

Launching a New Denomination in a Denominational Transformation Era Or, Reinventing or Resurrecting an Existing One

A Travel Free Learning Article

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By

George Bullard

Ministry Partner with The Columbia Partnership

Voice: 803.622.0923, E-mail: GBullard@TheColumbiaPartnership.org

Web Site: www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org

If I were launching a new denominational movement today, what strategic principles would I use to guide this process? And, if I was reinventing or resurrecting an existing denomination would I use these same or different principles? Yes, the same.

The foundational principle is that denominations should always be created by and for the benefit of congregations as they seek to fulfill the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment. Real denominations serve congregations. At any point a denomination forgets that congregations are its primary building blocks, it changes from being a movement to an institution that primarily serves itself. It begins dying a little bit each year. This can happen to a 20 year old denomination as easily as a 200 year old denomination.

Here are a dozen principles I would use to launch a new denominational movement:

1. Launch a new denominational movement only when the founding congregations are captivated by a transformative vision around the new thing God is seeking to do through the new denomination. This must be a spiritual vision of what God is in the process of doing in and through the denomination, where God is leading the denomination, and where it has a unique contribution to make to God's kingdom.

If a new denomination forms out of conflict with an existing denomination, it is extremely important not to allow the vision to diminish to become one of "we are not them". Doing so may result in the new denomination experiencing arrested development in less than 10 years after it is founded. It may only have one generation of vitality and vibrancy, and then become a plateaued and declining denomination.

If a reinvention process results in a new denominational movement, it should not be for the purpose of saving the dying denomination, but moving forward to a new denominational movement under God's leadership. Similarly, a resurrection process is not going back to the old denomination, but the creation of a new denomination in the work of God's kingdom.

2. Build it around a networked system rather than a hierarchical system. The networked system will be organic and allow the new denominational movement to grow and develop in natural ways according to grassroots movements. Therefore, be proactive to encourage a networked system rather than a hierarchical system. Peer learning communities built around various affinity definitions rather than only geographical understandings of organizing will be an important part of this system. The connectors of this networked system will be the enduring core values of the new denominational movement that are actively nurtured and continually communicated and demonstrated in word and deed.

3. Focus primarily on a missional movement rather than a programmatic, attractional, or even a discipleship approach. The missional perspective begins with the end in mind. The end is to

transform the world with the unconditional love of the triune God that flows out of a commitment to the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment. This missional approach sees no conflict between the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. It focuses on how Great Commission efforts can focus energies on a Great Commandment impact.

Never start a programmatic approach and structure within the denomination. Support a missional approach through discipleship processes of spiritual formation rather than Christian education programs.

4. Have the highest possible focus on relationships within the network constellation that makes up the new denominational movement. Remember that relationships are the key currency for the networked denomination. It is difficult to overestimate their value. The greater the relationship distance between people and congregations the more these relationships are around being an acquaintance rather than a friend or family member. The deeper the relationships the more true friends exist, and the fewer casual fellowships and only surface face familiarity will exist.

One trap in relationships, however, is that we lose the ability to speak the truth in love to one another because maintaining relationships becomes the primary core value. A more transformative core value would be to have prophetic relationships where we know and experience one another deeply enough to speak words of support, challenge and motivation to one another.

5. The highest possible commitment ought to be given to leadership effectiveness through ongoing leadership development processes rather than educational achievement and formal credentialing processes. Ordination should be a local congregational issue with suggested values and criteria. At the same time, formal recognition for various leadership development processes of the denomination should have high expectations and accountability systems.

The focus of developing new leaders should be on ministry preparation with sufficient theological reflection to be appropriately grounded in sound doctrine. This is as opposed to theological education with insufficient ministry reflection and engagement to be able to lead effective ministry that is relevant to the needs of real people in real time in real congregational and community settings.

6. The starting of new congregations should be the highest possible priority within the new denominational movement. Hardwire a congregational multiplication mindset as part of the missional movement. In the first decade of the denomination set a minimum goal of starting a number of new congregations each year equal to at least five to seven percent of the existing congregations. This goal assumes the new denominational movement begins with a group of congregations from an already existing denomination. Never allow this annual goal or its fulfillment to fall below three percent.

7. The era when a denomination, particularly a new denomination, can provide all the materials and other resources needed by congregations is over. That was a 20th century model, and it is no longer a relevant system. Brokering is a much preferred way to provide the materials and resources needed by congregations than is trying to be the producer of materials and resources.

It is appropriate to assess available resources and interpret their value and impact for congregations. It is also appropriate to commission the development of resources and materials

that do not exist. However, do this in such a way they can be produced and marketed to congregations beyond those affiliated with the new emerging denomination.

8. Build the new denominational movement around partnerships with appropriate institutions and organizations rather than establishing these. Develop formal partnerships with established and emerging institutions, parachurch organizations, and even for-profit businesses where competencies exist that are needed by the denomination, but especially by the congregations.

For example, rather than having colleges and seminaries with an organizational relationship with the denomination, build and fund—as appropriate—leadership development partnerships with colleges and seminaries that speak directly into the core vision and strategy of the new denominational movement. Direct impact and capacity building should be able to be measured. These relationships should be renewable every three to five years, and not be permanent relationships.

9. Begin with a concept of multiple funding streams for the new denominational movement. Never become dependent on one stream. It is appropriate to have a foundational funding stream that is composed of a percentage of undesignated receipts or dollar amounts that congregations commitment to the denominational movement annually.

It is also appropriate to have a limited number of general and designated, annual and planned giving vehicles for congregations, individuals, parachurch groups, and business organizations that support the work of the denomination. The number of funding streams should be at least a dozen.

10. While congregations are the foundational and primary building blocks of the new denominational movement, and while the necessary legislative processes and board composition ought to focus around persons from these congregations, it is desirable to create multiple means of affiliation. In addition to congregations, also allow individuals and parachurch organizations in friendly cooperation with the denomination to affiliate. This is not a substitute for congregations, but an enhancement to the affiliation of congregations. It is appropriate to have renewable and reviewable criteria for these supplemental affiliations.

11. Create and maintain management systems and processes that are lean and mean. Institutionalize a mandatory sunset law on management systems every five years. This will allow the organizational structure to be agile and responsive to the stages of development of the denomination.

12. Consider naming the new denomination something that does not use an already existing denominational brand like Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, etc.; that is, unless the desire is create a new sub-brand that is seen as faithful to a set of core principles of a denominational tradition. Do the latter realizing that in an atmosphere where denominational labels are often not a draw, but a distracter, that the growth of the new denominational movement may be limited by the denominational brand.

Other Thoughts Before We Take Leave of This Subject

What is proposed in this article are the principles surrounding the development of the next generation of denominations based on traditional 20th century denominational forms. An observation of North America will show that other forms are developing. There are pseudo-

denominations such as the Willow Creek Association. There are parachurch models such as Leadership Network and Acts 29.

The premise of these other models is different than that of a traditional denomination seeking to innovate, reinvent, or resurrect. They are more affinity-based. Denominations are more about a foundational relationship. Pseudo-denominations and parachurch organizations specialize in certain types of congregations, and—to the extent they recruit congregations into their movements—are able to do so in a manner that might be called “cherry-picking” the best congregations. That is generally fine and can be an empowering approach.

Denominations, however, because they have a foundational approach to working with congregations, have a broader variety of congregations. Thus they have a somewhat more difficult collection of congregations to empower because of a virtual no-exit relationship with congregations with various agendas, a diversity of visions, and a much greater percentage of plateaued and declining denominations. These plateaued and declining congregations are primarily contributing finances and loyalty to the denomination, but are not enhancing by their own missional action the progress of the denomination.

Important Things to Know

George Bullard is a Ministry Partner and the Strategic Coordinator with The Columbia Partnership. He is also General Secretary [executive director] of the North American Baptist Fellowship of the Baptist World Alliance. The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. **Travel Free Learning** is a leadership development emphasis. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.