

Frank Viola: Finding organic church

A comprehensive guide to starting and sustaining authentic Christian communities

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This is a helpful and stimulating book on how to grow church from scratch – the envisaged context being a small group of 8+ people. Despite his protestations that this is the only way forward and that the institutional church has no future, it has lots of common sense advice about how to plant a self sustaining cell church – and could be used very happily within an institutional one, with networks of cells under a single church umbrella.

The word church embodies two ideas: community and assembly. Not building, denomination or religious service.

The need for change – the quartz watch was invented by a Swiss, but the world famous Swiss watch industry turned it down. It was patented by Seiko, and the rest we know. The Swiss were too wrapped up in the old paradigm – a watch without a mainspring or bearings???

Introduction – reclaiming the biblical narrative. Church should be organic, not mechanical – ie it should be born out of spiritual life instead of being constructed by human institutions and held together by religious programs. Organic church is a grassroots experience that is marked by face to face community, every member functioning, open participatory meetings, non hierarchical leadership and the centrality of Jesus.

1. Planting the seed : biblical principles for church planting

1. The divine pattern of church formation

The NT offers 4 models for church planting

1. The Jerusalem model – Acts 2-8. 12 apostles planted one church by preaching Jesus; the church multiplied by migration. ie the church leaves the worker.
2. The Antioch model – Acts 13-20. Paul and coworkers were sent out to plant churches in other cities. They spent 3-6 months in each place before moving on. Elders emerged to lead it. ie the worker leaves the church. In both cases the apostle only builds the foundation; the people are left to get on with it.
3. The Ephesian model – Paul trained church planters for 2 years in the hall of Tyrannus: Titus, Timothy, Gaius, Aristarchus, Secundus, Sopator, Tychicus, Trophimus, Epaphrus. We think this because we know all were with him throughout his time in Ephesus, and we know he supported them financially (20.34) and sent them out to work with the churches he'd planted as well as plant new ones. Epaphrus went on to plant churches in Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col 1.7; 4.12-13).
4. The Roman model – Christians from different churches transplant themselves into a city to found one new one.

Churches were planted not everywhere but in strategic centres. They planted fewer than 20, at which point Paul said there was no further place for him to work between Jerusalem and Rome.

2. Restoring the itinerant worker

No solution, no matter how creative or highpowered, can succeed if you have defined the problem incorrectly. Put differently: more important than giving the right answers is asking the right questions... Simply changing the materials, programs, and activities is not enough. We must change how we perceive the church, how we see God expressing Himself in the world through the church, and how we do church – William A Beckham.

The apostles did not build churches, they established congregations. An apostle is sent, itinerant. He did 6 things:

1. Remove sin consciousness – ie empower people by setting them free from guilt
2. Provide practical tools – a leader is someone who knows the next step
3. Instil confidence in spiritual giftings – Paul repeatedly states his confidence in them, eg Gal 5.10, 2 Thess 3.4, 2 Cor 2.3, 7.16, Rom 15.14, Phil 1.6.
4. Model by example – Phil 3.17, 1 Thess 1.5-6, 2 Thess 3.7, titus 2.7, 1 Cor 1.11
5. Remove foreign elements – everything that is not Jesus
6. Defy entropy – energy naturally declines, and a church moves easily from organic to hierarchical and institutional.

Itinerant workers always emerge from the soil of an existing church – you have to be part of it before you can transport it. Living as a non leader produces brokenness and humility.

3. The master plan of church planting

'The person who says it cannot be done should not interrupt the person doing it' – chinese proverb

We tend to look for methods, but God looks for people.

Three things are true of the Trinitarian God: an exchange of life, an exchange of fellowship, a purpose to enlarge the life and fellowship to humanity. Jesus taught the same 3 things to his disciples – to live by divine life, to experience fellowship, to expand these things to other people.

- 'Jesus' mode of pedagogy represents a dramatic break with today's data-transfer model of teaching', 80. He produces transformed disciples, we produce consumers of mental information.
- Jesus introduced the disciples to the life of the church – travelling and learning and working together.
- He trained them to be apostles, ie to found Christian communities – later.

The 12 founded the church in Jerusalem. Some of the first members gradually emerged as leaders – James, Stephen, Philip, Agabus, Silas, Judas, Barnabas. Barnabas in turn trained Paul. The training was the same three things - to live by divine life, to experience fellowship, to expand these things to others. Paul then trained his 8 men, all of whom lived in an organic church community for a period of years before going out.

4. Apostolic covering vs apostolic help

Apostolic ministry is regional, churches are local, the work is transient. We tend to confuse the work and the church. If we see the goal of the church to multiply and create new churches, we confuse church with work. Only some are meant to plant new churches. If an apostle sets up home in a church he turns the whole church into an extension of his own ministry, and damages it. Apostolic workers plant, establish, leave, support from a distance. Paul's authority is never hierarchical. He has great confidence in the churches' ability to function in his absence – Gal 5.10, 2 Thess 3.4, 2 Cor 2.3, 2 Cor 7.16, 8.22, Rom 15.14, Philem 21, Phil 1.6, Heb 6.9.

Paul exerts spiritual authority – linked to function not office. Office separates brethren, function builds them together.

5. The modern house church movement

We live in a day where there exists a 'primitive church phenomenon' – everyone's noticing that the modern practice of 'church' is biblically groundless and spiritually ineffective. Many are leaving the institutional church and seeking to return to simpler forms of church life. But lots of house churches don't work. Types:

- The glorified bible study
- The special interest group
- The institutional home church
- The personality cult
- The bless-me club
- The socially amorphous party
- The disgruntled malcontent society
- The unwritten liturgy driven church
- *The organic church- a living, vibrant, face to face community that has no other pursuit but Jesus.*

Many house churches have a short life, and those that survive often turn into scaled down institutional churches – complete with clergy equivalent leader. Only organic churches not based on the above things survive and grow. We are living in a day of new beginnings.

6. Restoration or revolution?

We don't want restoration or revival, we want revolution.

2. Tilling the ground – answers to questions

7. Can the NT example be applied today?

Our concept of saving souls outside the context of the church is foreign to the Bible. For the 1st Christians being saved meant being added to the local community of believers – Acts 5.14, 11.24. The NT offers little support to evangelistic strategies that concentrate on converting individuals; Paul did not primarily deliver an individualistic challenge to give up vice but aimed at forming a community with those who responded to his proclamation; his aim was not to convert individuals but to establish churches. Peter talked about converting dead stones into living ones – but not just to pile them up, rather to build them into houses.

8. Was Paul an exception?

There are over 30 churches mentioned in the NT – list p139. All were planted by an itinerant worker. Rapid multiplication doesn't work; it takes time to build a foundation. Those who planted the NT churches had been part of the Jerusalem church for 4 years, and continued to receive oversight from Jerusalem. The church is not meant to be a technique for evangelism but the corporate expression of Jesus. and independence is not biblical.

9. Is church planting elitist?

It's the church planter's job to work himself out of a job.

10. Can't anyone start an organic church?

If a church is a group of people meeting in a home once a week to have a meal, prayer, singing, bible study, then yes. But if it's a group living as a shared life community under the headship of Jesus, no. Such a group gathers more than once a week, meets to meet Jesus together, has no dominant leader and no passive members, lives out its faith daily, finds creative ways to express it, handles its conflicts. Not everyone can plant one of those.

11. Wasn't Paul the last apostle?

No, he was the least, not the last. List of apostles mentioned in the NT – 22 of them, p 162: the 12 + Apollos, Andronicus, Barnabas, Epaphroditus, James, Junia, Paul, Silas, Timothy, Titus.

12. Don't apostles perform signs and wonders?

2 cor 12.12 – an apostle is someone who persists, someone you can't stop. Only 3 of them are recorded as having performed signs and wonders – Jesus, Peter, Paul.

3. Cultivating the soil – practical steps for beginning

13. Discovering organic church

The real trouble is not in fact that the Church is too rich, but that it has become heavily institutionalised, with a crushing investment in maintenance. It has the characteristics of the dinosaur and the battleship. It is saddled with a plant and programme beyond its means, so that it is absorbed in problems of supply and preoccupied with survival. The inertia of the machine is such that the financial allocations, the legalities, the channels of organisation, the attitudes of mind, are all set in the direction of continuing and enhancing the status quo. If one wants to pursue a course which cuts across these channels, then most of one's energies are exhausted before one ever reaches the enemy lines. JAT Robinson

What do you do if you live somewhere where there is no organic church life?

Priscilla and Aquila prepared the ground for planting a church; you can do the same. Start by bring others together. Then find a church planter who will help build the group together in such a way that everyone owns and leads it. if you don't do this, you will become a mini institutional church. Cornelius did this; he gathered his people together and invited Peter. You need 8+ believers old or new, and you need to meet together for 6+ months.

Viola's organisation can help – see <http://www.housechurchresource.org>

14. Five unmoveable principles

1. Become like little children – drop your agendas and even your ministry; it's important there should be no one acting as a clergyman: everyone must be equal.
2. Your feelings will get hurt, you will not get your own way, your patience will be tested, and you will discover your faults.
3. Be patient with the progress of the group – it takes time, and it includes lots of unlearning. You are moving away from a religious service on a Sunday morning where you mostly sit and listen, toward an organic gathering of new creations, discovering afresh how to express Jesus Christ corporately.
4. People will leave your group. Let them. And never judge motives – it destroys relationships.
5. People will experience exciting spiritual growth and healing.

15. Learning how to meet

No services – these are ritualistic, performance-based ceremonies, and the early Christians didn't have them, they had meetings. No going to church, you are going to a meeting and you are part of the church.

1. Find a home in which to meet and decide when to meet, for 4 hours if you can
2. Turn the heating down, arrange chairs to as to promote sharing – a square is good – and leave a path to the door/loo
3. Be punctual
4. Give visitors the chance to introduce themselves
5. Dress informally
6. Turn off your mobiles
7. Clear up together afterwards

Meeting content:

1. Sing together – not musician led
2. Share together, using eg these 5 exercises (complete each one before moving on to the next)
 - Each week, one person tells their life story
 - Share a bible message together (teaching slot)
 - Each week, 2 people bring one song that has special value to them (Christian or not)
 - Each week, 2 people bring 2 of their favourite bible passages
 - Each week, 2 people share what they would like their life to look like in 5 years.
3. Eat together
4. Have fun together – play is an indispensable ingredient of success. We have got too religious.

Common questions:

- Children? Well, make sure they have a nice time. It's the parents job to teach them the faith, not the group's
- Bible study? This is a C19th American concept. If you start here you won't last long, or if you do you will produce a single leader and revert to institutional church.
- Prayer? Relationships come first; avoid prayer requests; let it come slowly, naturally, spontaneously
- Evangelism? Build foundations first – like a married couple not having children straight away. But invite friends to your meetings if you want to.
- 1 Cor 14.26? Get to know each other first.
- Money? Each set aside some.
- Visitors who don't understand? Explain.
- Do we need a constitution/doctrinal statement/covenant? No.

16. Corporate singing

Build a song book, learn new songs, repeat them often, write new words to familiar tunes. Criteria for songs: spiritual depth, accurate reflection of your beliefs and vision, Christocentric, not outdated. Have people lead others in a song.

17. Building community

Very American chapter! Organise bonding times for sisters (sleepovers, cooking, games, write a song) and for brothers (hunting, camping, fishing). Suggestions for community building activities, sex specific. Point is, do things together not just in the big group, which you enjoy and will help you get to know each other better. Examples of excellent ice-breaking questions p 247.

18. Twelve essential ingredients

1. Lower your expectations
2. Unless you can improve on someone's idea don't criticise it
3. If you suggest something, take responsibility for it
4. Be creative
5. It's ok to make mistakes
6. Don't be legalistic
7. Support one another – say yes!
8. If you miss a meeting find out when where and what you need for the next one
9. Understand and accept introverts and extroverts – the first need to be asked questions, the second not to dominate
10. Look after the single women in the group
11. If someone has a hobbyhorse set aside a special meeting to listen to them, with the understanding you either agree or you don't. If you do, fine, and no need to bring it up again; if you don't, ditto.
12. Enjoy the honeymoon period.

4. Pulling the weeds – health and development

19. The growth stages of an organic church

Organic churches go in one of 4 directions:

1. Disintegration – through conflict, getting bored with doing the same things over and over again, burnout (when one pushes his vision on members through natural means)
2. Institutionalisation – someone in the group becomes its leader, and ends up doing most of the ministry
3. Corporate paralysis – inability to make decisions through fear of conflict.
4. Spiritual progress

They develop in stages – honeymoon; crisis; cross (are people willing to die to everything, their opinions, ideas, agendas, gifts, ministries, temperament); tested body life.

20. The seasons of an organic church

Physical seasons illustrate the spiritual seasons we pass through in our Christian lives. Churches need to maintain change. Springtime is a period of growth; outreach is good, and works best when it involves demonstrating the gospel in concrete ways. It should be done in seasons, not all the time.

Summer is the time of spiritual building – outreach. Autumn is the season of prayer, winter of sorrow. There are wet and dry seasons too.

21-22. The diseases of an organic church

Koinonitis – inward looking, existing for itself, no growth

Spiritual myopia – fixation with a certain practice, doctrine, truth which prevents them seeing the big picture

Spiritual dwarfism – no depth, only a few people functioning, never talking about the Lord outside meetings

Hyperpneumia – seeking experience, addiction to spiritual highs.

23. How an apostolic worker cares for a church

- Taking time to build its foundation
- Visiting it
- Writing to it
- Unveiling the glories of Christ to it
- Encouraging it
- Teaching it
- Warning it
- Reminding it to observe important practices
- Urging it to action
- Charging it in the Lord
- Charging individuals to stop teaching harmful doctrines
- Correcting the persistent sinful
- Asking it to esteem those who serve it
- Exhorting it to greet its members with affection
- Instructing and refuting false teaching
- Making practical suggestions
- Giving direction
- Inquiring about spiritual progress
- Asking it to excommunicate the persistently sinful
- Asking other churches to help it in a crisis
- Asking it not to gossip or speak negatively about others
- Asking it to receive others in the Lord
- Sending coworkers to visit it when he can't go.

24. The Journey ahead

Are you called to churchplanting? You should be at least 30; learn until then. Are you a pastor? Shut down your Sunday services and have a Wednesday evening meeting instead (don't preach but do teach). On Sundays, meet in homes.