

A Plea for Church-Strengthening Movements in Africa

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It has been called the “surprise story” of modern missions—the emergence of ‘Christian Africa’ (Bediako, 2000:3-4). In the last century, Christianity in Africa has seen the fastest numerical growth of any continent ever in church history. Down in South Africa, we in the Baptist Union have enjoyed a taste of this rapid church growth. But such expansion also brings unique challenges. In this article I would like to explore these challenges, first on a wider scale and then zooming in on the BUSA, followed by some biblical solutions and suggested strategies. *We must take a hard look at three critical issues that should compel us to launch a church-strengthening movement in the BUSA that will exalt Christ and bless the nations for generations to come.*

I. Our Need

Exciting growth

From a continent in 1875 that numbered its Christians in tens of thousands, to a continent with about 8 million professing Christians in 1900 (10% of the population), Africa now has close to 400 million who profess Christ (48.4% of the population, and 60% of sub-Saharan Africa) (Jenkins, 2002:3; Johnstone, 2001:19-21)¹. Estimates are that at least 4,000 new professions of faith are made every day in Africa, and that this is now the most ‘Christian’ continent in the world (Bediako, 2000:3; O’Donovan, 2000:1). Nearly one in every five professing Christians in the world is an African (Johnstone, 2001:2,19).

In his book, *The Next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins (2002) states that the heart of global Christianity will not be in Europe or North America, but in Africa. He says, “in 50 or 100 years, Christianity will be defined according to its relationship with that [African] culture” (cited in *CH*, 2003:2). The August 2003 issue of *Christian History* “tells the story of sub-Saharan Africa’s ‘Christian explosion’ in the twentieth century—a century that brought Africa from the periphery to the center of the Christian world, largely through the efforts of native African evangelists” (Armstrong, 2003). The inside cover declares, “The rapidity of Africa’s twentieth-century ‘baptism’ was stunning. There’s no better place to see the future of the global church” (*CH*, 2003:2).

Obvious concerns

Surely this is a cause for rejoicing, for Christ is being proclaimed and the gospel is spreading (Php. 1:18). But there is also cause for caution. Understandably, gospel advances are not tidy and they take place through feeble, imperfect human instruments and often under adverse conditions. Much patience and trust in the Holy Spirit is required in the face of slow progress. Yet this does not erase serious concerns about the way the gospel is advancing in Africa. If Africa represents “the future of the global church,” it is an uncertain future.

African theologian Tienou (1998:6) states: “The evangelical dilemma in Africa can best be described as proclamation without reflection. One observer put it this way, ‘Africa has the fastest growing church in the world: it may also have the fastest declining church!’

¹ Out of these, 118 million are Catholic and 116 million are evangelicals, with 125 million claiming to be charismatic or Pentecostal (some evangelicals, others not) (Johnstone, 2001:19-21). 78 million professing Christians are in African Independent churches, which are especially prominent in South Africa (particularly the Zion Christian Church) where they comprise 36% of the total Christian population, i.e., 15 million (Kombo, 2001:173)!

Numerical growth far outpaces spiritual depth and maturity in African Christianity". Tienou (2001:162) goes on to say, "I consider the deepening and the nourishing of the faith of those who identify themselves as Christians [in Africa] to be of the utmost urgency". Van der Walt (1994:109) likewise warns, "A fat, but powerless Christendom – that is the danger facing us when Christianity grows as rapidly as it is doing at present on the African continent". Many are now observing that Christianity is shifting southward and becoming increasingly non-Western (Maluleke, 2000:x; Jenkins, 2002:2). But Africa will also miss the opportunity to set the pace and the example unless her churches are better established in the faith.

Anyone doubting the shallowness of Christendom in Africa need only look at the moral and political chaos in countries where the vast majority of the population has claimed the name of Christ for years. Probably the most graphic depictions of this nominalism are the horrific genocide in supposedly "80% Christian" Rwanda and the brutal bloodshed in the supposedly "96 % Christian" Democratic Republic of the Congo (Johnstone, 2001:19). Ott (2004) points out,

...the matter of church health in rapidly growing movements has not been adequately addressed. The classic church growth movement was more concerned with numbers than quality. Events such as the genocide among "Christian" tribes in Rwanda, the rampant nominalism and syncretism in Christian churches, are well known problems. ... Rwanda is one example of very superficial Christianity having horrific consequences. Another example is the astonishing growth of AICs (African Independent Churches) and various independent movements that are for the most part quite heterodox, but attracting huge numbers of followers; many from established churches.

Many today view the phenomenal growth of African Independent Churches as promising (e.g., Jenkins, 2002:68-69; Anderson, 2000), while others have exposed the widespread syncretism and false teaching (e.g., De Visser, 2001). As for nominalism, Brierly's extensive study (Siaki, 2002:47) reports that only 49% of all those in Africa who claim Christianity actually hold membership in a local church. Another study reveals that in Kenya, "80% claim to be 'Christian', but only 12% are actually involved in a local fellowship" (Winter, 1999a:368). It is reported that in South Africa, out of the 30 million who claim Christianity only 6 million regularly attend church (Siaki, 2002:46).

Africa is not unique in this dilemma of breadth without depth. While the Western church declines rapidly, many of the churches planted in the 'mission fields' remain unestablished in the faith (Reed, 2000:73; Johnstone, 2001:13-14)². Reed (In preface to Hesselgrave, 2000a:9) warns:

...A growing number of us who were involved in attempting to reshape the missionary enterprise at the end of the twentieth century realize that something is drastically wrong with the contemporary Western paradigm of missions. We see entire movements of churches with an appalling lack of leaders. Almost all of these movements are on course for producing but a nominal fourth generation. Some argue that this downturn is inevitable, yet many of us believe that the biblical ideal suggests that the fourth generation of churches should be the strongest generation to date. With the coming postmodern global village, these churches must be

² Cf. Eller & Grossman's (2003:300-310) extensive study of the nominalism in Guatemala after more than a century of mission. They show how the churches began to think that more church planting could replace church maturing. Note also Ott's (2004) comment, "The rapidly growing house church movement in China is also known to be very susceptible to false teaching. Personal interviews with various persons who minister there confirm this over and over."

sufficiently strong to realize the potential of fostering a worldwide expansion of the gospel such as has not been seen since the early church.

Possible causes

Ott (2004) attributes this nominalism in Africa mainly to “weak leadership and shallow discipleship”³. When professing Christians quickly revert to pagan behaviour in times of trouble, the gospel is only a veneer and has not penetrated deeply enough to transform their worldview. Van der Walt’s (2002:16) diagnosis is penetrating:

Because the Gospel was not brought as a new, total, encompassing worldview, which has to take the place of an equally encompassing traditional worldview, the deepest core of African culture remained untouched. Christian faith only influenced and changed the outer layers of African culture such as, for example, customs and behaviour. For this reason it often led to superficial Christianity – totally at variance with the nature of the Christian faith, which is a total, all-embracing religion, influencing the whole of life from a reborn heart – in the same way that a heart pumps life-giving blood to every part of the body.

The average African convert did not experience the Gospel as adequate for his whole life, and especially not when it came to the most complex issues of life. For that reason we discover all over Africa today that Christians, in times of existential need and crisis, as in danger, illness and death, revert to their traditional faith and view of life. The Gospel has no impact in those areas where it really matters!

Solutions offered

One major solution to the instability of African churches is to develop trained pastors, since the majority of churches are still without one (both in Africa and worldwide) (Buys, 2002a)⁴. But training such pastors becomes difficult when there are few local churches mature enough to raise up qualified candidates and to apprentice them and model for them what biblical principles look like in practice. Rare is the seminary or college that can offer what a strong local church can in terms of integrated (theory, practice, and supervision) training. Studies also show that graduates who return to unstable churches often face such inertia that they never effectively implement change (Stamoolis, 2001:489).

Any diagnosis of these unestablished churches must go *beyond* the obvious need for leaders. Mission groups must not only ask, ‘*After* a church is planted, then what?’ More must start asking, ‘*How* should a church be planted and nurtured to maturity *until* qualified local elders are entrusted with leadership?’ (Patterson, 1999:595-605). The lack of qualified pastors in churches is often only a *symptom* of the root problem: deficient church planting. In fact, a multitude of problems in the African church and society can be traced back to the planting of weak, ineffective churches. Just supplying more pastors or more churches is not the most effective solution, and it could even increase the problem.

But once the core problem of church health is addressed, many other symptoms will recede. *Better churches* produce better people, better leaders, better marriages, better parents, a better workplace and a better society. The need for stronger churches in Africa is the ‘longest pole in the tent,’ the one issue which affects every other issue, the one solution upon which all other solutions will depend.

³ Cf. other observers concerned about this nominalism in the African church: many of Johnstone’s descriptions of African countries in *Operation World* (2001) describe the severe extent of nominalism and the dangerous consequences (e.g., Botswana, 2001:118); Tienou (2001:154-162); Buys (2000:16); Winter & Fraser (1999:368); Armstrong (2003).

⁴ Van Horn (2004) says that in Africa, “Up to 90% of the pastors in any given country have never received even one day of training.”

A case study - BUSA

One African denomination that is facing many of these challenges is the Baptist Union of Southern Africa (BUSA). BUSA has seen both rapid growth and need for depth. In BUSA, we are seeking to find solutions to strengthen churches so that we can also pave the way for other African denominations that face similar challenges. Time and again I have witnessed the instability of African churches in our work at Christ Seminary in Polokwane. Over the past six years, I have visited many young churches and have seen firsthand their dire needs for nurture. I have also spent hundreds of hours in discussion with the leaders of these young churches and have heard of the challenges they face because they were not well established at the outset.

Since 1990, BUSA claims that 413 new churches have been started (Rae, 2003), which has more than doubled the size of the denomination (Robbins, 2003:157; Rae, 1999:164). Adding up other BUSA statements yield smaller, but still significant figures: 376 or 335 new churches (since 1990) (BUSA Handbooks, 2002 & 2003a; Rae, 2001:7). The BUSA president for 2002-2003 has said, "A new BUSA church is planted every thirteen days" (Coertze, 2003). A recent ecumenical publication on mission in post-apartheid South Africa highlights the BUSA as an example of effective church planting (Kritzinger, 2002:58; Robbins, 2003:157). But in order to deserve such praise, the BUSA's proof must not be in just the numbers but in the quality of the churches being planted. Since these new churches represent over half of the BUSA, the health of these churches has serious bearing on the overall health and direction of the entire union.

The BUSA has acknowledged the lack of depth in many of its new churches, and has begun giving attention to nurturing them. For nine years, the BUSA had a General Secretary whose main burden was for more church planting ("95 [new churches] by 1995" and "201 by 2001"; Rae, 2003; Rae, 1999), which had been underemphasized in previous years. Now the current BUSA General Secretary, Rev. Scheepers, has brought a timely vision for strengthening these churches. This has been signalled by his thrust, called "Equip 2005", which has generated helpful training manuals for the churches, along with workshops for the church planters (BUSA Handbook, 2002:210).

Furthermore, this year Rev. Scheepers is launching "Impact 2010", with a slogan calling us to "reach *and* disciple," to "plant *and* to nurture" churches. This is an exciting emphasis on greater church-strengthening. The head of BUSA missions, Dr. Eric Robbins, also wrote, "Following the phenomenal growth of BUSA in recent years there is obviously a great need for discipleship, teaching, and consolidation of the work" (2003:157). Rev. Scheepers has said that he thinks the BUSA needs an entirely "new model" for quality church planting (2004). At Christ Baptist Church where I minister and where many churches have been planted or assisted over the past fifteen years, we too feel this critical need to strengthen weak church plants and improve church planting.

My research

It was because of these concerns in the BUSA and in our ministry up in the Limpopo Province that I embarked on doctoral research to see how we could improve the situation. I surveyed the leaders of about 250 of the churches planted since 1990, and I heard back from eighty-three of them. I combined this with many interviews of area coordinators and key church planters. If I had the space, I could mention many of the highlights and strengths in these zealous young churches. But in line with the purpose of this article, let me list some of the chief concerns that surfaced in this research:

- Over a third of these churches is being pastored by ‘remote control’. In other words, their pastor does not stay locally with their church, but either travels there on Sundays or weekends, or only goes two Sundays or less per month.
- Less than half of these pastors believe that preaching verse-by-verse through God’s Word is the best regular food for their flock. Over half said they’d rather choose what to preach along more subjective guidelines or just preach evangelistically.
- Less than one-third of these younger churches acknowledged any link with a mother church.
- Over half say their giving/tithing has shown no increase in the past two years (and what they are getting is tiny in most cases, far from being enough to live on).
- Only one-third of these pastors said he was sure that the majority of his members have a good grasp of the gospel.
- These churches have been in existence for an average of nine years, yet the average increase of adult members over those nine years is only eleven new members in total (they started at an average size of 20 and are now at an average size of 31 members). This would suggest that they are averaging about 1 new member added each year (about a 5% growth rate).
- The combined opinion of the area coordinators and numerous other key church planters and leaders is that *only 20-25% of these churches have become healthy or mature, responsible churches* (even though these churches are an average of 9 years old by now). These same observers also estimated that *just over half of these churches still do not have a capable pastor* or leader who has received or is receiving some kind of adequate training (even if it is non-formal).
- Many of us who have spent time in some of the newer BUSA church plants in the Limpopo Province have noticed certain patterns: the tent evangelism draws many more decisions than real, lasting disciples, and it tends to attract mostly women, youth, and children (which doesn’t form a good long-term backbone for a church); there is a severe lack of men and of whole families; there is a lack of good leadership; there is weak or shallow teaching of the Word; there is a strong charismatic influence and reliance on emotion over truth; these churches are often crippled by a dependency mentality (waiting for outside funding) and a lack of real *responsible ownership* for the ministries and the mission of the church.

This brings to my mind the rebuke given by one contemporary missiologist (Reed, 1992:138, 143): “One of the great indictments of colonial [and modern] missions is its consistent failure to establish associations of independent, thriving, and reproducing churches, filled with real leaders, able to think theologically in their own culture”. An African proverb says, “You can never abandon your own born child”. Yet I fear that too often this is exactly what we do in church planting, leaving crippled infant churches by the wayside as we rush off to the next church plant.

Yes, obviously there are *many* other socio-economic and cultural factors that have contributed to the instability of these churches. But most of those factors are out of our control; and, these factors cannot be blamed for *all* the problems in these churches. So it is more helpful and more hopeful to focus on what we *can* do to improve the stability of these churches.

II. Our Responsibility

Biblical principles

In conjunction with my field research, I did in-depth exegetical research in Acts and Paul's epistles to determine the biblical keys to building mature churches. It was a rich and rewarding study, and much was gleaned!⁵ What I repeatedly found was that strengthening churches was central to all of Paul's labours in missions and church planting. We find the Greek word *steridzo* (to "stabilise, establish, or strengthen") used four times in Acts (14:21-23; 15:41; 16:5; 18:23) and six times in Paul's epistles (Rom. 1:11; 16:25; 1 Thess. 3:2,13; 2 Thess. 2:17; 3:3), all describing Paul's efforts in nurturing young flocks. For Paul, *ensuring that young churches were well-established was a key to the very advance of the gospel and fulfilment of the Great Commission.*

Reed (2001:17) writes:

One of Paul's highest priorities was establishing the young churches he had founded. He would even leave wide-open doors for the gospel if one of his churches was in serious trouble (e.g., 2 Cor. 2:12-14, he left the open door to Troas because of his burden for Corinth). ...For the gospel to progress with any stability, with any kind of depth, with any kind of foundation, these churches had to be flourishing and a base for the progress of the gospel.

For Paul, the activity of "preaching the gospel" equally included *both* the evangelistic campaigns *and* the nurturing of new converts in healthy churches. In Romans 15:19 Paul makes a stunning claim to have "fully preached the gospel" across a region of almost 2,000 kilometres. This must mean that Paul was claiming to have left behind him healthy, well-led, reproducing churches in strategic city-centres—churches that were now able to reach their own regions for Christ. Bowers (1993:909-610) concludes:

A distinguishing dimension of the Pauline mission is that it found its fullest sense of completion neither in an evangelistic preaching tour nor in individual conversions but only *in the presence of firmly established churches*. ...What lies, in effect, within the compass of Paul's familiar formula 'proclaiming the gospel' is, I suggest, not simply an initial preaching mission but the full sequence of activities *resulting in settled churches*. ...He was not only proclaiming and converting; he was also founding communities (emphasis mine).

O'Brien (1995:42) reiterates this crucial lesson from Paul's church planting method:

From his *practice* of residential missions (at Corinth and Ephesus) and nurture of churches (1 Thess. 2:10-12), from his *priorities* (1 Thess. 2:17-3:13; 2 Cor. 2:12-13; 10:13-16), and from his *description of his assignment* (Col. 1:24-2:7; Rom. 1:1-15; 15:14-16) in relation to admonition and teaching believers to bring them to full maturity in Christ, it is clear that the *nurture of emerging churches* is understood by Paul to be an integral feature of his missionary task (emphasis his).

Reed (1991:9) punctuates this point, emphasizing Paul's plan to always establish a "beachhead of Christians" who could "go...and have an impact on their own community."

He knew that he had to stick with that plan, that the churches needed to be central. He also knew that if he kept going further and further out with the gospel and he did not have strong established churches, his whole base would be eroded. If his base was eroded, the gospel would not progress and ultimately he would have to take

⁵ For the full biblical research and the principles that I gleaned from Acts & Paul's epistles, see my doctoral thesis entitled, *Building mature churches: a biblical basis and African case study in church planting and church-strengthening*. Copies are still available for R75. Please contact me at: tandm@pobox.com or (015) 296-9920.

the gospel to them again. And, he would not have the additional help and reinforcement or the models that were needed (emphasis his).

God makes is crystal clear in His Word that we must do God's business in God's way, leaving the results and the growth rates in His hands. In the eyes of Christ, our Master-BUILDER, there is only one way to plant and build churches:

But each man must be careful how he builds... Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is *to be* revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss...(1 Cor. 3:10, 12-15).

Some cautions

We must beware of a paternalistic or relativistic attitude that says, "Well, that weak little church is better than what they had before, or better than the other bad churches in that village". Or, "As long as a few are saved, it's all worth it". Or, "This is normal, you usually only get a few good churches out of the lot". Nowhere in Scripture do you find that shotgun approach of 'plant many, get a few good ones'.

We also must not be deceived into thinking that just because we don't see much damage, there hasn't been any harm done and we can just hurry on ahead to new works. A crack in a house's foundation usually doesn't surface for a while; but once it does, it can mean big trouble. Here's what's at stake if weak churches are not well-planted and strengthened. These are some of the long-term consequences:

- If these churches are not well-planted, it can *dishonour the name of Christ* in the community through false conversions and unstable churches filled with sin, conflict, and immaturity (cf. Col. 4; Titus 2).
- By not developing good leaders, we leave the *door wide open to false teaching* to corrupt the church and lead many astray. (Some of the Zionist churches appear to be prime examples of initially shallow church planting.)
- Hasty evangelism can *harden people* to the gospel through either giving them false assurance based on walking an aisle, or leaving them disillusioned by a false conversion.
- By not planting these churches firmly, we only create *more work for the mother churches* down the line when they have to go back and sort out the mess, resolve conflicts, and un-teach so much error. (This is precious time that could be spent advancing the gospel and planting new churches, if the job had been done right the first time.)
- If these churches are not well-planted, we set a *poor example for the daughter churches* who will then turn and follow this model by planting their own (granddaughter) churches in a hasty, ineffective way. So the cancer of mediocrity and instability (and often nominalism) spreads and worsens with each new generation.
- If we are not building quality churches, here is the most severe consequence: According to 1 Cor. 3, one day *Christ will test the quality* (not quantity) of our work, and we will have to answer to Him.

Let's not forget that the Golden Rule also applies to church planting. In other words, plant the kind of church for others that you would want them to plant for you.

Who would want to hire an architect or builder who admits that out of his last fifty buildings, only five of them have collapsed within the first two years after they were built?! Yet those kinds of statistics are commonly accepted among church planters. One wonders how this kind of hit-and-miss approach to church planting has become so acceptable? Think of how affectionately and earnestly Paul laboured for the maturity of *each* church he was involved with. Surely he would see such neglect of infant churches as synonymous with *child abandonment*, an awful practice in the ancient world and in heathen cultures that was outlawed long ago. As another African proverb says, “Only a foolish woman throws away her own baby.”

Maybe we in the BUSA should, instead, start saying, “Since 1990 we’ve *started* 350-400 churches or fellowships and we are *still planting* them until they can truly grow and flourish on their own”. The hour has come for launching an all-out, wholehearted effort at strengthening these young churches until they are well-led, mature, reproducing churches that exalt our Lord.

III. Our Strategy

The key to developing this urgently needed church-strengthening movement in the BUSA (or anywhere) is to *equip churches and church planters to pursue a more biblical pattern of church planting and to not depart until the job is done*. This equipping strategy could unfold in three phases:

A. A logical place to start would be to *identify and develop hub churches* in each area, churches that can serve as vibrant Antiochs (cf. Acts 11-14) for their area. These sort of ‘grandmother’ churches must understand and own the biblical pattern for church planting. When there is not a strong or potentially strong church in an area, every effort must be made (even if it means a few years of cross-cultural mission) to establish a strong indigenous church there as a hub. There is *no substitute* for strong churches. No seminaries, no conferences, no associations or coordinators, *nothing* can replace the biblical role and the long-term impact of a model, Antioch kind of church in each area.

B. Next, the established, stronger churches must *teach and model* for the younger mother churches and their church planters the clear biblical pattern for church planting. When we study Acts and Paul’s epistles, we find that the three main stages of effective church planting are laid out for us (Acts 11-14, 15-18):

1. **Paul evangelised & gathered new converts.**
↓
2. **He established them in the faith.**
↓
3. **He entrusted leadership into the hands of qualified and capable local leadership.**

The missiologist Van Rheenen (1996a) confirms this pattern:

Developing a strong movement of God in a new city or ethnic area requires the accomplishment of three essential missiological tasks. First, initial evangelism must lead to planting new churches. Second, Christians must be nurtured to maturity within these churches. Third, leaders must be trained to evangelize and plant other churches, pastor and shepherd the community of believers, and train other leaders. ...While other mission tasks may amplify these three central tasks, a strong movement cannot come into being without their accomplishment (emphasis his).

C. Finally, we must help the younger mother churches and the church planters to *implement* each of these three biblical stages. The leaders of stronger churches must mentor and show these younger churches and leaders, step by step, how to biblically and practically carry out the evangelising-establishing-entrusting process in their own area. For example, in evangelising we must teach them to evangelise more strategically. In our region here, it seems that many of the churches in the black areas have started off on the wrong foot and laid a weak foundation by an evangelism that mostly targets women, youth, and children. I know this is tough because of the migrant worker situation, but in most cases there are still men there. But they must be sought out more intentionally.

One of our lecturers at Christ Seminary is Andrew Isaiaho from Kenya. Andrew joined us after fifteen years of pastoral and church planting experience in the African context. God used Andrew to effectively plant a healthy church in poor, semi-slum area outside of Nairobi, Kenya. He began in 1994 with a mid-week men's evangelistic Bible study for the first six months. Only after a core group of men were converted and being disciplined were the men urged to invite their families to come along for Sunday services. Now, after years of hard work, Andrew has left behind him a strong church led by a mature group of five biblically qualified elders and a growing flock of over sixty members. While planting this church, Andrew was bi-vocational, carrying another full-time job during the day so that he could provide for his family and not have to burden the young church plant.

Conclusion

My earnest prayer and plea is that these three issues – the severe needs, our biblical responsibilities, and the suggested strategies – will drive us to embark on radical church-strengthening movements all across Africa. In my research and discussions with key BUSA leaders over the past few years, this burden continues to weigh on my heart: *In order for the gospel to steadily advance through the BUSA (or anywhere in Africa), mother churches must take responsibility for strengthening younger churches until they are well-led, mature, reproducing churches.*

Evangelism and church planting must never stop. Expansion and multiplication must never stop. But, if we want it to honour Christ and bring lasting results, it must be *married to a church-strengthening movement*. Biblically, there should be no divorce: church planting and *church strengthening* should be one flesh. What God has joined together, let no man separate.

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