at work, we gladly leave them behind. We resist building monuments to the past if it means missing out on what God is doing now.

11. Mobilization for mission is rooted in a hopeful belief in the progress and future reality of God's completed work and the renewal of all things.

(Acts 17:24-27; Revelation 21:4-6)

We affirm that the decline of church membership over the last few decades is one of the useful metrics to gauge the climate of North American spirituality. But church membership decline is merely one narrative among many others that motivate the Body of Christ to greater mission work. The decline narrative calls people to mission by relying on a period

of history where church membership was thought to be stronger. This institutional memory is quickly fading and increasingly less effective at rallying the imagination of segments most easily mobilized. Some other crucial ways to mobilize the whole Body of Christ into mission includes biblical reconciliation, Kingdom renewal, the Church from around the world coming to North America, and previously unreached communities worshipping and glorifying God.

We agree to mobilize churches and church planting teams not simply by talking about church decline, but also by the multiple ways God is actually at work in developing a diverse mission force in North America. We avoid a one-dimensional theology of mission that neglects the multiple heritages that make up North America.

12. Men and women leading in mission—from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds—is a demonstration of the power of the gospel.

(Acts 13:1-3; James 2:1-7)

We affirm that God has sovereignly allowed high levels of diversity to descend upon North America as part of his plan to raise up new disciples and new churches. All movements must continue to look to Jesus and the New Testament pattern for how to disciple and release both men and women into mission. Just as the Church from around the world often understands that the Great Commission is all peoples reaching all places with all of the gospel, North America, as a microcosm of the world, requires a mission force led by diverse and culturally intelligent leaders. Acts 13 reminds us that God launched a global missions enterprise from the church in Antioch, which was composed of people from different nations and socio-economic backgrounds.

We agree that North America, as a cultural mosaic of God's children, needs all kinds of churches for all kinds of people. While not every context demands high levels of diversity, we believe that as North America continues to complexify, churches that reflect diversity and mission strategies that are led by meaningfully diverse teams demonstrate the power of the gospel to a non-believing world in a unique way. We discourage the marginalization and side-lining of any groups within the Body of Christ.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

<http://www.sendinstitute.org/manifesto>