

BREAKING THROUGH GROWTH BARRIERS IN NEW CHURCHES

Focusing on Leadership Development

by Sherri Brown

Article Summary

One of the most critical areas in church planting is leadership. A church planter must grow, change and develop his or her leadership style in order to take a church to the next level.

Further Reading

[Branding your Church: Issues Involved in Branding Existing Churches and Church Plants](#) by Sherri Brown

[Creating Strategic Alliances and Partnerships for Planting New Churches; Issues Involved in Sharing Information and Resources Toward Greater Evangelism](#) by Sherri Brown

[Becoming a Church Planting Church: Issues Pastors Address When Leading a Church to Birth a Network of New Churches](#) by Sherri Brown

Big dreams were never a problem for Marcus Bigelow. He was 33 years old when he planted a church in California. It was 1984 and although he was passionate about his calling as a church planter, he didn't have all of the essentials that people believed he needed for a successful start-up.

"I was under-funded, I appointed elders too quickly and we never were at harmony with the agenda," Marcus says. The launch team was already in place before Marcus was hired as the church planter. "I was a fixer," he admits. "I cared too much what people thought. I didn't know you could tell someone to leave, I thought you had to keep everybody."

It was a recipe for disaster and that's exactly what Marcus cooked up.

"I started with 75 people and at the end of three years I'd managed to end up with 23 people," he says. "I was convinced I was toxic. I was seeing a counselor and praying for a one-way ticket to anywhere." That ticket out never came. Instead, all that went wrong led Marcus down a different kind of path. For the past 13 years, he has worked with **Stadia: New Church Strategies** (<http://www.stadia.cc>), and is now president at large for Stadia West. During that time he has helped start 120 churches that currently have a combined total of 30,000 people worshipping each week.

"Prior to coming to Stadia, I stayed at that church for 12 years, bringing attendance up to 135 people. I fell in love with the people and was ready to buy a cemetery plot when God moved me," he says. In his current position he is able to take all that went wrong and help other church planters learn from his mistakes. "Every stupid and disastrous thing I did I can now help someone avoid. And I can say it with conviction," he says.

YOU'VE ALWAYS GOT TO LEAD PEOPLE TO THE NEXT LEVEL.

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"You've always got to lead people to the next level," Marcus says.

Church Growth Rises and Falls on Leadership

"There's the going someplace part of leadership, then there's the taking people with you part of leadership," says Margie Blanchard, who works with her husband, Ken Blanchard through **The Ken Blanchard Companies** (<http://www.kenblanchard.com>), a leadership development group. According to Margie, a leader must carry out three tasks: perform your own job functions; develop the people that report to you; and provide long-term perspective. "It's important that a person knows you're interested in where they're going and want to help them get there," she says.

These principles can be easily translated to the church. As a church planter guides a church to grow, successful church planters will:

1. *Be visionary leaders,*
2. *Work to bring others along with them, and*
3. *Do everything they can to create disciples and followers of Jesus Christ.*

Casting Big Vision

Taking time to hash out a clear vision will help prepare for the hard times, says Margie Blanchard. "The big thing with any group is to take time in the beginning to establish who you are, where you're going and what you're doing when everyone is enthusiastic. Do it then, not later," she says. That way when disillusionment hits—and it always does—the vision sustains you. "I see this in marriages," Margie says. "No one tells couples that everyone has to go through disillusionment and crawl out of it to make it better."

Once a church planter has the vision for creating disciples, he needs to be able to communicate to the church, says Jim Akins director of church planting for **West Ridge Church** in Dallas, GA (<http://www.westridge.com>). "Look at your

leaders and the people you have to engage and let them know you're moving to the next level and you want them to move with you. Then cast that before the church," Jim says. Eight years ago at West Ridge Church, it became clear that it was time for the part-time children's minister to become full-time. There was no funding, but the leaders knew it was a critical need, so the pastor chose to take up a one-time \$20,000 offering to pay for the salary for that year. He told the congregation the need and the next week the congregation of about 400 gave \$20,001.96. "It happened because the pastor clearly laid out the vision to the people and they responded," Jim says.

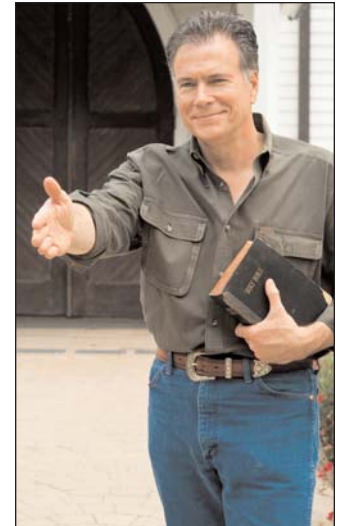


West Ridge Community Church was able to pay the children's minister's salary in one offering collection because the pastor clearly laid out the vision for the people.

Church members' expectations must change as a church grows larger, says John Jackson¹, founding and senior pastor of **Carson Valley Christian Center** in Minden, NV (<http://www.cvcwired.com>). "We hadn't even started meeting yet and I had a lady come up to me very angry because there was stuff going on in the church that she didn't know about. I told her it was actually going to get a lot worse, because a lot of things were going to happen that she wouldn't know about and I wouldn't know about," he said.

John had been a staff member at a 90-year-old church and was also a denominational executive when he left to plant a church in northern Nevada. "It's a beautiful place, but it's the wilderness," he says. "I knew from the beginning

what it looked like to lead a church of 1,000. My struggle was different. I knew what it was like to lead a church with a bunch of staff, but there were no staff when I started." He found himself befriending "anyone who could fog a mirror. I was Mr. Friendly at the front door when people came for a service or a small group, but I found out quickly that everyone I was friendly with thought I was going to be their best friend. I realized I had to make sure people weren't attached to me, but attached to the vision." So John developed a "people pathway"—a method that allowed him to explain in 10 minutes how to get connected in the church. That was a great first step to attaching people to the church's vision of changing lives.



With a small staff John Jackson had to make sure that people were attached to the vision and not to him.

As Marcus Bigelow tells his church planters: "Vision without a strategy is just a pipe dream."

VISION WITHOUT A STRATEGY IS JUST A PIPE DREAM.

Finding the Right People to Bring With You

A Leader with a Clear Sense of Call

The biggest issue that faces church planting groups is finding the right person to be the church planter. "Start out with the best you can find," says Henry Oursler, pastor, trainer and mentor with **Grace Global Network** (<http://www.graceglobalnetwork.org>). "You never find the complete product, but you have to have the raw product. You have to know this guy has what it takes. Sometimes that's intangible, but you want someone with vision, with confidence, who is teachable. We look for those who have the ability to multiply what they are doing." While assessment tools are always used to help identify

healthy church planters, there are more issues that often don't appear on a resume, Henry says. "I want to see a sense that it doesn't have to be all about me. A church planter needs to be willing to have the people he disciples far surpass him."

After 21 years as an associate pastor, Mike Lowery resigned from his job at a large, influential church to become a church planter. He had all the qualifications including expertise in education, discipleship, counseling and evangelism. His first attempt failed for a number of reasons, but he still feels called to church planting, says Henry. "In a year or so, he'll re-launch that church and learn from the mistakes he made," Henry says. "He'll do it because of a clear sense of calling. He told me, 'I've known more than anything else in my life that I'm called to start a church right here. I could walk away from this, but I fear God more than I fear bankruptcy or anything else. I would be afraid to leave here because I know for certain what God called me to do.'" Mike will start another church because he knows God is in that plan. That kind of call creates a sense of purpose and a sense of courage, Henry says. "The call is critical."

A Core Group of Disciples

Marcus Bigelow coaches church planters to start a church with a high-impact model—breaking the 100 people barrier before they actually get started. "We encourage them to break that 50 and 100 numerical barrier before launching. That way they move to the 200 mark pretty quickly," he says. Gathering a strong core group, developing small group Bible studies and advertising the coming of a new church before launching weekly worship are ways to develop a large base for a new church start. That level is where many church planters must change leadership style in order to continue on an upward growth curve.

Hire Well

Building a team may be one of the most challenging tasks for a church planter. A church planter takes the church to one level, but alone, he can't take it much past 150 or 200 regular attenders. In order to break through that 150 numeric growth barrier, competent staff members must join the team.

Sam Douglass likes to tell his church planters to "hire slowly and fire quickly." He suggests they not hand out titles and not give out a lot of money in the beginning. "Hire an intern, an apprentice or an assistant. That way they can earn the right to be elevated and you minimize the fall-out if it doesn't work," Sam says. He also advises young churches to make their first hires wisely by hiring people who attract other people. "Hire a children's minister who will attract families and ultimately pay his own salary. Don't hire a financial secretary or a janitor as your first staff members."

Marcus Bigelow agrees, "It's also important to analyze the senior leaders' gift mix and the congregational gift mix. If the senior pastor is a great visionary, but a lousy administrator, then hire an administrator. You need a complementary gift mix that fills in the lack." Marcus suggests church planters look at several characteristics when hiring staff:

- Find someone who is loyal. That should be high on the list for all staff members.
- Ask about previous experience with bosses. If they say, "My pastor was a jerk," that's the wrong answer. The pastor might have actually been a jerk, but he needs to find his part in the relationship.
- Make sure you are hiring someone competent.
- Passion is critical. A staff member must be passionate about his or her work.
- A good work ethic. Past behavior is the key to this one.
- If possible, hire from within. If you hire someone who has already been working

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at the church, you've seen his work habits and know his competency. *One caution: be careful when hiring within the church, because if it doesn't work out it can be a disaster to the congregation. The same goes with hiring friends. It can often be a mistake.*

Marcus also suggests a pastor needs to know who needs to do the hiring. "I don't hire people personally. I stay out of it," he says. "I tend to see the best in people and if I see any problems, I assume we can work it out. That's not good." He leaves the hiring to people who are more objective and clearly see the potential issues in a staff member.

Fire Well

Shawn Lovejoy is the lead pastor at **Mountain Lake Church** in Cumming, GA (<http://www.mountainlakechurch.com>), an 8-year-old congregation with an average attendance of 2,000 on two campuses. As important as hiring the right person is, knowing when to fire the wrong person may be even more important. "Nobody hires well 100 percent," says Shawn. "Having the guts to fire is more important than hiring. The challenge is that we tend to only fire people for having an affair or getting caught up in pornography. We don't fire people who aren't producing or who are not accomplishing the mission of the church." The first person Shawn had to fire was a pastor he had personally recruited. The staff member moved across the country to join him in the new church plant. At the end of the first 12 months, it was clear to Shawn that this staff member was not going to make it. "I was clear with him. We set goals and one after another they weren't accomplished. We finally offered him a severance and gave him time to seek employment." It was difficult, but in the long run a good choice for everyone. "We released one pastor and he went to a smaller church. He's flourishing there. That's his gift, his strength," Shawn says. "It's the least Christian thing to do to not be honest and not do the best for the body of Christ. The best thing I can do for a leader is to allow him to be in an environment he's suited to be in."

At times, as the church grows, competent and loyal staff members may "grow out of a job" and no longer be effective in their position. That's when a church planter has to learn to be tough, says Marcus Bigelow. "Being a friend and being an employer are two different things. Your job is to lead people to the next level." If there is another position where the staff member can continue to be effective, then move him there. Otherwise, it's best to let him go. "The skill set for taking things to 200 is different than the skills to take a church beyond that," Marcus says.

Creating Disciples Through Reproducible Models

Shifting From High Level to Low Level Control

Although different sources list different numerical growth barriers, generally church planters find the barriers at 200, 400, 800, 1,000 and beyond. The difference in leading a church of 200 and leading one of 800 is in the leadership style. "When your church has less than 200 members, a church planter can do pretty much anything and everything, from taking out the trash, doing follow-up, to running the organization," Henry Oursler says. "In order to break through the 200 barrier, the pastor usually has to switch gears. On the other hand, if a pastor comes out of seminary saying 'All I want to do is lead and preach', he needs to understand that he can do that in an 800-member church, but not in a church of 150."



HENRY OURSLER

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"What keeps them from passing the 200 mark is moving from doing it all to hiring good staff to get the church at the next level," Marcus Bigelow says. "Hiring wrongly is one of the biggest problems. Guys don't learn to give away ministry. They hold it too close and become the bottleneck."

Let Go of Control and Reproduce Yourself

Jim Akins coaches church planters. In five years, West Ridge Church has sent out 30 daughter churches. Coaching through the growth barriers is critical, he says. “I’ve got a couple of guys right now that are at a significant size after a couple of years. I’ve told them I think their ministry style has reached its maximum if they don’t change. You see some willing to change and some won’t.” Leadership has to go from being the pastor of the whole church to be pastor of the leaders of the church—teachers, elders and other volunteers, Jim says. “When you start reaching 500, you step back and realize you don’t know everybody. That’s when you’ve got to start pouring yourself into the leaders. And at some point, you eventually move to leading only your paid staff members,” he says.

Reproducing yourself is one way to begin letting go, Henry Oursler says. “If you are not training leaders, it puts an artificial lid on your ministry and you cannot grow,” he says. “The first thing I look at is the sense of control. If someone believes no one else will do it as well as he will, then there is an issue of releasing control. At the heart of the issue of control is insecurity and pride.”

Once John Jackson realized he could no longer be Mr. Friendly at Carson Valley Christian Center, the next step he took was developing a strong leadership core. “We were clear early on that we

needed strong leadership. I mean, which wing on the airplane do you not want to fly with?” John had seen church planters develop tremendous momentum as they gathered people for large events, outreach activities and preview services. If the crowd was there, but the leadership was missing, the whole thing imploded. “We prayed strategically asking God to bring people to us who were moving into the area coming from

a church background. That’s a little counter-culture for people in new church plants, but I wanted us to seek people drawn to us with gifts who could join the mission. God honored that,” he says.

Shawn Lovejoy admits he occasionally still struggles with the issue of control. “I know you can’t develop your team unless you as the senior pastor lead differently. My tendency is still to lead like I have 500 people. I enjoy my team; I enjoy knowing everything going on. I don’t like releasing control and not knowing everything,” he says. “But to be effective, I have to have those tough conversations. Everyone can’t be at the table for everything.” Shawn developed a “Leading Elder” team that was in place six years when he told them, “Guys, this isn’t working. Every decision is channeled through us. I have realized that people still aren’t being empowered to make decisions.” Eventually, he did away with that team.

“I started the church in my living room. It’s hard to turn loose, but if you don’t, you won’t grow,” Shawn says. “If it falls apart without you leading everyone, you’ve got the wrong people on the team.”

Growth through multiplication

While the vast majority of churches look to continue growing in size, a small percentage of churches choose to cut off growth at about 125 and start more churches. However, even multiplying smaller congregations creates leadership challenges for church planters.

Neil Cole, author of *Organic Church* and founder of **Church Multiplication Association** in Signal Hill, CA (<http://www.cmaresources.org>), sees the benchmarks of growth on a smaller scale. Neil divides groups into a set of natural boundaries: two or three; 12 to 15; 70 to 75 and 120 to 150. Groups at each of those levels are able to reproduce, although Neil admits that the leadership needed at each level is different. “With two or three people, there is disciple-making. When you have 12 to 15, you have a unit of disciples. A group of 70 to 75 you have facilitation where you assess, train and deploy,” he says. “At 120 your leader is a shepherd and that’s the largest group a shepherd can really

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oversee. At that point, you add more shepherds.” Neil backs up his ideas biblically by pointing out the natural group sizes in the New Testament. “Jesus was quite successful at gathering multitudes, but he always abandoned them for the smaller group,” he says. The key to growth is multiplication. “You can reproduce all those

levels,” he says. Through this approach, Neil has begun a church multiplication movement that produced 53 new church plants in three years. Currently Neil provides training to about 3,000 people each year, which results in an average of two church starting every day.²

Rickie Bradshaw, director of **Street Talk Church Planting Network**, adopted Neil Cole’s multiplication model in his Houston, TX church. While Rickie’s congregation at First Southwest Baptist Church in Houston, had planted 86 churches, he found that discipleship was lacking.

His hope was to lead his congregation not only to continue multiplying churches, but also to grow disciples. That would be especially challenging to a population that struggled with a variety of issues, including literacy. “We wanted to model disciple-making disciples and we wanted it to be so simple that ordinary men and women could do it.”

Rickie found that model in Neil’s Life Transformation Groups—a simple method for a group of two to three people committed to making disciples and multiplying Life Transformation Groups.

The opportunity to work in a nearby men’s prison opened and Rickie began to take Life Transformation Groups to the inmates. He faced plenty of challenges, one of the most daunting being the literacy level of the inmates. “In Texas prisons, 75 percent of the inmates never finished high school. We developed models for teaching Bible stories using chronological story-telling methods,” he says. They also found audio Bibles read by Denzel Washington, Cuba Gooding, Jr. and others that they made available to inmates. “We trained 200 inmates at once on how to lead Life Transformation Groups. We now have over 40 groups going in that prison. When they get out, we connect them with a church planter practicing church multiplication.”

The program has been so successful that prison chaplains from other Texas facilities have asked for Life Transformation Groups as a program in their units. Through the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, 150,000 Life Transformation Group cards are being distributed by the Welcome Back Ministry throughout the system, including a unit in the Harris County Jail. “It works,” Rickie says. “It works because these guys have picked up the concept of being missionaries in their own culture. We must transform our models to grow disciples and multiply churches. We’re going to have to unlearn the necessity to have programs to make disciples and instead, we must learn how to use programs to transform lives.”

It is making disciples that make disciples that form the basis of growing and starting churches, Rickie says. As prisoners who are released connect to a church and continue to grow in their faith, they are sent out to multiply both disciples and new churches in the world in which they live, work and play as prisoners and slaves of Christ.



First Baptist Church in Houston has trained over 200 inmates how to lead Life Transformation groups and has over 40 groups meeting in a prison.

Reproducing Disciples

Whether reproducing on a large scale to grow a church of thousands, or reproducing on a smaller scale to plant numerous churches, the key is in reproducing disciples.

SPIRITUAL ACTIVITY DOES NOT PRODUCE SPIRITUAL MATURITY.

A few years into his church plant, John Jackson realized a new challenge: spiritual *activity* does not produce spiritual *maturity*. “We were not producing disciples.” While some people were growing into disciples, it wasn’t because the church was helping them along. “It was happening randomly

through the power of God’s spirit, in spite of us. But our church systems were not creating the environment in which disciples were being

developed. I know that ultimately people and the Holy Spirit are responsible for growth, but it’s my job to produce the environment for growing disciples—and for making that the healthy norm,” he says. That’s where the church is now. With an average weekly attendance of about 1,700 on two campuses, John and church leaders are rearranging the resources around a clear process of discipleship. “I want to lead a church that is passionate about reaching lost people for Jesus Christ and is equally passionate about seeing people grow to spiritual maturity.”

For information on Neil Cole’s Life Transformation Groups, see the book “Cultivating a Life for God: Multiplying Disciples Through Life Transformation Groups” which is available at cmaresources.org and at amazon.com.



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Leadership Network welcomes your response. The primary writer is **Sherry Brown**. Editorial advisors were **Linda Stanley**, Director of Next Generation Leadership Communities for Leadership Network and **Warren Bird**, Director of Research and Intellectual Capital Support for Leadership Network. Contact them via Karen.Andrews@leadnet.org



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** Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the NIV translation.*

ENDNOTES

¹ Dr. John Jackson's book God-Size Your Church: Beyond Growth for Growth's Sake (Abingdon Press) will help church leaders move through the various stages of church life and health.

² For information on Neil Cole's Life Transformation Groups, see the book "Cultivating a Life for God: Multiplying Disciples Through Life Transformation Groups" which is available at cmaresources.org and at amazon.com.

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By Sherri Brown

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