

LESSONS IN TEAM CHURCH PLANTING IN NORTH AMERICA:  
THE CASE OF BEDROCK COMMUNITY CHURCH

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A Ministry Project Report

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by

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Roland Allen's work entitled *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours* written in 1912 still proves to be a great tool in the hand of any pastor or missionary today. Paul was perhaps the greatest missionary that the church has ever seen. Thankfully we have the inerrant pages of Scripture to tell us his story. We also have men like Roland Allen to help us understand the depth and breadth of Paul's impact in our culture today. Allen's work helps us understand some very practical applications from finance, to teaching, to even authority and discipline. One area of Paul's methodology that Allen does not spend a great deal of time on is Paul method of teaming. In fact terms like team, partnership, and cooperation are not found within the pages of this work. However, Allen does refer to the men who traveled with Paul as companions (2 times) and fellow workers (6 times). In chapter 9, a chapter dealing with the training of candidates for baptism and ordination, Allen states, "I cannot help thinking that here we find one of the most important elements of his success."<sup>1</sup> The element that Allen refers to is what he calls the "great principle of mutual responsibility."<sup>2</sup> He refers to this principle as something that affects the church as a whole. The church is a family and each member is mutually responsible for another. However, I believe that this most important element also applies to the leadership of the local church. The idea of team and mutual responsibility is a crucial element to the

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Allen. *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours* (London: World Dominion Press, 1912), 78

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

success of church planting in our day. This paper will present some lessons learned from a team church planting model in North America.

### Need for this Study

The need for this study is found within the need for new churches.

Leading missiologist C. Peter Wagner said, “Planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven.”<sup>3</sup> I could not agree more to this thought, but the idea needs to be developed a bit further. In the same way that a new church can be the most effective means of reaching lost people within a community, it can also be stated that unhealthy and failing new churches can be one of the biggest stumbling blocks to a community coming to know Christ. I would like to amend this classic and often quoted statement of Wagner and say, “Planting new and healthy churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven.”

The need for this study can be summarized with one simple statistic, from Ed Stetzer: “Around 68 percent of all church plants still exist four years after being started.”<sup>4</sup> If one out of every three churches fail, then there needs to be some study done on the period of time prior to the start of those churches in order to determine if there are universal, unhealthy characteristics. For example, a church plant in a particular city has gone through five years of struggle.

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<sup>3</sup> C. Peter Wagner. *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1990), 168.

<sup>4</sup> Ed Stetzer. *Church Plant Survivability and Health Study 2007* (Alpharetta, GA: Center for Missional Research, North American Mission Board, 2007), 13.

Another church plant in the same city, which started in the same year, has seen five years of dramatic growth. They have the same denomination, same city, same desire, same calling but two completely different results. One difference between the two churches is that both churches employed different philosophies of church planting prior to beginning their respective journeys. The first church that struggled and has now closed its doors employed a pioneering approach where the lead planter and his family moved to the location and started alone. The second church employed a team approach to church planting.

A researcher by the name of Steve Gray conducted a survey in 2007 in order to identify why some church plants were experience dramatic growth and why others were struggling to survive. In fact Roland Allen also addressed this issue in his book *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and Causes Which Hinder It* (1927). "Gray's study discovered common characteristics in fast-growing churches. For this study, Gray compared 60 fast-growing church-plants and 52 struggling church-plants and found important differences. In successful church-plants: 88% had church planting teams; Only 11.5 percent of planters involved in struggling church plants had a church planting team."<sup>5</sup> Gray also discovered that "fast-growing church plants had multiple paid staff. Two paid staff members was a majority among these church plants."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird. *The State of Church Planting in the United States: Research Overview and Qualitative Study of Primary Church Planting Entities*. (Nashville, TN: Lifeway Research), 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

One danger is that when churches are planted prematurely or with a lack of preparation and team participation, it has a tremendous impact on the church planter. Many church planters will begin with a great passion and desire to see God do a great work in a certain area or among a specific people group only to find themselves discouraged and defeated with the first two years of ministry. As a result the church planter leaves the new church where it began and becomes disobedient to the initial call of God upon his life. Can church plant burnout be avoided by applying some basic principles before the church even begins?

Another great reason for this project is the need that local churches have to understand how the process begins. If churches are responsible for planting churches, then what are the practical measures that need to be in place in order for this philosophy to be fleshed out? Should it look to plant churches using a team approach or through a more traditional pioneer model? It is vital that every church plant develop a biblical strategy for church growth in order to carry out the Great Commission.

### Paul's Methods

As you follow the journeys of Paul through the book of Acts you find that he is rarely alone. It is clear to see that Paul valued partnerships in ministry. He valued partnerships with individuals as well as churches. It was these partnerships that empowered Paul to continue all of the missionary work that we now know him for. Partnerships for Paul included everything from assistants to

those who would have equal status to his own. For example, his first partner in ministry was Barnabas. He is recruited by Barnabas to help evangelize the early Christian community in Antioch (11:25-30). On the first missionary journey, Barnabas is clearly the leader and Paul is the assistant. Not only is Barnabas usually named before Paul (13:1-2, 7), but after healing a man in Lystra, the people assume that Barnabas is *Zeus* (the father god) and Paul is *Hermes* (the messenger god). Other partners in ministry include Timothy, Titus, and Silas. Paul variously calls Timothy "my beloved and faithful *child* in the Lord" (1 Cor 4:17; cf. 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2), "our *brother*" (1Thess 3:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Col 1:1; Phlm 1), "a *servant* of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:1), and "our/*my co-worker*" (1 Thess 3:2; Rom 16:21). Paul tells the Corinthians that Titus is "my brother" (2 Cor 2:13) and "my partner and co-worker for you" (8:23). To stress that someone's status is equal to his own, he sometimes also calls him a "partner" (2 Cor 8:23) and even gives that title to Philemon (Phlm 17) even though he is one of Paul's converts.

The term used often by the apostle Paul is the word *sunergoi*. The Greek term is an adjective that combines *sun* meaning "with" and *ergon* meaning "work". It brings the idea of a fellow worker or a co-laborer. This is different than the Greek word *boethos*, which is simply translated as a helper. There is quite a distinction between someone who helps you accomplish your task and someone who co-labors with you to accomplish a greater task (2 Cor. 1:24; 3 John 1:8). Individuals called *sunergoi* by Paul include Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:3), Urbanus (Rom 16:9), Timothy (Rom 16:21; 1 Thess 3:2), Titus (2 Cor 8:23),

Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25), Clement (Phil 4:3), Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus (Col 4:10-11), Philemon (Phlm 1), Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (Phlm 24). Paul uses several other Greek terms containing the prefix *sun* to designate his assistants, including *sustratiotes* ("fellow soldier") for Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25) and Archippus (Phlm 2), *sunaixmalotos* ("fellow prisoner") for Aristarchus (Col 4:10), Epaphras (Phlm 23), and Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16:7), and *sundoulos* ("fellow slave") for Epaphras (Col 1:7) and Tychicus (Col 4:7).

### Case Study: Bedrock Community Church

#### Our Journey

In spite of hearing about the difficulties and frustrations associated with church planting, God began to burden the hearts of three families to plant a church in North America. This burden grew into more curiosity and eventually more research into the church planting field and studies of current church planting models. As a result of searching and praying for God's direction, these families are now involved in a new church plant in the area of Bedford, Virginia. Bedrock Community Church began as an idea that God placed into the hearts of three families back in 2007. This team of church planters covenanted to serve together to reach Bedford County and the surrounding areas. The Tate, Dowd, and Minor families moved into Bedford and began to serve the people of Bedford. The church began as a small group that met weekly in the home of the Tate family and then began to grow and multiply. Within eight months the

church had six small groups meeting weekly and had a core team who was gathering for monthly preview services. The year was spent developing systems, serving the community, and communicating the very simple vision that God had placed upon their hearts to: build relationships, build believers, and build churches.

Since the launch of Bedrock Community Church on September 7, 2008, they have continued to serve the community, rise up leaders, multiply small groups, and develop ministry teams. As a result, God has grown this small church and within 4 years has allowed them to launch a second campus in the Roanoke Valley. Bedrock currently has two campuses, small groups in three different regions between Roanoke, Bedford, and Lynchburg and they have begun a church planting training program with more than a dozen young men who desire to go and plant more churches.

### Teaming Model

The team concept permeates every area of Bedrock Community Church. If the team concept is going to take hold in every area of the church plant then it must begin at the top. The most popular models that exist in church life today typically include a senior pastor. This senior pastor leads and directs a staff or team of pastors. There is a delegation of responsibility but not necessarily a delegation of authority. Bedrock desires to not only have shared duties but also shared leadership. It is the difference between a rectangular shaped table and a



circular table. The leadership structure at Bedrock is a plurality of elders who sit at a round table but have different roles and responsibilities. There is a lead elder but he serves as a lead among equals. Vision and mission are shared and decisions are made once consensus has been reached. The elders meet weekly to pray and seek the face of God for the direction of the church and its ministries. We believe that our individual perspective is always limited and our individual wisdom is never enough. A team leadership model is not only biblical but will produce better decision-making and promote unity among the leadership.

#### Teaming on the platform

The teaming philosophy even finds itself on the platform every Sunday morning. Another popular model that exists in churches today is the idea of one primary teacher. This model leads to personality driven ministry and offers the church members one perspective and one delivery style. A team teaching approach offers several benefits. When Bedrock first began we only had one service on Sunday morning. A team teaching approach allowed for two teaching pastors to prepare and study together weekly and then alternate the teaching of the messages on Sunday. This allowed each of the teaching pastors at least two weeks to pray and prepare to preach. As a result the congregation received more “crock pot” sermons versus “microwave” sermons. They also listened to a message from a man of God who was prayed up and prepared to preach which led to more accurate and bold preaching. The greatest benefit to this model is

that the congregation does not relate the church to an individual or personality.

The major personality is Jesus.

As Bedrock developed a second campus there was a need to add a member to the teaching team. The team now plans the sermon each week together and then two of the team members rotate to preach it live at each campus – same message, different messenger. The team meets to prayerfully develop the annual calendar, teaching series, bedrock principles, and message outlines. Sermons are worked on three weeks in advance. The individual teachers then develop their own thoughts and illustrations. We believe this is a great model for developing and multiplying teachers, but can also sow the seeds towards eventual independent congregations.

Teaming with the community

One piece of advice that has been given by many church-planting gurus is to get up and running as quickly as possible. From day one church planters set their minds to the launch and want to be meeting for weekly worship as soon as they can. We believe that one should spend a great deal of time trying to gain some insight into the community through personal experience and scientific investigation. Wisdom through personal experience can only be gained by spending time with the people in the community. Spending a lot of time with the core group or training a launch team is essential, but being in the community with lost people must be equally as important. Scientific investigation could

include demographic information, geographical information, education level, projected growth areas, etc. Without a general knowledge of the people and the community, it is foolish to start making large decisions and taking giant leaps forward in the design and makeup of the church plant.

The prophet Isaiah writes in 28:23-29,

Give ear and hear my voice, listen and hear my words. Does the farmer plow continually to plant seed? Does he continually turn and harrow the ground? Does he not level its surface and sow dill and scatter cumin and plant wheat in rows, barley in its place and rye within its area? For his God instructs and teaches him properly. For dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is the cartwheel driven over cumin; but dill is beaten out with a rod, and cumin with a club. Grain for bread is crushed, indeed, he does not continue to thresh it forever. Because the wheel of his cart and his horses eventually damage it, he does not thresh it longer. This also comes from the LORD of hosts, who has made His counsel wonderful and His wisdom great. (NASB)

There is wonderful counsel and great wisdom in planting properly. In the Isaiah passage God gives instruction about taking great care to plant properly. God instructs and teaches that anyone who wishes to plant must have a good understanding of the time, the tilling, the technique, and the tools needed for this process. The first step is time. The very first verse gives a revealing look at the priority of plowing. The plowman plows all days in order to sow. There is a lot of time spent on plowing the field prior to scattering seed. Most would begin by spending all day sowing and looking forward to the harvest, but this passage indicates that before one can even think about harvesting he must place great importance on plowing.

The second step in the process involves tilling or plowing the ground. There is great care taken continually to turn and open the ground in order to make it more receptive to the seed. The soil is carefully broken and then raked smooth in order to cast the seed throughout. Broken earth is always more receptive to the seed, and God knows that this not only applies to crops but also to the hearts of men.

The third step involves proper technique. Certain plants belong in certain types of ground. Some seed was cast abroad; some was scattered; and other was simply cast. Three different Hebrew words are used to describe the action of sowing seed. Careful attention is also given to when and where to scatter specific seed. The barley and the rye need to be “in their place.” How can a farmer know where and when and which seed to scatter without a great understanding of the field?

The final instructions involve choosing which tools to use in the process. Certain tools are needed for specific crops. If the wrong tools are used with the wrong crop, then there is a danger of damaging the harvest. Selecting the right tools to use based upon an understanding of how the crop will react is essential for any farmer.

This text is rich with parallels for today’s church planter. Every church planter has a time frame in mind when he steps onto the field. They all have dreams of a great harvest. They all have great seed to work with and a technique that they believe will work because that is how a professor or a book said it

should be done. They all have tools in their hands that have a proven track record from other church plants. They hit the ground running, full of faith, and full of zeal to reach their respective cities. How much time and effort could be saved if there was adequate investigation and understanding of the city before they began to work? Many church planters fail to break up the ground before they cast the seed. They have a preprogrammed technique and plan in place before they even move into the area. They fail to recognize that some ideas work in some areas but will not work everywhere. Time must be spent to understand the community so that the planter can decide what kind of church needs to be planted there. Efforts must be made to determine which evangelistic tools would be the most effective. What would be considered “good news” in their area? What needs are they uniquely qualified to meet that would break up the hard ground and hearts of the people of that community?

Hosea 10:12, “Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the LORD, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.” (ESV)

The idea of breaking up fallow ground is scattered throughout the Old Testament and brings the idea of humbling one’s self and opening up to the love and mercy of God. The term literally means “to till up the soil.” Again God uses horticulture terminology to picture the act of opening our hearts and lives to the living God. Fallow means uncultivated, barren, or empty. God is willing to bring life and hope to a place where there is none. The only prerequisite is to plow

voluntarily through the hardness of our hearts and to be open to the gift that God desires to give. The result is a change from being barren and unable to produce any fruit to a life that is abundant with fruit.

Many areas that church planters target are areas that seem to be barren of fruit. The areas seem hard and in desperate need of a good church. In the same way that a man's life will remain fruitless unless he opens up his heart and receives the grace and mercy of God, a town will remain fruitless unless work is done to break up the fallow ground. Plowing must precede planting. The first step in a church plant is not to find a building and start a worship service. The first steps must involve some plowing of the field and the breaking of hearts before they will receive a new plant. Partnering with and serving the community provides the church plant with a powerful tool to break up the fallow ground. We desire to partner with the community in order to help the community serve each other.

We began this process of cultivation by building a relationship with the city and its leaders. We started in January of 2008 doing works of service in the city of Bedford. Mission teams from other churches came in to help us serve the city. We participated in everything from cleaning bathrooms downtown to being a part of the city sponsored Spring cleaning program. We developed a relationship with the city manager and partnered with the city and its efforts to keep Bedford beautiful. We took a list of projects and tasks that the city was not able to perform due to lack of resources and manpower and we took to the

streets and worked on the extensive list. Since we started with that mindset, God has allowed us to partner with other entities within Bedford. We began to worship in the local YMCA and partner with them now to provide help and bible studies for their summer camp program. We currently worship in the local high school and we have partnered with them to paint the facilities, landscape the grounds, and provide everything needed for teacher appreciation every year. When we entered into our first lease agreement with the high school we stated that we “are not just renters, we are partners with you to serve the students and the families of Bedford.” We have also partnered with the local primary school to provide a backpack feeding program for food insecure children.

As a result of developing strong relationships with the community and establishing a consistent reputation for service, we have been approached by the local elementary school to provide a Good News club every Monday afternoon at the school. This is an invitation to come and bring the Gospel to their students. It is not very often that you are invited in to a public school setting and to open up the word of God. We have also been invited into the local middle school to help provide mentors and counselors for the Hope Mentoring program that will begin in the Fall. We are being asked to come in and build relationships with students and provide mentoring and help for them and perhaps their families. We decided to make Bedford our home. We live here. We serve here. We are partners with the community of Bedford to set the cultural and spiritual climate and help to move it forward.

## Teaming in the community

Another philosophy that Bedrock adopted early on in their development was the idea that we didn't have to do it all ourselves. Missionaries can have the idea that they are the new experts in the community and they can walk in with the desire to create things and develop new things when there are already working systems in that community. Too many times we can come into an area and have the mindset of being the teacher instead of the learner. We can have the mindset of creating bigger and better rather than partnering with existing ministries. We have a great deal to learn about our community and we learn that best by being part of the community.

When one understands the community and his heart breaks for it, then it is time to do something about it. The church planter should find out which segment of the community he is uniquely qualified to reach and begin there. Paul began with the religious leaders and began dialogues and Bible studies. This is what Paul knew and what he did well. A planter should start with his strengths but should never ignore the rest of the people in the city and should be intentional about reaching them. Church planting should stretch a man to get outside his comfort zone and reach a city by all means necessary. The planter should be in the marketplace everyday and rub elbows with the people. He should spend time with lost people and not just seek to grow a church through reaching out to disgruntled church members from other local churches.



A church planter must earn the right to be heard by the lost community and take advantage of every opportunity opened up by God. When the planter has a good understanding of the culture, a broken heart for the people, and an audience that is willing to listen to what he has to say, then he can speak the Word of God with clarity and boldness. The opportunities to speak before a large crowd and explain the gospel will come, but the plant must start in the marketplace. The people of Athens invited Paul to come and speak to them. Paul did not invite them to come into the synagogue to listen to him.

From the very beginning we sought to understand our community and see what needs that we were uniquely gifted, qualified, and called to meet. During that process we discovered several ministries in the Bedford area that were already serving some of the felt needs of the community. One of the limitations of church plants is not having permanent facilities. As a result, you are limited when it comes to ministries like a food pantry or a clothing closet. So we partnered with a local outreach ministry that was already offering those services and doing it well. We stocked their shelves with goods and provided volunteers. We also didn't have the manpower or facility to offer services or programs such as AWANA or Celebrate Recovery. So we partnered with other churches in the area to send our people there if they desired those programs.

## Teaming regionally

Growth for a new church plant brings blessings as well as some difficult decisions. When Bedrock began weekly worship services God opened up an opportunity to meet in the local YMCA. The space and location was ideal for the church as it began. Soon the attendance on Sunday mornings grew to the point where they could no longer safely and completely care for all of the children that were coming. The leadership team began to think through their options and looked at possibly going to two services. Then an opportunity came to meet inside the local high school. The timing was perfect and Bedrock moved locations and has been worshipping there ever since. Now as Bedrock continues to grow we are faced with more difficult choices. At 80% capacity both in seating and parking most churches have three options available to them. One option would be to build a bigger facility to house all the new people. Another option would be to move to multiple services to make room at the current facility. A third option would be to plant another church or start another campus locally. The philosophy and passion of Bedrock is to always choose the third option. With a large percentage of worship attenders driving from distances of 20 to 30 miles away, the leadership team developed a strategy to team regionally.

Bedrock uses a hybrid model of multi-siting and church-planting. We focus less on growing the home church numerically and more on reaching an area for Christ through externally-focused multi-site campuses. We will multi-site locally (within a 60 mile radius) and church plant beyond those boundaries.

Our prayer would be that the sites could be fully functioning, autonomous churches within three years of their launch. Our small groups will move beyond being just a place for Bible-study, fellowship and pastoral care, but will become a more intentional and integral part of the overall strategy to reach a community for Christ. These small groups will be geographically-based and precede the launch of multi-site campuses in a targeted community.

### Teaming globally

Bedrock also partners with ministries around the world. Short term mission trips can be a tremendous blessing to the missionaries on the field, the members of the mission team, and the sending church but going one time to a country for one week does not have a tremendous effect on the people group that you are going to reach. To truly make an impact in a specific region or people group it is absolutely necessary to partner with mission efforts that are ongoing in a specific area. Churches would do well to partner prayerfully, financially, and through human resources with missionaries in the field. To that end, Bedrock has partnered with Because We Care Ministries a church planting effort in Nicaragua as well as a church planting effort in the state of Alaska. We send several teams annually to both these locations. Each staff member of the church leads teams throughout the year and are involved in helping the mission efforts in each of these areas.

We have also entered into a strategic partnership with Principe de Paz church in Somotillo, Nicaragua. We have committed to come along side them and their leadership in order to help them reach the city of Somotillo. We will send teams and resources there throughout the year as well as help them serve and build relationships within their city. We will also mentor the two pastors who serve that congregation. It is our desire to partner with the church as they partner with the city.

#### Closing remarks

The team model has a strong biblical heritage. Jesus used the team model and provided an example when He selected twelve men to form his team of disciples and even developed a team of three close partners in ministry. We have already seen how Paul used partners and co-laborers as team members in his missionary efforts. There is also a very strong missionary heritage for teaming. Throughout church history we see missionary efforts being done through teams of people and not just individuals. The team church planting model is now one that is growing in popularity among new church plants in North America today. It is finding a great deal of success and could be setting a new standard for church planting moving forward. The benefits of church planting as a team is something that Roland Allen identified several years after writing his classic work on the missionary methods of Paul. In his later book entitled, *The Case for Voluntary Clergy*, Allen writes:

The one-man system, which concentrates all authority in a single individual, is not ideal. No one man concentrates in himself all the various qualities which are necessary for the manifold activities of a Church. A few men are singularly gifted, but even they do not do everything with equal efficiency; and normally many gifts are divided between many individuals.<sup>7</sup>

Teams run farther and faster than individuals. Let us team together to advance the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

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<sup>7</sup> Roland Allen, *The Case for Voluntary Clergy* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1930), 96.

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