

Patterns of Simple Churches Impacting Lostness

God is still up to something. He has not been dormant during the global pandemic. In fact, I'm amazed at what he's doing just below the surface of what we usually see and discuss.

Through my podcast, I've had the blessing of interviewing men and women that are still seeing God do amazing things. Specifically, during Season Four of [On the Road](#), I interviewed front-line practitioners that are seeing simple churches both form out of lostness and impact lostness.* As I've done these interviews, I noticed some patterns emerge.

[You can read this article for yourself, listen to me read it on the accompanying podcast episode,](#) or read this PDF download. Find any option at [ontheroad.link](#).

Why Patterns?

Before we dive into what I observed, I wanted to share a couple of thoughts about patterns and the value they bring.

You don't need me to make a joke about anecdotal evidence during the pandemic to be reminded that anyone can find a story to support any stance they could ever hold. I want to be careful not to take one story and hold it up as normative.

However, when we see regular patterns emerge across dozens of stories, I think there are things we can learn. I truly believe the patterns below are more than single anecdotal stories. There are some consistent themes that arise as we see God birth new churches among lost people.

At the same time, I am not in any way claiming that this is empirical research. I appreciate the movement missiologists who have the time and energy to devote to the empirical validation of what we're seeing in movements around the globe. Part of the reason I appreciate them is that I don't feel I'm gifted with the skill set needed for empirical research.

I don't want to base my methods solely on an anecdotal story, but at the same time, stories captivate me more than empirical research. I'm hoping this article lands somewhere between anecdotal stories and an empirically researched dissertation.

To state it once more: [Here are the patterns I saw as I have been capturing stories of God starting churches out of lostness.](#)

A committed laborer.

There is a committed laborer. The men and women God uses to start simple churches are committed to a few things:

- They are committed to reaching the lost. They have a heart and burden for those who are far from God.
- They are committed to the Lord. [I heard Chuck Wood say this first](#), but they are the type of people that, even if they lost all of the fruit they have seen, they would still be content with Jesus and their relationship with him. During our interviews, these laborers brought up their prayer life and relationship with the Lord before I had a chance to ask. A commitment to daily walking with Jesus is core to who these men and women are.
- They are committed to the process. Actually, they are committed to a process more than the process. The specific tools and framework (i.e. the Four Fields) aren't as important as faithfully putting their hand to the plow. In his classic book Good to Great, Jim Collins talks about spinning a giant flywheel in a factory. At first, the work you do to spin this giant disc is imperceptible, but eventually, with one crank after another, it starts gaining momentum. This is that same idea. Do what you know God is asking you to do. Repeat.

Other thoughts on commitment:

- [Travis at Movement Church](#) said this the best: Be faithful with what God has put in front of you, but always ask how you can improve what you're doing to better reach the lost and see sustained disciples and churches.
- Surrender is completely interconnected with commitment. These men and women of God are leaving their comfort and plans behind and giving their lives for the sake of the Kingdom. They are fully surrendered to what Jesus will do with them, in them, and through them.

A Dip.

This will not be easy. Leave behind the thought that you can knock on 10 doors in one afternoon, find a house of peace, and see a church start that will reproduce to the fourth generation.

God can do what he wants, of course, but the pattern I'm hearing in a western context is this: There will be some tough plowing.

When I interviewed Steve Addison on his book, [Your Part in God's Story](#), he said it well: "God is more concerned with us and our hearts. He has the work of the kingdom under control and doesn't need our fretting to get it done."

Take a minute to consider Paul's first missionary journey: What results did he see? Yes, there were new churches and believers... but he also was run out of town after town, including getting stoned to death.

There will be a season of drought. There will be multiple groups and churches that start and die. Are you willing to push through that?

Seth Godin, one of the premiere marketing writers of our time, has a short book called [The Dip](#). It has a simple premise that often the things that are most worth doing require us to push through a tough spot or season to see a breakthrough on the other side.

Here's the pattern: There is a dip in the work to see churches form out of lostness. Are you willing to push through it? Asked another way: If it takes seven failed church starts to see one sustaining, reproducing church, are you willing to attempt the first six?*

God gives the increase.

"And the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." - Acts 2:47

There's good news following the dip. If there is a committed laborer who is persevering through the dip, the pattern that follows is God gifts fruit to that laborer. It might be a spiritually responsive person, a house of peace, a clear prompting of his Spirit, or any number of things, but it is clearly a gift from God.

For those of you who have listened to previous episodes in this season, here are a few examples: [Travis at Movement Church](#) and his experience with Daniel, which helped him see the need to gather his own Oikos; [Jay of First Light Churches](#) had people lining up to be baptized; [Roman](#), who was born in Ukraine, hears a song from Africa in a refugee camp in America, and that connection leads to a discovery group. [Sara](#) is questioning if she should move on from an apartment complex when a person of peace opens up her home for a Bible study.

None of these were caused by the laborer. They were doing the work, committed, surrendered, persevering through the dip, but God gave the increase.

We see God doing this for Paul in Corinth: In Acts 18 Paul starts to see some persecution in Corinth... probably making him think about when he should move on due to his past experiences... But what does God do? He directly intervenes at this point: "Paul, this is the place for you. Do not be afraid. Do not be silent. Go on speaking."

It's definitely worth noting the connection between a gift from God and a commitment to a process. When God gives the increase, the committed laborer knows what to do with it. The story of Zeal Church that's been captured on [the Movements podcast](#) is a great picture of this. The No Place Left team in southern California took the new disciples God gifted them and had a process to see them become a healthy, reproducing church. Without the process, those new disciples might just be told about a local church's Sunday service and receive no meaningful follow-up or discipleship.

Name it.

Naming the church, no matter how small or fledgling it is, is normative for these stories I've captured. This is common among these churches that are starting among lost people.

[Rodger and Sara](#) pointed me to the fact that "The Way" is used to describe the Christian movement in Acts at five different times.***

Paul always calls the receiver of the epistles "the church at ___". This is his norm. And it includes places like Thessalonica where he did not spend very much time or Corinth that had some major issues as a body of believers. I loved [J.D. Payne's terminology](#): "[Plant the church that is not the church to come.](#)" The pattern here is to name the church no matter how fledgling it seems.

Relationships.

In the western context, there are very few examples of an outsider meeting an insider who then comes to faith, leads his or her family to faith, and starts a simple church that reproduces. As I said before, God will do what He wants, and He is working that way in some places, but in these interviews, it isn't the pattern. Even when stories like those happen, often the outsider becomes a participant in the church as he or she grows close to those being reached. They grow into family relationships. (I think of my interviews with [Amanda](#), [Tyler and Ben](#), and [Travis](#) on this one.)

I think both of the following statements can be true:

- 1) Relationships matter and we should build meaningful relationships.
- 2) We should filter quickly for spiritually sensitive people.

Consider Thessalonica when Paul, Silas, and Timothy planted a church in less than a month! First Thessalonians 2:8 says: "We loved you so much that we shared with you not only God's Good News but our own lives, too."

This verse assumes that the Gospel is being explicitly shared. And at the same time Paul, Silas, and Timothy, in less than a month with the Thessalonians, can claim that they shared their own lives with them. Can we say the same for the people we are sharing the Gospel with?

Speaking of filtering, that leads me to another pattern I saw:

Filter with patience.

We should filter for obedience. We should filter for those who are spiritually open. But we also need to be patient.

This lines up with what Robert, a missionary to India, shared with me as we were chatting about the status of No Place Left in America. He took me to Luke 8:15 where Jesus is finishing his explanation of the parable of the four soils. He says: "But as for the seed that landed on good soil, these are the ones who, after hearing the word, cling to it with an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with **steadfast endurance.**" We need to have steadfast endurance as we disciple people. We need to be patient as God is working in their hearts to transform them to be more like Jesus. Some fourth soil people are ready to bear fruit, and some are soil that is still getting tilled.

We're going to have to look to the Lord for guidance on this one. How do you know who is fourth soil that needs some endurance versus who is first or second soil that is wasting your time?

Ask the Lord.

Baptism.

Here's a pattern that surprised me: Baptism got mentioned a lot. As I think about stories from churches filled with primarily existing believers (and I can say this because that's where I find myself often), we talk about many things: disciple-making, outreach, Gospel conversations, prayer, and learning from the Word. All of these are important and I don't want to take away from them.

But in churches that are impacting lostness, they talk about something I rarely hear about: **Baptism.** Baptism is a key part of the culture of these churches formed out of lostness.

This really lines up with what we see in the New Testament: Baptism by immersion soon after repenting is the norm for new believers. Check out the [Baptism Hammer](#) for a reminder of the who, why, and when of baptism.

These are the patterns I noticed.

- A committed laborer.
- A dip.
- God gives the increase.
- Name it.
- Relationships.
- Filter with patience.
- Baptism.

The question is: What do we do with them?

There are some of these patterns we can put into practice: We can have patience as we filter. We can put a high value on baptism and naming a church.

And there are some of them we can't: We can't control how long a dip we will have as we pray and labor for new believers. We don't know when God will give the increase.

If you're reading this today, I'd ask you to focus on the first pattern which happens to be the one you have the most control over.

If we want to see churches start among lost people, are we striving to be that committed laborer?

Are we burdened for the lost? Does our heart break for them?

Are we fully surrendered to God? At this moment, right now, are you fully surrendered to God's word and His will?

Are we committed to a process? At the end of the day, can we look back and see that we've had our hand to the plow, no matter how tough the soil? We've done what God has called us to do. We've done it faithfully. We've done it regularly.

Can we claim these things?

This has been said before by others, but it seems like a good way to end:

Are we the type of people to whom God would entrust a movement?

*For context, these interviews were recorded in the first half of 2021 and from the western hemisphere. Find them at <https://ontheroad.link/season4>

**I have no empirical research that it will take six failed churches to start one, I'm merely using that number as a way to illustrate the need for persevering through the dip.

***The Way in Acts: Acts 9:2, 19:9, 19:23, 22:4, 24:14

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