



# FLOW



UNLEASHING  
A RIVER OF MULTIPLICATION  
IN YOUR  
CHURCH, CITY AND WORLD

LARRY WALKEMEYER

**FLOW**  
**Unleashing a River of Multiplication in Your  
Church, City and World**

**by Larry Walkemeyer**

*FLOW: Unleashing a River of Multiplication in Your Church, Your City and World*

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**Credits**

Cover and Interior Design: Karen Pheasant

Editor: Lindy Lowry

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Thank you Todd, Lindy, Terri, Karen, E and team for being Godly gospel witnesses who are led by the Spirit. Your tireless efforts serving the cause of Christ are impacting multitudes. Your spirits of faith, joy and love are contagious. Wisdom flows from your lives—inspiring and instructing us who are honored to partner with you.

The selfless, gospel-centric vision of Exponential to accelerate the multiplication of healthy, reproducing churches is a primary tool God is using to shape and build His kingdom in our generation. I am grateful for your affirmation of the words God's Spirit has placed on my heart. This eBook is a result of your vision, encouragement and assistance. Anyone this eBook touches will have your fingerprints on them.

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# Introduction

Writer Alex Haley famously quipped, “If you see a turtle on a fence post, you know he had some help.” Our church feels like that turtle on a fence post—only God could have put us there. He has taken us on a unique journey from addition to multiplication over the last 20 years.

In our city of Long Beach, California, it seems like we have plenty of churches—approximately 300 identifiable evangelical congregations. That’s great until you do the rest of the math. Long Beach is a city of nearly 500,000. The average church in our city has fewer than 100 attendees on a Sunday. This means that only 30,000 of our residents attend a local Long Beach church. Even if you generously double that figure for those who attend church outside our city, the number rises to a dismal 60,000 or 12 percent. The national scene in the Church in North America is only a few percentage points better.

In our city, we don’t really need a few more big churches; we need a “multiplication” movement. My guess is it’s the same for your city. The North American Church has been majoring in “addition” for the last 40 years but still losing ground. We need to learn multiplication—how to help existing churches become church-planting churches, how to start churches that start churches.

This eBook tells the story of how our church, Light & Life Christian Fellowship—a dying Free Methodist congregation with only 39 parking spaces—came to life and transitioned into a church-planting church, what we call “a RIVER church.” It chronicles some of the key struggles we faced along the way, the underlying issues in my own heart and nuggets of teaching that may prove invaluable to your own journey.

Our desire is that these words will spark faith, minister encouragement, give insight and initiate fresh vision. We pray that they will help a “river of multiplication” spring up in your church as well.

# Chapter 1

## Our Journey to the River

I held up the plaque for the entire church to gaze upon with adoration and pride.

“Together we have achieved an honor to give great thanks to God for!” I crowed to the applauding congregation. “This plaque reads, ‘To Light & Life Christian Fellowship—Largest Church Attendance Growth for our Denomination 1995.’”

More applause. It was a great moment, but I didn’t realize how heavy that plaque would become.

### **Admitted to Triage**

Four years earlier, my wife Deb and I had experienced a surprising transition when the Spirit led us to leave our thriving suburban church to pastor a church in a tough urban neighborhood of Long Beach. There was physical blood in the streets and spiritual blood in the pews of this struggling church. The all-Anglo congregation was losing people to “white flight,” worship wars and spiritual apathy. Ten months after we arrived, the Los Angeles Riots tore our community apart, exacerbating our challenges. We needed spiritual triage or the church was headed for the congregational graveyard.

In triage, CodeRED signals the most urgent cases, as these are the patients best able to survive if treated immediately and correctly. Our church was CodeRED as we simply focused on stopping the bleeding. We calculated our actions primarily to keep the people who were already in the pews.

We quickly discovered, however, that our best efforts at stopping subtraction were inadequate. Exhausted, we slowed the bleeding but couldn’t stop it. Focusing on convincing the “already there’s” to stay was a losing strategy, much like an army assigning too many of their soldiers to the M.A.S.H. unit.

Trying to stay even in church attendance is a losing wager. The deaths, relocations, divorces, job transfers and church hoppers conspire against a church fighting subtraction. The births and newcomers to the neighborhood are never enough to offset natural attrition.

### **Discovering the Beauty of Addition**

We rapidly pivoted from stopping the bleeding to a transfusion of new blood. The idea was to infuse new blood quickly enough to outpace the loss of old blood and usher in a whole new patient. We devoured “church growth” literature three meals a day—and for a midnight snack. We craved the “secret sauce” that would allow us to attract those turned off by the typical church. We stocked our church refrigerator with every new recipe a church growth guru wrote.

But first, we had to clean the fridge of the beloved but moldy items hiding in the back. Some sacred cow meat had spoiled. Out went the hymnal for the overhead, and then the overhead for the slide projector. We declared all worship wars over—our new music was

hip and here to stay. Our 17 church committees, including the committee that existed to make new committees, got cleaned out. We banned the word “committee” and established one leadership council. We discarded the Sunday night service and replaced it with “Care Groups” (small groups that connected our people, created places for newcomers to engage and raised up new leadership). We changed the name of the church, dropping the denominational moniker that often left people with a dazed look in their eyes, and traded neckties for untucked Hawaiian shirts. Sunday school morphed into a “Children’s Ministry” held during the service, reducing people’s Sunday time investment from three hours to 82 minutes.

More importantly, we focused on the spiritual dimensions of seeing the “new recipe” work. We began to prioritize the power of prayer with all-night prayer vigils, prayer walks through the neighborhood and the formation of prayer teams. We preached a new level of commitment to Christ and a fresh faith for the supernatural to occur through ordinary believers. Personal evangelism became the theme song you heard around our church ministries. Every ministry was commissioned and constructed to attract the unchurched. We celebrated and implemented our new slogan—“The People-Loving Place.”

We also embraced a new passion for ethnic diversity. We prayed earnestly, “Lord, we want our church to look like our neighborhood.” A few folks didn’t like the new multi-ethnic ingredient; it was too spicy for them. But the majority relished watching this biblical priority begin to be displayed on our platform and in our congregation.

An amazing transformation occurred. Within months, these new recipes began to attract hungry new “customers.” Our church began to add people at thoroughly unexpected rates. For nearly 40 years, the church had maxed out at 90 attendees on a Sunday. Within two years of making the changes, over 200 people filled the sanctuary. We accommodated the newcomers by knocking down walls, making a bonfire with the orange pews, kissing our small foyer good-bye and relocating our church office to create a larger nursery.

With only 39 parking spots on campus, our primary challenge was not seating but parking. This urban challenge is often a game-stopper. Ironically, I had just read one of the most popular church growth books that listed “having adequate and convenient parking” as an essential.

Our only option to alleviate the parking pinch was to add another service. We would spread the cars out. It felt like a daring move, especially as some self-appointed prophets forecasted it would split the church.

The first three weekends of two services were a cakewalk. Then reality struck, and attendance at the early service dropped. I had my finger on the “panic and abort” button. Miraculously, a couple of new families walked into the early service and actually enjoyed it. A few weeks later, more showed up. Ten months later, we had added another 150 folks to the fold ... and won the “fasting-growing church” plaque.

## **Experiencing the Ugliness of Addition**

The honeymoon of the “successful attractational church” was in full swing. We were the flavor of the month. We had added, were adding and would add more. We were the

poster child of church growth. But have you ever seen a grown-up poster child? They can sometimes get ugly.

At 700, we got ugly. Our space was overloaded. Our volunteers were overworked. Three services were exhausting us. Our innovative Saturday night service launched and then crashed. We needed a new place, a bigger building so we could add a lot more people to our flock. We all prayed the Prayer of Jabez—asking God to “... enlarge our territory” so that we could move the church to a “safer” area with much more parking and seating.

## **The River of Multiplication**

At this juncture in 1998, Deb and I decided to get away for our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary to seek God. The new millennium, century and decade were knocking on the door of our church, and we needed to know what to say when we opened the door. During those days away, the Lord birthed a new vision into our minds. It was a concept we had never heard of, though we did not invent it.

The vision was to stop becoming a “LAKE church” and instead become a “RIVER church.” To us, a LAKE church meant a church where people flow in and stay. A LAKE church seeks to get more and more people around one pastor in one place. A RIVER church was dynamically different. Instead of staying, the people flow in but keep moving downstream. God takes them to other places to minister. The measurement becomes about “flow rate” instead of “volume contained,” about “gallons per minute” instead of “gallons retained.”

Specifically, we felt this meant, “Stay where you are and stop worrying about growing your numbers.” Instead, begin to “send people out to start new churches, thus making room for more people to fill their place.” We sensed the Lord saying, “*Focus on FLOWING instead of GROWING, and see what I will do.*”

This message didn’t come out of nowhere. We had been praying about our next ministry move, both personally and for the church. Recently, I had been troubled listening to a megachurch pastor report on the several million dollars they were spending to deal with an environmental “bird problem” in their relocation effort. I had done the math in our own context. I knew that to relocate in our general area to a facility that could support the next 30 years of growth would cost \$10 to 15 million. In an urban poor congregation like ours, that amount was astronomical.

I began to ponder, “What could be accomplished if, instead of investing those dollars in buildings to ‘add,’ we invested them in people so we could ‘multiply’? What would the Kingdom impact be if we focused on raising up and releasing pastors, leaders and workers to start new churches?”

## **Mission 2010**

As Deb and I continued to pray and discuss, a specific vision started to unfold. We titled the vision “MISSION 2010.” The city of Long Beach is divided into nine City Council Districts, and our church was in District 9. We sensed we were being led to start a new Light & Life in each of the other eight City Council districts by the year 2010.

Soon after, my 16-year-old daughter and I were looking at all the 20:10 verses in the Bible to see if a passage fit our mission. When she read Acts 20:10 (NIV), Lindsey exclaimed, "Papa, that's it!" I read it: "Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. 'Don't be alarmed,' he said. 'He's alive!'"

It seemed just like our church. We had been gathered in our upper room, preaching our sermons, singing our songs. But there were broken people in the streets of Long Beach. We needed to get outside our walls, into the streets, to put our arms around the hurting, bring healing and speak life to this city. While not accurate exegesis, it became a powerful word picture for our church to work from.

Our staff and leadership team had some questions and initial resistance to the new vision. I had built a DNA of "addition," so the idea of "multiplication" was foreign. No one knew how to speak this innovative language. They may have completely rejected the new vision had it not been that everyone was too exhausted from trying to grow the church in such a small facility, yet could not see how to raise the millions to relocate.

We imparted the multiplication vision through sermons, teaching, books and conversations. Eventually most people were convinced. After much prayer and discussion, we formulated, embraced and summarized a new Light & Life mission statement —"Reach, Teach, Mend & Send."

None of us had an inkling of the sacrifice and battles that lay ahead. We just agreed, "Wouldn't it be great if we could impact this city for Christ with eight new churches?" We knew our desired destination and our necessary direction. Beyond that, we were basically clueless.

## **The Trickle**

As we began this journey to multiplication, the first question became, "Who will start the first church plant?" While everyone cheered, no one volunteered to leave the comfort of home. The RIVER was a good idea, but LAKES were much more peaceful and predictable.

Then the Spirit spoke to me and said, "How about you?"

I replied, "I already have a church, but thank you for asking."

"Well, what are you doing on Sunday evenings?" the Lord inquired.

"I'm watching videos and veg'ing after preaching three times on Sunday mornings," I answered smugly.

"How about then?" the Lord countered.

I went to my other boss (my wife), returned to the Lord and said, "Here we are, Lord. Send us".

Again, this conversation had a context. Deb and I had lived for the past seven years in a small rental house in the most affluent and unchurched part of Long Beach, 20 minutes from where our church was located. Many evenings we had walked our local streets

praying for City Council District 3. Invitations to our neighbors to attend church mostly went unheeded due to the physical and social distance. Starting a church in our part of town seemed like the answer to many of our prayers.

With a core team of 25—some from our main church Light & Life North (“North” being added as a necessary suffix in the new vision) and some from the District 3 neighborhood—we launched Light & Life Belmont Shore. In a community center, with floors invariably sticky from dances the night before, we began preaching the gospel. With no space for children’s ministry, our kids met in tents on the patio in “Camp Belmont.”

The Lord blessed our effort and within 10 months, we were nearing 100 in attendance. Then we hit a plateau. For four months we leveled off. The leaders of the new church felt that to break through the inertia we needed to move the service time to Sunday morning. I agreed to “shuttle” down to preach at Belmont between our Sunday morning services at Light & Life North. It worked, and we grew another 50 people.

The RIVER was trickling. Leaders were relearning. New DNA was developing. As the lead pastor, I was demonstrating that we were serious about the idea of multiplication. Something contagious was making its way into the LAKE water of Light & Life.

### **The Price of a River**

Within a few months of starting Light & Life Belmont, one of my staff came to me and announced a “call” to District 8. This ministry couple was dynamic leaders at the mother church, Light & Life North. They were certain to be able to rally more than 10 percent of our church to follow them.

Up to this point, planting had only cost us a little money and sharing of my time. Now the RIVER was going to require staff, leaders, tithers and monthly financial support from the mother church. As costly as this was, we were determined to be obedient and exercise faith. So with a deep breath, we blessed them and launched Light & Life Bixby Knolls in District 8.

Meanwhile, I had a personal challenge, I was in love with the mother church *and* the new baby daughter at Light & Life Belmont. Both were in need of more of my attention. I made one of the most difficult ministry decisions of my life when I handed our young daughter over to one of our staff. Looking back, I was discovering in multiple ways the thrill and sting of being a RIVER.

A short time later, another brilliant young staff member announced to me he felt led to plant in Philadelphia. I asked him which City Council District that was. He laughed and started gathering a handful of our best young leaders. I went into my prayer closet and to our leadership team. We asked God, “If this vision of MISSION 2010 is from you, how focused should we be? Should we engage with other open doors or stay laser-focused for the sake of the mission?” The answer seemed to be, “Prioritize the mission but respond to the opportunities I present.” Today our largest and most vital church plant is Storehouse Church in Philadelphia.

### **The River Grows & Bends**

The RIVER was flowing. Over the next several years, we nurtured and repeated this pattern of gathering, empowering and releasing. The relational and financial sacrifice was frequently excruciating. We often quoted John 16:21 (NIV): “A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.”

The size of Light & Life North, the mother church, ebbed and flowed as people, resources and energy were gathered from it and released. Church planters would rise up from within or come from outside to join our staff with the plan of planting within a year. Despite our investment in giving away tithers, every year we brought in more income than the previous year. We had more and more justification to boldly proclaim, “You can’t out-give God!”

Perhaps the most surprising and tragic lesson in this journey of exhilaration and exhaustion was, “Some babies die.” We expected all of our daughter churches to live and thrive. But for every four we birthed, one would die. The sorrow was demotivating. We were tempted to pull back. But the vision, conviction and victories were so strong we would rally and push forward.

Along the way, God brought us into new phases as a church. We realized about five years into our RIVER vision that while we were emphasizing reaching our city, we were neglecting our world. We became convicted our RIVER vision of multiplication was also to have a global component. So we partnered with communities in Ethiopia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Mexico to launch church planting efforts.

The RIVER was becoming global.

Nine years into our vision, we recognized we were planting churches in our city and world but neglecting the tangible needs of our own neighborhood. We began a push to inject more “missional DNA” into our “multiplication DNA” and had a revelation of how vitally linked these two were. Our Community Center and Community Gardens developed as a result. The Community Center provides programs and services that break the cycle of poverty and empower people in holistic ways. Our Community Gardens produce fresh, organic vegetables and teach people how to sustain their lives through healthier growing options.

You may be asking, “What happened by 2010 when MISSION 2010 was to have been accomplished?” The answer is simple—we failed. We reached a high point of having Light & Life churches in only six of the nine City Council Districts. The full picture, however, was quite different. While we had set out to plant eight churches by 2010, we had actually planted 12 churches, and the RIVER was flowing beyond our expectations.

Light & Life North still only has a measly 39 parking spaces. We will never become the megachurch we once dreamed of. Our church “growth” has become secondary to our church “flow.” To date, Light & Life has planted or replanted 19 churches nationally. In addition, dozens of international churches have been started and are embracing the RIVER DNA.

Last Easter Sunday, over 5,500 people gathered in U.S. churches started by the church with only 39 parking spaces.



A few years ago, Light & Life received another plaque. This one wasn't from our denomination or *Outreach Magazine*. It was from the mayor of Long Beach, thanking us for the transformational impact we have had upon our city. I have those two plaques in my office to remind me that addition is good, but multiplication is transformational.

## Chapter 2

# Dams on the River: Multiplication Tensions

Moses used his staff to bring a river from a rock. Today, God is seeking to use His Word through His leaders to start rivers from Christ, the Living Rock. But certain forces, concerns, questions and tensions conspire to keep the river in the rock.

Rivers can be dammed to create lakes. Streams can be obstructed to create pools. Trickles can be blocked to become puddles. *Churches of all sizes can prioritize addition so highly that they become blind to the greater vision of multiplication.*

Many churches are in survival mode, focusing their attention on the battle against subtraction. Others are consumed in the scorekeeping of addition, tallying up the total number of breathing creatures who touch their property on a weekend. According to the 2009 report “The State of Church Planting in the United States,” fewer than 4 percent of churches in America are giving any attention to the river of multiplication.

There are real and justifiable reasons for this behavior. Tensions exist between prioritizing addition and multiplication. Unless these pressures are identified and wisely confronted, they can derail any church’s quest to move from addition to multiplication.

In elementary school, I was the addition whiz kid. Put me at the chalkboard against anyone, except Jackie Williams, and I would take my team to glory. Consequently, everyone figured I would ace multiplication. They were wrong. Addition was straightforward. Multiplication was more involved, complicated by the need to memorize tables. I wanted to stay in the glory days of addition, but to conquer the math world, I would have to move up to multiplication. I had a choice of stubbornly clinging to addition and rejecting multiplication or using addition to learn the new language of multiplication. Churches today face the same choice.

At Light & Life, we faced many competing tensions that tried to trap us in addition. By sharing several of the pressures we faced along our journey, I hope to normalize and neutralize some of these dissuading tensions. If not handled with faith and conviction, each of these potential dams is powerful enough to stop the river’s flow.

### **Tension #1: Kingdom Math**

*Addition (grow attendance) vs. Multiplication (start new places of growth)*

As we introduced the idea of giving away staff, leaders and workers to multiply churches, we experienced an immediate push back when people realized this idea might hinder our quest of “growing our attendance.” We were winning awards for addition; what would we win for multiplication? I had preached “church addition” for almost a decade, and suddenly I had switched sermons.

Addition is adept at bringing glory to us; multiplication requires humility lived out. Multiplication demonstrates an, “it’s not about us” dimension to ministry. It builds a different scoreboard that lights up when new leaders are sent out instead of when new consumers come in. The multiplication scoreboard is exponentially bigger because it is

recording “Kingdom points” instead of “local church points.” Ultimately, the glory of the local church gets lost in the glory of the Kingdom.

Only a growing conviction that the Kingdom matters more than our lone church helped us through this difficult time of resistance. We believed that “Kingdom” math was more important than “church world” math. If we were to resurrect into a RIVER church, our message of “dying to self” had to extend to “dying to church glory.”

## **Tension #2: Build It and They Will Come**

*Facility Acquisition (expansion, remodeling, relocation) vs. Facility Sacrifice*

Some voices in our church were anxious to relocate to a better part of the city; others wanted a space for our kids that didn’t smell musty. Others just wanted spotlights that weren’t residential track lighting. “Addition” could make these things happen, but “multiplication” would threaten that plan. We knew that really embracing this RIVER vision would delay facility improvements, leaving us with old, worn carpets and overworked air conditioning. The dollars slated for these items would be spent on church planting and also given away in the form of tithers leaving to pioneer new churches. Pursuing multiplication meant facility sacrifice, literally denying some comfort to us to launch something new for God.

If we did this, one of our real concerns was the economic status of people we would be able to attract to our church if we didn’t improve the aesthetics of our building. The urban poor might not be bothered, but the middle-class folks in our area were used to “higher quality” than we could offer. We needed these upwardly mobile members to help fund our multiplication vision. As we prayed, our staff felt the Spirit saying, “Embrace my priorities and I will provide.” Fourteen years later, we can testify this is true. We are in the same building; however, we have new carpet and stage lights. Admittedly, the air conditioning still needs help.

## **Tension #3: The Almighty Dollar**

*Financial Security vs. Financial Sacrifice*

In my experience, Christians love spiritual priorities until they are translated into dollar signs. A preprogrammed worldly attitude resists investing generously into something largely intangible, yet spiritual.

Financial investment in church planting can feel like buying a lifeboat for people on some impoverished island. It’s nice, maybe even important, but they’ve lived without it so far and besides, you may never see it. It’s a big chunk of change to send off to buy something that won’t affect you.

As we moved from addition to multiplication, we faced the expected interrogation. Business people on our board wanted to know, “What’s our ROI going to be?” Bankers and accountants queried, “How will this impact our savings, our investments, our contingency funds?” Staff members gingerly asked, “How will this impact the amount I have to spend on *my* ministry?” Some other money-conscious people argued, “We don’t have the margin we need yet to invest in church planting. When we get ‘X’ number of dollars in savings, then I will vote for this!”

The reality is, God is bigger than the “X.” God is not limited to our savings account. Jesus taught us to lay up our treasures above, not on earth. He wasn’t denigrating savings accounts but establishing priorities. Our security is not in a bigger number of dollars but in the ability of God and His promises to sustain those who follow His Kingdom priorities. We can trust “the Almighty” or “the Dollar,” but not both.

It is easy for “wisdom” and “faith” to seem competitive. A worldly kind of wisdom protects the bottom line, yet hinders Kingdom expansion. James warns us of a “wisdom” birthed from “selfish ambition” but reminds us of another kind of wisdom that bears good fruit because it comes from above (James 3:13-17). Our team struggled at first but eventually embraced the wisdom born of faith.

God has proven to us that His different kind of math works. I remember one year we had given away a large group of tithers to a church plant, resulting in the mother church’s annual income being \$30,000 in the red. To my own embarrassment and for the sake of honest confession, I was standing in the water baptizing people while literally thinking, *I wonder how much they can give*. This one was unemployed; this one was too young; this one worked at McDonalds; this one was homeless. The Lord spanked me with a rebuke—“Larry, each one is invaluable to me. You take care of the poor, and I will take care of you.” I listened. We ended that year \$30,000 in the black with no one to thank but God.

#### **Tension #4: A Recliner and a Remote**

##### *Attractional vs. Activational*

I remember the day one of our key givers confronted me in the parking lot about the quality of her son’s new children’s ministry teacher: “If you hadn’t sent Mrs. Jones out with that last church plant, we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now! I expect the best for Bobby and he’s not getting it now!” My assurances of training the new teacher into excellence did little to assuage her anger.

The conversation was a prime example of a barrier I failed to consider as we moved into multiplication: the challenge of leading believers away from the ministry forms that tend to satisfy their consumerist taste buds. **Attractional** priorities in church ministry look for activities and quality that reinforce attachment to the local church. **Activational** priorities challenge believers to do what is difficult—to eschew growing too attached to the amenities of the mother church and instead live actively and sacrificially for the sake of the mission.

We started emphasizing at our membership classes that we were an unusual church on a unique mission that required everyone to be active and sacrificial. We explained that the “comfortable” churches were down the street. If you wanted a church that came with “a recliner and a remote,” you would need to look elsewhere. Our rate of new members declined while our quality of members improved.

During World War II, many church bells stopped ringing because they were taken down and melted into metal to be used for the war effort. The bells that used to ring once a week to attract people to church were now being used daily to take the war to the enemy. Our churches can major in attraction or activation, and only the latter will win the war.

## **Tension #5: Empty Seats**

### *Filling Our Church vs. Starting a New Church*

The same year we introduced the RIVER church vision, we built out our balcony, which since 1976 had existed as an empty, unusable space. A donor gave money to build stairs and support structures to make the balcony inhabitable. When finished, it increased our capacity by a whopping 230 seats but added nothing to our 39 parking spaces. The lines of sight in the balcony were dismal, but we were excited to start filling it up.

This blessing gave rise to one of our big challenges to multiplication. A few vocal folks began to say, “Let’s fill up the balcony before we do this church planting thing. Why start something new if what we’ve got is not full?” The point was well taken—and may have stuck had we more parking.

Surprisingly, this argument helped us in the long run. I addressed the question head on and moved the conversation from situational to principle. I explained, “Multiplication is not a matter of how much space you have in the building, but about the needs of the harvest and the most effective way to reach the lost. Planting new churches has been unequivocally proven to be the most successful means of reaching the lost. This is what matters to God and, therefore, what has to matter to us, whether our church is empty or full.”

## **Tension #6: The Hallmark Slogan**

### *Staffing Mother Church vs. Staffing Plants*

Karin was a firecracker. She could draw on her experience of headlining the comedy club to make you laugh or her profoundly deep spiritual insight to make you cry. Everyone loved Karin. “Pastor of Assimilation” could not have been a better fit for her. Then the RIVER bug bit Karin. She and her gifted husband, Jim, felt called to plant a new church. I started back-pedaling: Yes, I believed in the vision, but we needed to pace ourselves, ease into it, take care of “mom” along the way. We could find other people to plant. *Just don’t take Karin.*

Then the principle of Deuteronomy 15:18 got under my skin: “Do not consider it a hardship to set your servant free ... And the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do.” This verse—and a little slogan from Hallmark Cards—summarized how God wanted to change my attitude.

When C.E. Goodman, a Hallmark executive, jotted down the words, “When you care enough to send the very best” on a 3x5 card in 1944, he hoped to capture the essence of Hallmark Cards. It was also the essence of the heart of God as demonstrated in Christ. This concept captured the heart God was trying to form in me on our journey from addition to multiplication. We would send Karin.

This pivotal decision began to create a culture of expectation that every pastor would be released and supported if called to planting. We viewed each pastoral hire as a potential church planter. Stability and longevity were no longer the goals we strove for on our pastoral team, as obedience to the call mattered more than disruption and

inconvenience. Recruiting and training new staff became a yearly reality thanks to our multiplication vision.

### **Tension #7: A Deep Bench**

#### *Leadership Retention vs. Leadership Release*

Closely related to the tension of staff release is the challenge of leadership release. The key to a winning church is to get excellent volunteer leaders and then hang onto them as long as you can. But what happens when you are sending out leaders nearly as quickly as you're raising them up?

In 2014, Germany won the World Cup. Most spectators agreed that the most obvious piece of German brilliance was the depth of the team. It ran 23 men deep. There was no one star. No single hero. The team was brilliant top to bottom.

This is the kind of church the Spirit is seeking to build, one in which there is no celebrity but everyone contributes. When a player is traded to a new team or falls on the field, another is ready to take their place. The Church of Jesus has been hobbled by an overemphasis on a few gifted leaders. While we were busy promoting the gifted ones, we neglected to build a deeper bench.

At first glance, giving away leaders in the RIVER model seems antithetical to building a deep bench. However, the opposite has proved true for us. The multiplication culture forces everyone either up or out. Saints who would have stagnated as observers in the stands are noticed and urged onto the playing field. Every time a new crew heads out to plant, new openings are created that call people up to levels of play they never imagined. True, the bench never stays deep very long, but there's never a doubt it will fill back up quickly. With a culture that continually creates space for new leaders, they tend to multiply quickly, and releasing them is less scary.

### **Tension #8: The Marching Parade**

#### *Relational Stability vs. Relational Transience*

Recently, a pastor friend was commenting on the new mobility in society and how it impacts church ministry. He stated, "I feel like I am preaching to a parade." Parades make for great viewing but bad living. Stable communities grow strong. The small town in Kansas where I grew up has four or five generations of the same family living within five miles of each other. Relationships have history, memories and stories binding them together.

Healthy churches foster authentic relationships that reach beneath the superficiality of modern-day living. LAKES can get really deep; RIVERS not so much. So what happens when the church is built around a priority of flowing instead of staying?

Recently, we started a new church that disrupted an entire social network in our church when a few families in the network stayed and the remainder went with the plant. These dear believers had sat together in church for years. But if you asked them how this has impacted their friendships, they would tell you, "Pastor, we are closer than ever. Our relationship is grounded in Christ, not in the church we attend. We have become cheerleaders for each other's churches."

Because we generally plant churches within 30 minutes of the mother church, people usually retain their circle of friends. Most gain new friends without sacrificing old ones. Some of our small groups have people from as many as four different Light & Life churches attending. While friendships centered in church life are good, friendships centered in Christ Himself are even better—that foundation never changes.

You'll probably agree that it is difficult to develop friendships with those marching past you. However, if you join the parade, you can forge deep relationships with those you are marching beside. Your shared mission creates an atmosphere of adventure and risk, bonding church members together in a manner similar to soldiers who share foxholes in battle.

### **Tension #9: The Messy Room**

#### *Systems Optimized vs. Systems Disbursed*

Creating a culture of multiplication demands a tolerance for some messiness. Our oldest daughter is creative, a relator, lover and adventurer. She attended Azusa Pacific University and blessed so many people they voted her Homecoming Queen and Senior Chapel Speaker. But she's messy. It used to drive her mother and me crazy. A mentor finally helped me realize I had to "major in the majors and minor in the minors." Releasing my expectations for "A-level organization was liberating both for me and our daughter.

Every church has multiple systems operating simultaneously—outreach, discipleship, worship, financial, assimilation, youth, children, ushers, greeters, communication, hospitality, maintenance, small groups, etc. Designing and refining these systems to work efficiently and smoothly is an ongoing and daunting task. But when you add the disruption of sending out staff, leaders and workers, your systems can end up looking like my daughter's room. Just when you get a ministry or system working well, some key leaders march out the door on a mission for Jesus, and it gets messy again. This can be quite tiring.

I have discovered that I must slide my tolerance marker away from "systems optimized" to "systems distributed." It seems more advantageous for the Kingdom to have B-quality systems replicated in multiple places than to keep everyone in one place working to achieve A-quality systems. We found as we birthed new churches that they often started out with the systems we used at the mother church but then improved upon them. They then taught us approaches that helped us become more effective.

Occasionally, one of our leaders or staff approaches me and says, "Pastor, we have so much we need to improve on around here. I think we need to slow down until we get things running well." My answer is, "Friend, if we have figured out how to get people in the gospel car that's running 60 miles per hour, I think it's more important to build another one of those than figure out how to get the one we have to go 100 miles per hour."

Admittedly, I am not a good systems guy. I have often failed to prioritize strategy and systems highly enough. I have, however, observed too many churches develop big notebooks with protocols and strategies only to watch the pages yellow on some forgotten shelf.

Efficiency in the details must always serve effectiveness in the mission. Church consultants would probably chide us for the disarray of our systems but applaud us for our impact. Tom Peters, author of several business management classics, captures my emphasis here in his book, *Leadership*: "Instead of looking for things that have gone wrong in your organization and trying to fix them ... look for things that went right and try to build on them."

### **Tension #10: The Young Mother** *Mother's Maturity vs. Baby's Birth*

My wife, Deb, was 26 years old when our first child was born. Twenty-six is about the average age of first-time mothers now, but when Deb gave birth, the average was 21. That number continues to inch upward in our culture today. What is the optimal age for a woman to give birth? Of course, the answer depends on a variety of factors.

I've had couples tell me, "We are planning on having kids but we are going to wait until we can afford it." I counter by asking, "How will you know when you're there? Do you think Junior will know how much money you have in the bank?"

How mature, healthy and financially secure does a church need to be before they give birth? These are questions that must be addressed prayerfully and thoughtfully, but also boldly. Certainly, if a mother has gangrene it's not the time to get pregnant. I have confronted churches whose desire to reproduce would have only spread their disease.

On the other hand, most churches are waiting too long to give birth. They fail to see that reproduction can be a means to maturity. There is nothing like becoming a parent to make you ready to be a parent. The most effective personal evangelists are not those who are fully trained and matured but those who are newly saved. The same is true for multiplication. The younger and fresher a church, the more apt it is to start another church. As churches age, they tend to become more adverse to the adventures of multiplication. (Sorry if I've just stepped on some toes.)

At times, I felt Light & Life needed to slow down on multiplication so we could deepen ourselves spiritually. Each time I followed that impulse, it led me to some ambiguous means of trying to define maturity. I am certainly an advocate of "spiritual disciplines," having studied them carefully as a corrective to my Type A personality. But as I researched Jesus and His multiplication mission, I have come to the firm conclusion that disciples were formed on the job, not in the classroom. Jesus shaped them as they traveled on the mission. They had days or nights "away" from ministry, but not entire seasons.

Likewise, spiritual maturity develops most rapidly when living on the bold edge of mission. Launching new churches keeps us frequenting our prayer closets. The setbacks are humbling and drive us to find satisfaction in Christ and not in "success." The advances are also humbling, causing us to admit Christ made up for our weakness and immaturity.

Our adult daughters often waterski and snow ski with us. Their passions and interests inform us and keep us young. Their questions and stories mature us. We are quite



thankful we didn't wait until we were 40 to bring them into our lives. Usually there is never a better time than "now" to give birth to a new church.

### **Tension #11: Coasting**

#### *Senior Leader Coasting vs. Senior Leader Climbing*

This tension is intensely personal for me as the lead pastor of Light & Life. I wish I could say, "The older I get, the bolder I get." That's just not always true. Instead, as I age, I face a growing temptation to coast, kick back, play it safe and risk less. While that may be wise financial planning for 55 year olds, it's not smart in Kingdom living. The temptation to "coast" is present regardless of age. We want to pursue ministry models that generate better results with less energy. I've met pastors who are always looking to "coast."

We have a vacation home in Silver Star Ski Resort. Four thousand feet below and 13 miles away is the Canadian town of Vernon, British Columbia. One adventurous day, I decided to would ride my very ordinary mountain bike from Vernon to our house. *I'm in shape*, I thought, *this will be fun*. I started the climb up the mountain, and the trip quickly became brutal. Thankfully, I found occasional flat or slight downhill spots where I could coast for a moment. I kept thinking, *I don't have to be doing this. I could turn around anytime I want and simply coast back into town*.

After three-and-a-half hours of painful pedaling, I arrived at the top near our home. The last quarter mile was a downhill coast into the ski village. As I coasted that short stretch home, I raised my hands in the air and prayed, *God, this is the life and ministry I want. I'm not looking to build the type of church that will allow me to coast. I want to choose to climb, to ascend. Give me momentary breathers, but don't let me turn around and coast! There's time for that in heaven!*

The temptation to coast is always present for multiplication leaders. *We have planted enough. Sent out enough. Given enough. Let's take life easy for a season. Let's add instead of multiply. Let's coast*. Our experience has been that as soon as we are recovering from our last plant and thinking of kicking our feet up for a spell, God opens another door inviting us to multiply. Someone recently said to me, "Aren't we ever going to get past this church planting phase?" I, perhaps too quickly, retorted, "I hope not!"

Author and speaker John Maxwell has a saying: "Speed of the leader, speed of the team." As it relates to church reproduction, the internal tension in each pastor's heart has external results in the priorities and production of the team.

### **Tension #12: My Turf**

#### *Proximity Protection vs. Proximity Evangelism*

The young pastor was nearing tears as he described how his megachurch pastor had refused to bless his new church plant. The cause of rejection—the plant site was less than 30 minutes away from the megachurch. His pastor had discouragingly discussed "market saturation," "brand purity," "sheep stealing" and "divided loyalties." In an effort to comfort my young friend, I sought to balance my love for that megachurch pastor with my anger for such unfounded territorialism.

Proximity is one of the real tensions that will arise for a church that multiplies by sending out pastors, leaders and workers. *How close is too close? Won't it become a competition to reach the same people if we let them plant too close? Shouldn't we only plant where there is not another Light & Life nearby? What if people like the new pastor and church more than they like the mother church and start leaving?*

The answers to these questions are contingent on the size of the ministry area and the model of church planting you are employing. If you live in a town like Mayberry, N.C., Andy Griffith's fictional community of 1,200, and plan on building a megachurch there, then "no," starting three more of your brand of churches may not bear the maximum fruit. The fact is, however, there aren't many Mayberrys around these days, and most multiplication models are not looking to build megachurches.

The answer to these questions depends even more fundamentally on the focus of your "fishing pool.". At Light & Life, we actively help our church planters recruit "launch team members" from our church. I tell them, "No one is off limits for recruiting. Just let me know who is going so we can fill the holes." *But* once they have their "launch team," their "fishing pool" is the unchurched, not our church. Jesus said, "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field" (Matthew 9:38, NIV).

Most American harvest fields are urban areas with density numbers that can support many churches within walking distance of one another. With 10,000 people per square mile in our city, we could start 10 churches that average 300 in attendance and still only reach 30 percent of the population within walking distance.

Territorialism is most frequently driven by ego, fear and competition for Christians. If our focus is on those without Christ instead of those without our brand, then it's difficult to start churches too close together. We have started seven churches within 10-minute drives from the mother church, and each is reaching unique groups of lost people.

### **Tension #13: Backyard First**

#### *Missional Focus vs. Multiplication Focus*

My wife is the one who first influenced me toward the "missional church." Her doctoral work at Fuller Seminary included a reading list that encompassed all the seminal works on "missional church." Every new read for her became, in her opinion, a "must-read" for me. Soon I discovered a tension arose in our discussion. Deb wondered aloud, "Don't we need to focus on the needs of the neighborhood where God has placed us *before* we address the need for churches in other neighborhoods?" I pushed back, "I agree with you if you change the word 'before' to 'as.' If we wait to plant until we meet enough needs in our backyard, we will be on hold forever." She agreed, but not everyone did.

The missional nature of the Church is undeniable. We are saved to serve, to demonstrate the tangible Kingdom, to be salt and light where God has placed us. However, when that becomes an argument against the multiplication of churches, we have overthrown our point. Do we care for the poor *or* evangelize the lost? The answer is "Yes." *As soon as missional and multiplication become competitive, we have misunderstood the nature of both.*

Along the route of multiplication, we became convicted that our missional DNA was not as strong as God intended it to be. We had been somewhat blind to the blood in our own

backyard. The answer, however, was not to shut down multiplication but to prioritize the missional nature of the churches we started. So our mother church began to model missional service. Community engagement, service projects, partnerships with community organizations, our Light & Life Community Center, our Community Gardens and much more came to life in our efforts to serve.

Our new church plants began to arise out of acts of service to their respective neighborhoods. Missional was serving multiplication. We are still in the process of deepening missional DNA in our church culture, but it is now a non-negotiable. We have found that the more churches we plant, the wider this missional DNA can spread.

### **Tension #14: The Natives Haven't Heard**

#### *Missions Focus vs. Multiplication Focus*

In the 1970s, environmental groups launched the phrase “Think global, act local” to push forward environmental activism. At that point, the Church had a mindset of “Pray global, act local,” generally limiting global actions to raising money for missionaries in far away places. Then the world became, as journalist Thomas Friedman labeled it, “flat.” With the ease of global communication and travel, the people who seemed so distant were now our neighbors. NorthWood Church Founder and Pastor Bob Roberts was among the first to write effectively on the power of “glocal” churches.

Nevertheless, for those raised on old-time “missions conventions” and the missionary slideshow, the idea of investing in multiplication seemed competitive to the “foreign mission field.” People asked us, “Why should we start new churches to tell people about Jesus when there are already numerous ways for Americans to hear the gospel? Most have heard it multiple times. Instead, we need to focus on taking the gospel to those who have never heard it for the first time!”

We found the answer to this tension in Acts 1:8 (NIV): “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” There is no escaping the responsibility to take the gospel to unreached and under-reached people. Yet the order of priority is to start in Jerusalem. As new Spirit-empowered churches start in our own Jerusalem, they will set their sights on the “ends of the earth.” Each new church has the potential and call to become a mission-sending station.

During our phase of concentrating on “church growth,” Light & Life made a dismal impact in world missions. Our navel-gazing focus on “addition” kept our eyes close to home. As we began to plant churches and give away generously, it also impacted how we prioritized missions. Generosity through multiplication inspired generosity in missions. We began to explore how our local church planting could translate into global church planting. Multiplication did not reduce missions; it released missions to an unprecedented level. We now have four international church planting partnerships.

### **Tension #15: The Bigger Lake or Wider River**

#### *New Campus (multisite) vs. New Plant (multiplication)*

We never thought we would do it. We seemed destined to permanently reside in the church with 39 parking spaces. Then the unforeseen occurred—a church seven minutes

away from us went bankrupt. Their property went into foreclosure and was on its way to becoming apartments. This church's neighborhood was distinct from ours and in desperate need. Finding a space in our built-out urban city where you can gather 200 people for church is like finding gold. Consequently, with our denomination's support, we purchased the property for a multisite campus. It had a whopping 23 parking spaces and 350 seats.

As we prepared to go multisite, we asked ourselves, "What will this do to church planting? How will this impact the RIVER church model? Are we becoming a bigger LAKE?" I immediately reassured our church: "We are not stopping the RIVER; we are widening it!" We allocated the 70-seat chapel on the new property as space to be used for gathering "launch teams" and holding "pre-launch worship services." Even before we held the official grand opening of the new campus, we had launched another church plant, primarily from those who had already gathered at the new campus.

The tension between multisite and multiplication depends on the multisite model you're implementing and your end game. Here's how I see it. If multisite is simply an "overflow room" to further deploy the gifts of the lead pastor, then it is an "addition" model (a bigger LAKE). If, however, multisite is a means to leverage the strengths of a mother church in a new location with a goal of raising up a new pastoral leader and starting a new campus or church plant itself, then it is a multiplication model (a wider RIVER).

We've observed that multisite can easily become a barrier to multiplication, so we are walking this path alert to that danger. We have already been cautioned by our own limited experience. Our new campus has consumed much more time, energy, leadership and money than any of our church plants by far. But we continue to believe this investment will pay off, as the new campus becomes an incubator allowing us to birth new churches more quickly and with less momentum lost.

### **Cutting the Cords**

Light & Life loves to throw festivals for our underprivileged neighbors. One of my favorite inflatable games at these festivals requires that you put on a harness and run as far as you can while a bungee cord works to pull you back. When you stop running, you get snapped back to the start. The teenage guys especially enjoy this one because whoever runs the farthest gets the bragging rights. Sometimes I find myself watching them and secretly wanting to sneak in and cut the cord just when he has stretched it as far as they can go.

When I think of the "tensions" holding churches back from multiplication, I visualize this game. In the church world, whoever stretches their LAKE church the furthest gets the bragging rights, but I believe that RIVER churches extend to make the greatest impact for the Kingdom. There will always be various cords hindering our stretch from addition to multiplication, but the good news is that the Holy Spirit has a big pair of scissors and He's happy to use them if we let Him.

## Chapter 3

# My Journey to the River: The Inside Story

I have an internal problem that has threatened my Kingdom impact on many occasions. My challenge? I want to be a hero.

It may have started as a young boy when my daddy was dying of cancer. I wanted to come to the rescue, to save the day, to stop my mom's tears. It may have arisen later when our family consisted of my mom, my older sister and me. I was "the man of the house" but still a boy in my heart.

Whatever generated this heroic quest, it was the type of desire that more frequently led to pride instead of nobility. I wanted to be applauded and lauded as the rescuer.

As I progressed in ministry, I continued to look for opportunities to advance the scope of my heroic adventures. I found it in the church growth movement. I do not fault the movement. Its motives—to reach more of the lost—were noble even when some leaders' methods were not. I recall a pastor in our area whose "\$10,000 giveaway" at Easter drew hundreds, but his somewhat personality-based congregation folded not long afterward. I am ashamed to admit I thought about how we could do the same thing. If our church grew, I would be a hero. The bigger it grew, the bigger the hero I would be.

A serendipitous thing happened on my journey—I fell deeply in love with a group of people called Light & Life in a building that only had 39 parking spaces. I could be their hero, at least until we outgrew our small church building. I lived with this looming internal battle on the horizon.

When the day of battle arrived, I had options. A few different churches (with more than 1,000 parking spaces) wanted me to lead them. Or I could lead Light & Life into a perilous relocation project that would allow us to add a few more thousand to the flock.

I was also considering another more unusual option, one that would require me to place my hero hat on the altar. In this scenario, I would transition from "leader" to "launcher." I could begin to employ my leadership gifts and my love for Light & Life in an effort to launch new churches. Our church might not grow larger, but hopefully the Kingdom would.

My inner battle wasn't a few quick shots of Angry Birds but more like Joshua's siege of Jericho. I was open to taking Jericho, knowing it could be a key to expanding God's territory. However, huge walls in my heart kept me from making the move. Like Joshua, I walked around praying about those walls, feeling a bit foolish, and nothing seemed to be changing. Then, these walls gradually began to fall down. I wasn't smart enough or strong enough to push them down; it was God's doing. Unexpectedly, a whole new vision lay before me.

Three big walls needed to come down for me to move forward. My thinking needed to be adjusted toward truth in each of these three areas.

## The “Skewed Scoreboard” Wall

Imagine watching an NBA basketball game, but unbeknownst to you, the NBA has drastically changed the rules. Now, in addition to field goals being worth two or three points, every assist (a pass that empowers someone else to score) is worth five points. The game would be totally altered. The celebrity shooters would no longer dominate teams, but the effective passers would be of even greater value. High scorers could be those who never even made a shot. Team play would rise to a whole new level, with scores potentially surpassing 250 points.

I believe God scores the assists. He’s searching for “passers” even more than “shooters.” He’s looking for leaders who are more concerned about who they can launch than how many they can lead. For too long, the scoreboard has been skewed and leaders like myself haven’t played up to our Kingdom potential. The scoreboard, however, is shifting from addition to multiplication.

In my own journey, it has been a radical shift to transition my internal scoreboard from “size” to “impact.” This shift is ongoing because my ego has a tendency toward perpetual resurrection. My struggle is exacerbated by the modern church culture. For decades, the Christian scoreboard has tallied attendance as the criteria for “Most Valuable Player” in the wide world of church. Scant attention has been given to how those numbers arrived, or what those numbers did upon arrival. It was sufficient that they were present in the building.

Many pastors have been left behind when they looked at the Christian scoreboard. With over 80 percent of churches in America plateaued or declining in attendance, the battle is not church growth or church multiplication; it’s church survival. It is a battle against subtraction rather than for addition. Some pastors (maybe you?) refuse to even look at the scoreboard due to the depressing nature of their score. They seem to never make a shot.

Other pastors are shooting, feeling the thrill of watching two points added to the scoreboard. They are watching the leading scorers—those star players whose statistics are steadily rising. They are watching their videos, studying their moves and listening to their advice about how to make more baskets. For them, (or is this you?), addition is king of the game.

But more and more pastors want to change the game, adjust the rules, and overhaul the scoreboard. They want to start scoring “assists,” learning how to move to multiplication by empowering others to score. They realize the Church in America is losing the game because we are playing addition instead of multiplication.

For years, I have quoted Jesus to reassure myself that my local church was going to grow: “I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18, KJV). Someone put a pin in my balloon, however, when they pointed out that this is a promise to the universal Church (big “C”), not my local church. Jesus is far more concerned about the growth of the global Church than He is with whether you hit 10 percent attendance growth this year.

When we start focusing on how we can “assist” the global Church to grow this year, we have crossed over to true Kingdom thinking. We care about scoring points by helping other churches start and expand.

Acts 2:47 (NIV) says, “... and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” That’s good! But remember that the believers had a tendency to want to stay in the comfort of the Jerusalem church. So the Lord allowed persecution to come to the church. Six chapters later, Acts 8:1 (NIV) says, “... On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” That’s bad! But then three verses later, Acts 8:4 (NIV) says, “Those who had been scattered preached the Word wherever they went.” That’s great! When addition gave way to multiplication, the movement began to spread.

Every pastor has to break down the scoreboard wall that has been erected. If we settle for the “good” of addition, we will miss the “great” of multiplication. We will prioritize our reputation, our new buildings, our church’s depth, our church savings account, our user friendliness, our squeaky clean systems and our committed staff *over* the harvest.

We must overhaul the scoreboard to tally actual kingdom impact; to show how much community transformation is happening; to understand how much transmission of the gospel is occurring; to record how many workers are actually being sent into the harvest. Even if the Christian media fails to recalibrate their scoreboard, we must ask for this renovation in our own hearts. To move the Kingdom forward, this wall must fall down. .

### **The “Play It Safe Wall”**

When I think about the concept of a “play it safe” wall, the Berlin Wall immediately comes to mind. The wall was built to protect the Soviet people from the incursion of the Western world. West Berliners could still enter East Berlin, but East Berliners who tried to go west were shot—136 people met this fate. One unintended result of the wall was that West Berliners would dump their garbage over it onto the Soviet Union side. As they said, “It wasn’t as if we were going to be made to fetch it back.” The Soviets mistakenly thought they were helping their cause by living behind the wall. Instead, they were inviting rubbish into their land and population.

I had built a similar “play it safe” wall in my mind and in our church. I could have also named it “the wall of fear” or “the wall of risk aversion.” I wanted to build and live behind a wall that would keep our church safe from any threats to its survival or growth. But, like in Berlin, the wall that was meant to protect us attracted garbage. The atmosphere was self-protective selfishness that said, “We have a good thing going; why risk it by giving some of it away?”

For our church and me, inner fears were like mooring lines tying a boat to the pier. We could build a bigger boat as long as we didn’t have to untie the lines of fear that would let her sail to the world. We knew what it felt like to build the boat, but not what it meant to free her and let the wind of the Spirit take her where He wanted.

Fear always builds walls of protection, but faith builds bridges of freedom. Fear restrains us, but faith releases us. Lakes gather and bind, but rivers disperse and run free.

The more I studied the book of Acts, the more deeply I was overwhelmed by the bold fearlessness that marked the early church. “Risk” was the daily special on the church’s menu. They took risks for the “Big C” church, not just for their “little c” church. I became convicted that if we were to be a RIVER church, the dam wall must be torn down.

What was I afraid of? I prayerfully probed what type of fears had built this wall and discovered several:

**The fear of failure**—What if we give away leaders, people and money, and then the projects fail? We were winning at addition; why risk losing at multiplication? *What if church planting damaged our mother church? Could we recover?*

**The fear of rejection**—I realized multiplication meant allowing allegiances to transfer from the “sending pastor” to the “planting pastor.” This kind of emotional exchange called for deep personal security. Insecurity is a form of fear, so I faced my own inner fears of rejection. *Was I secure enough in God and in my own identity to face what would feel like a form of abandonment?*

**The fear of loss of control**—Multiplication is an empowerment of others, a divesting of the direct management of leaders and people. It is much like a parent who launches their child and must endure the pain of their poor choices. Did I trust God enough to hand over large groups of people to novice shepherds? Each time our church plants, we encourage everyone in our church to ask God whether they are being called to go. I have no control over who leaves on the mission. *Could I trust God to replace key staff and lay leaders if they went?*

**The fear of conflict**—To move forward in multiplication would undoubtedly create significant pushback, or even division, that could be avoided. Everyone loves addition but many fear multiplication; consequently, it’s difficult to cast and pursue this vision without generating sparks. I am a conflict avoider. I delay or detour around confrontation whenever possible. I was never the kid who picked a fight. *Could I deal with the fallout from developing this controversial new priority in our church?*

**The fear of financial hardship**—When we invited large groups of people to take their tithes and offerings and leave with a church plant, we had no idea how much money we were talking about. We have watched as much as 25 percent of our monthly income flow out to launch a new church. Anticipating this reality made me want to build a wall around our tithers. *Would God really provide all that we needed?*

**The fear of change**—My stepdad used to say, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it because your fixin’ might break it.” What we were doing was working well, but “good” is often the chief enemy of “great.” It is scary to change something that seems “good enough” because you want to “wall it in” so nothing can alter it. However, once we were convicted of the biblical priority of multiplication over addition, the question was not “What works?” but “What is obedience?” *How was God calling us to step out in faith?*

Fear robs; obedient risk rewards. I have taught the principle of tithing to many people. I always acknowledge that giving to God the first 10 percent you make can be scary if you have never done it. But I have collected hundreds of stories that report when you practice this kind of obedience and generosity, God unleashes blessings in an undeniable manner.



If this is true in tithing, how much more is it reflected in the giving of people, energy and resources for the work of church multiplication? Every church would do well to consider how to tithe to the work of multiplication. At Light & Life, once we began to demonstrate our faith that “You can’t out-give God,” we began to experience His richness in unprecedented ways.

As church leaders, we want to build walls to protect what we look to for safety, but walls of fear do not make us safe or effective. On June 12, 1987, President Reagan looked at the Berlin Wall and announced, “...This wall will fall. For it cannot withstand faith; it cannot withstand truth. The wall cannot withstand freedom.” Walls of fear must be attacked with faith, truth and freedom. Every church must dare to take risks that lead to the multiplication of the church.

## **The “YBH” Wall**

When I fly for the first time to an international airport, the first item I look for is the terminal map. Often it is on a large wall in a central location. When I find it, I specifically look for the “you are here” sticker indicating my current location. Once I know where I am and identify where I want to go, I am confident to start the trek to my desired gate. I call these informative walls the “YBH” walls—the “Yes, But How?” walls. I know where I came from, where I am and where I want to go—“Yes, but how do I get there?”

As a senior pastor, after I was keen to trade in my skewed scoreboard and determined to tear down my walls of fear, I needed to deal with my YBH wall. This was a matter of knowing enough to head the right direction without demanding to know the details of the journey.

When Moses told the children of Israel they were leaving Egypt to head to the Promised Land, he didn’t have a map or a GPS. He had plenty of questions and only a general direction. The good news was that he had the best guide a leader could ask for. So do we.

The YBH wall will only topple through a combination of information and trust. The more you learn about multiplication cultures, the clearer your destination will become. The further you move forward, the more you will discover you have to trust God for answers along the way. It requires both knowledge and dependence.

People who discount knowledge, training and equipping in favor of simply trusting God to provide should read the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah had a plan and some resources. He learned what he could before he launched out. Conversely, people who need to have all the answers before starting the expedition should revisit the book of Exodus. God provided along the route in some surprising ways.

As Light & Life prepared to become a RIVER church, I started researching “church planting” and “multiplication movements.” I learned from the successes and failures of others. I asked questions of the pioneers. Throughout the process, I pursued three specific types of knowledge:

**Vision knowledge** I wanted to understand the “WHAT” I was being called to. I learned what it looked like for churches to plant churches. I looked at different models from

Calvary Chapel, Vineyard, Southern Baptist, Assemblies of God, Four Square, etc. What would it look like for us to do it? If I could get a picture of what the future might look like, then we could begin to build toward it.

**Motivation knowledge** I also grew in my knowledge of the “WHY.” Why was the risk of planting churches worth it? Why was it biblically, sociologically and ecclesiological vital to plant churches? Why was it essential to the health of my local church to plant churches? If I had a clear vision of “WHY,” we could figure out the “HOW.”

**Skills knowledge** Then I started to research what skills and technical knowledge would be vital to planting. What “HOW” questions needed to be addressed, even if they couldn’t be fully answered at the outset? Questions about insurance, paychecks for planters, promotional materials, financial processes, facility rentals, launch team development, intercessory prayer, administrative oversight, etc., surfaced. (None of this was mentioned in either my M. Div. or my D. Min courses. Seminaries at that time had largely ignored church planting as a field of study. Thankfully, that is changing.)

The YBH wall is a tall one that can quickly seem overwhelming. However, the more you develop a vision, know the compelling heart of God behind it and learn what you can about it, the smaller that wall becomes.

Ignorance about church planting is largely responsible for the dismal reality that fewer than 4 percent of U.S. churches will ever multiply in any fashion. Most churches not engaged in multiplication are probably ignorant about how to overcome one of these three walls. We thank God for the increasing number of church planting groups like [Exponential](#) who are raising the banner to say, “You can do this! It’s important and we can help you with the skills.”

### **Building in the Air**

A few years ago, Electronic Data Systems created a humorous TV ad that showed a crew of airline engineers building an airplane as it flew at an elevation of 30,000 feet. One day, without an introduction, we showed it to our staff and leaders. We all howled in laughter and pain because we could relate to the daunting and sometimes comical task of building on the fly. With a plane, you have a choice. But with a multiplying church and a church plant, you have to build it in the air. Thankfully, that’s exactly where the Holy Spirit specializes.

The potentially discouraging news is that “wall-busting” is not a one-time thing. Defeating Jericho doesn’t mean Ai isn’t ahead. However, this recurring challenge forces us to continue to confront those internal enemies that block us from expanding the Kingdom to the maximum territory possible.

My image of heroism has morphed as I have left the LAKE church for the RIVER church. My biggest heroes aren’t the high scorers but those who help others score, help people get off the bench and help whole new teams get in the game. It seems to me this is the type of ministry the one true Hero engaged in.

## Chapter 4

# Five Life-Changing Lessons From “RIVER Living”

We recently held a staff retreat high in the mountains of British Columbia. During one of the team exercises, our youngest staff member had a chance to ask me one question. He said, “If you were who you are now, talking to yourself when you were my age, what five things would you tell yourself?” It was an excellent question.

I'd like to conclude this eBook with five words of wisdom about what I would tell myself if I was starting over in multiplication ministry. Limiting it to five is a difficult task, due to the numerous errors I have made and how much I have learned from them. But here's the short list.

**I would tell myself to ...**

### **1. Focus more on God's bigger picture.**

I tend to see my ministry in terms of what is near and now. This is natural, and there is wisdom in it. I am not responsible for the whole world but for my neighborhood. I am not responsible for 100 years from now but for my generation.

While this keeps us focused on the work at hand, it can also blind us to some of the most important work at hand.

God's bigger picture is the broader Kingdom view. It takes humility, discipline and vision to look at what's in front of me and ask, “What can I do today that will impact the Kingdom of God beyond my local church?” I've been infatuated with my own church but not in love with the Church of Jesus in my area. My decision-making filter changes when I develop the type of peripheral vision that sees beyond our four walls and our own mission initiatives.

I was raised on scary rapture theology that suggested the end of the world was near. We sang songs with lyrics like, “You've been left behind,” and then on the last round, you suddenly clipped off the word “behind” to give it more powerful emotional impact, like it had just happened. That was 40 years ago, and we are still here. I am a strong believer in the imminent return of Jesus; however, the call to build something for the long run is essential.

When I started pastoring, I wasn't thinking about two generations from now. If I had been, I would have started planting churches much sooner. One of the convictions that pushed me into church planting is that the greatest churches of 2050 aren't started yet, but they need to be. Church history shows us that churches have a lifespan, and we need to be reproducing if we want our legacy to thrive.

### **2. Spend time with the leaders you want to be like.**

I've wasted time trying to get close to and spending time with people I didn't want to end up like. They had bigger churches than me, had written more books than me and had more Twitter followers than me, so I thought they were the “me” I wanted to be. But they weren't. I was pursuing a different dream, a dream to see dozens of healthy urban

churches started. These folks were great leaders, just not the kind of people who could really help me go where God had called me.

I have always liked Henry David Thoreau's words: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away." We all need some marching partners, but they need to be listening to the same drum we are. Once I found some folks who had the same heartbeat as mine, my learning curve and effectiveness began to increase exponentially.

### **3. Expect greater impact from ordinary people.**

The greatest card I ever received from my wife said, "I like me best when I'm with you." To me, it communicated that I helped her become the best version of herself. Similarly, my passion is to bring out God's best in ordinary people for the sake of the Kingdom.

For many years (and still too often), I underestimated what the Spirit of God can accomplish through uneducated fishermen who have been with Jesus. These unknown, economy class kinds of people have extraordinary capacity to multiply the Church of Jesus. I have watched them lead people to Christ, start large Bible studies, shepherd people, pray for miracles, comfort dying friends and much more. They weren't waiting for a seminary degree, a prophetic word, a title, a room reservation at the church or a pastor's endorsement. They just went out, empowered by the Spirit, and did the work of Jesus.

I wish I had majored more in helping ordinary people engage in higher impact ministry. Waiting for the dynamic, hip, 10-talent leader can hobble the explosive ministry that can happen when you focus on empowering the John and Jane Doe's.

### **4. Build multiplication DNA deeper into the genetic code of every church plant.**

It's one type of accomplishment to plant churches, but it is a different kind of deed to plant churches that plant churches.

I am at the age that I would like some grandchildren. I hope neither of my daughters reads this, as they both groan when I mention it. They point to each other and basically say, "You first!" I will happily, fully love my girls if they never have kids, but just in case they are reading this, let me repeat, "I would love to have some grandchildren!"

Likewise, I have failed to impress deeply enough the need for our church plants to quickly daughter churches. Too often, we've been so happy to plant churches that survive we fail to plant churches that reproduce. I am working on correcting such shortsightedness. I am happy to report that our last church plant publicly promised me a granddaughter before their third birthday.

### **5. Explore the power of bivocational ministry sooner.**

My education always explodes when I minister in underprivileged countries like Ethiopia or the Philippines. I learn much more than I teach. I never hear leaders in those places speak of their profession or their careers. Instead, they talk of their call or their privilege or their duty to minister the gospel or plant a church. They simply trust God with the finances now and in the future.

I am a bit troubled when I return to America and hear pastors focused on building their careers and complaining about the size of their pension. However, then I watch myself draw too much comfort from visiting our denomination's pension website to see what my own monthly payout will eventually be.

Nevertheless, I can't shake the feeling that this "careerism" approach to the gospel is hindering our cause. Paul gladly lived on the gifts of the church when possible but didn't miss a ministry beat when it was not possible. If financial realities required tent building for a season, it would not stop his apostolic work; rather, he would find ways to use it for the gospel.

I believe one of the next great strides forward for the American Church will be intentionally pursuing bivocational ministry. If we can learn how to do bivocational ministry in ways that are healthy for the gospel, the church, and pastors and their families, then our church multiplication will become prolific.

I love what Swedish theologian Soren Kierkegaard says: "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." I pray I can keep looking back with understanding so I can live forward with greater effectiveness. This must be the prayer of our hearts as we seek to advance the Church of Jesus.

## Chapter 5

# Where the RIVER Flows

Rivers usually start from springs in high places.

It is impossible to conclude a book on the river of multiplication without emphasizing the promise of Jesus to believers and His church in John 7:37-39 (NIV).

*“On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” By this He meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive. Up to that time, the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.”*

Multiplication is not a model or method to be employed as a sociological strategy to move the institution of the Church forward. Multiplication is a work of the Spirit to bring life to thirsty people. It requires seeking God in spiritual high places so these rivers of living water can begin to flow. Unless we are gripped with God’s heart and filled with His Spirit, we will not become a flowing river.

Lakes are beautiful, but rivers are powerful. I’ve never heard a lake described as powerful. Lakes can “grow,” but rivers “flow.” What America needs are churches determined to become rivers, churches that prioritize raising up new churches, churches that major in equipping and sending Spirit-filled leaders. It will not be without tensions. It will require honestly addressing deep issues of the heart.

This new multiplication will mean some radical shifts in church culture but it is essential if we are to reach our secular culture. The prophet Ezekiel saw the river that flows from the temple of God. This fresh-water river brought life and overcame the salt-water culture of death.

The angel made a promise to Ezekiel, a promise we must claim for the Church today: *“Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; **so where the river flows everything will live**”* (Ezekiel 47:9, NIV).

Pray with me for a movement of RIVER churches to bring the life-giving water of Jesus to our generation.