

Long Live the Organic Church!

Sustainability and Longevity of Organic Church Movements

By Neil Cole

My wife is very health conscious. She likes to buy groceries at places that sell organic food. I found out that organic groceries go bad quicker than those that contain artificial preservatives. Is that true for all things organic, even churches? Will our movement eventually die? Is there an expiration date for organic church?

Mark Galli wrote an article in *Christianity Today* called "Long Live Organic Church!" In it he is flattering of some of the organic church movement leaders like Alan Hirsch, Frank Viola and myself, but he expresses concern for our wellbeing. Fear that the bitter disappointment of seeing the inevitable failure of our movement may cause us to become bitter and fall out of service is implied in the article. While I appreciate his kind words, I must say the article came across rather depressing, fatalistic and perhaps even a tad bit patronizing. I trust he didn't mean it that way.

The concerns he expresses are not just valid; they are haunting realizations I have lived with for over a decade. Sustainability, longevity, the threat of institutionalization are all subjects I have thought about considerably. On the other hand, holding unreal expectations and the disillusionment that can result has not ever been a concern of mine.

What is success?

Well, first, I do not live for success but to follow Christ everyday. If when my life ends I have only a handful of faithful followers that can carry on the work I will not be ashamed to meet my Lord. Reading 2 Timothy 4, Paul was in much the same place, but he said he finished the course and kept the faith. But, he also transformed the world! He planted seeds that bore fruit for generations to come (we are the fruit of his life). Eventually, even the mighty Roman Empire surrendered to the unstoppable faith. There were some things put into place that would bring lasting change throughout the centuries. There were other things that lasted only a generation or two. I think that is the way of true awakenings. Some new ideas stick forever, others only for time.

Is our movement doomed to fail? Can the world be changed by the power of the gospel? Is it possible to keep the movement alive and not turn out to be institutionalized with detrimental side effects?

My mentor, Bob Logan has said: "Success is finding out what God wants you to do and doing it." I think that is really the truth. As long as there is a living and communicating God this success is available to us all.

I refuse to be paralyzed by the fear of failure, I will press on to my last breath to see Christ proclaimed in this generation. I have held firmly to a quote from the late missiologist Ralph Winter: "Risk is not to be evaluated in terms of the probability of success, but in terms of the value of the goal."

The Inevitability of Institutionalization

Galli points out that every movement has an expiration date and that their actions will inevitably produce unwanted consequences in the future. I will not refute his point as history is soundly in support of his hypothesis. We have wondered about this for some time now and asked ourselves if it is impossible to stop the death, is it at least possible to delay the decay of institutionalization.

Ten years ago we were not a movement. Back then we were just a few of us scheming and dreaming for one. Even then, we asked the question: What prevents a vital movement from becoming institutionalized? We recognized that every denomination was once a movement that became institutionalized.

We wondered if we could take steps even before the movement was moving to prevent institutionalization from creeping in later. We even decided to establish some policies to prevent institutionalization, only to find out that doing so took us ten steps closer to institutionalization not further from it. We stopped immediately. We began to pray and seek the Lord about how to keep our future movement from becoming another denomination. Is that even possible?

What delays the decay of institutionalism for a movement like ours? Ironically, our sustainability is directly tied to our willingness to not be sustained. As long as we cling to Jesus and His life with white knuckles and release everything else we will continue in vitality. When we let go of that life and cling to our reputation, methodology or organization we will begin to decay. Institutionalization is directly related to a protectionist approach to ministry.

Is the Organic Church Movement Sustainable?

In every city of America there is at least one church with a building worth hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of dollars. This church meets every Sunday morning with only eight to ten silver and blue haired women and one or two balding gentlemen for a "service". They sing a hymn or two, one of the stately gentlemen shares a few opinions of things in the world today, they say a prayer, amen and then go home.

Empty parking spaces, silent pulpits and dusty pews cry out for days of glory gone by. The church has been dead for years, perhaps decades, but has been kept alive unnaturally by an artificial life support system. The soul is gone, brain waves have ceased, but mechanization keeps the lungs breathing, the heart beating, and the door opening every Sunday morning at precisely 10 AM.

Why? We are so desperately afraid to admit failure that we will keep the church alive as long as we can. It is as if the continuity of Christianity depends upon this one church staying alive. If the church dies God has failed, and we cannot allow that.

Why are we so desperate to keep churches alive? While I know that the church is special to Jesus (His bride!) I think we have lost touch with something very spiritual...death. Can it be that death is as spiritually right as life?

The Sin of Self-Preservation

While we clearly avoid a theology of death, the opposite is not a theology of life, for life is not what you will find in churches that strive to avoid death at all costs. I don't know how it happened, but sometime in history we bought into a theology of safe. We think that we should do what is safe, for ourselves, for our families, and for our churches. In fact, we are convinced that anything that is unsafe must be outside of God's will and is thoroughly un-American and un-Christian. A theology of safe is put in place as a defensive measure to avoid death. This leads us right down the path of self-preservation.

We often approach church and ministry with a theology of SAFE.

Safe is...

Self-preservation = our mission
Avoidance of the world and risk = wisdom
Financial security = responsible faith
Education = maturity

Does that not describe many of the churches, denominations or ministries you have encountered? Some of you have been on elder or deacon boards that are perfectly described by this acronym. I know I have. In fact, it almost seems like our default response. Our instinct is to preserve our life. It seems so natural to surrender to the current that is self-preservation. It is a fight to stay close to a theology of death.

Johannes Hoekendijk, a Dutch theologian who taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York during the 1950s, once defined the church's well being as, "when she cannot count on anything anymore but God's promises." That is life!

Self-preservation is actively choosing an alternative to the life of our God. It is a direct move away from faith in the life giving and sustaining Savior. God created us with an instinct for self-preservation. It is not a sin to want to live. It is human instinct to want to survive. It is a sin to want to live without God's life source. Use that desire to live as motivation to die, for that is the only path that leads to true life in God's upside-down kingdom.

Preserving oneself separate from God's life is not just a sin; it is blasphemy. It is taking your own place as the life-giver. Self-preservation means that you are the one who gives and sustains life, which is blasphemous. It is also the path to self-destruction, not life. As Jesus said so strongly and repeated often: "The one who finds his life loses it." (Matt. 10:39) As a consequence of the sin of self-preservation, literally tens of thousands of Christians and churches are deceived into a "churchianity" that is carried out by men, for men, under the name of God. I wonder if God likes getting the credit for all of the crap we do.

When presented with the choice: self-preservation or the cross, for the servant of God there should be no choice. We follow Christ to the cross or we do not follow Him at all. He said, "If any wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, pick up his cross and

follow Me.” (Luke 9:23-25)

Jesus said clearly, “He who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it.” (Matt. 10:39)

Why is death to self so important? Well consider this, without death you cannot have a resurrection. Without death there would not be any Gospel or salvation...or even life itself. Perhaps it is time that we embrace a theology of death.

This is what a theology of death looks like...

- Die daily to who we are
- Empowerment of others (not self) is our life
- Acceptance of risk is normative
- Theology is not just knowledge, but practice
- Hold tight to Christ with an open hand for everything else.

Unless we are willing to die we will not live. It is that simple. Death is the path to life. Conversely, holding on to life appears to be the path to death. We are to die to self because it is the only way we can live for Jesus. We can only have one master. Either we will live for ourselves or we will live for Jesus. This is why we must put ourselves to death every day.

The words of Jesus having to do with death are usually only applied to an individual—a disciple. And the verse should be applied in this way. I have found, though, that the truth contained is a universal principle, which also applies to any organization made up of disciples, such as a church.

More than once, in fact, I have found myself in a place where I was a voice of leadership to a dying organization. I have “pulled the plug” on ministries a few times. I am the Doctor Kervorkian of Christian organizations. I have had to preside over the deaths of a bible study, a Sunday School, a church and a publishing ministry board. In each case I have led the people involved to understand that death to the organization is the best solution.

What is ironic is that all the organizations I have had the courage to lead toward death have never died. If anything, they were already dead; I simply said it out loud. When we actually “pulled the plug” publicly the ministries all were reborn with new life and new vision. The actual acceptance of death ignited a spark of life for each one and a new identity for the organization followed. That is when I discovered that these truths that Jesus is giving to us are universal laws that can also have a corporate application, and not merely individual.

Just as Jesus said, “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake is the one who will find it.” Every time I have decided to acknowledge a dying ministry and we decide to die, we have actually chosen the very thing that brings life!

In fact, I have come to believe that the health of any organization can be evaluated in

direct proportion to its willingness to die. The more vested they are in self-preservation the less health they will have. The more willing to die so that the Kingdom can flourish, the healthier the organization is. Perhaps you should take a minute and do a little self-evaluation in this regard with your own church or ministry.

Imagine all that would happen if our churches adopted a theology of death in a city. What would happen if the First Baptist Church viewed the First Brethren Church as their own family and sought their welfare above their own and vice versa? What if the Pentecostal Church was more interested in the success of the Presbyterian Church than their own? What if these churches shared their resources freely and generously? I guarantee you that God would be pleased and honor such love. I also am confident that the people of the city would notice it. I imagine that the entire spiritual climate of the city would be shifted.

This is counter intuitive. It is the opposite of the norm, and it is so right. The results would be a vibrant faith and life.

Can We Change the World?

Galli raises this question in the article. He seems to feel that the answer is no. We are to make disciples of all the nations to the ends of the earth. In doing so, Paul and his associates turned the whole world upside down (Acts 17:6).

Is transformation of society the true mark of a movement. Yes, I think it is. As I have said to many who question our legitimacy, it will not be our contemporary experts and critics who will give us our validity, but future historians. I often think of the future historian and their perspective when I look at things, it helps to gain a bigger and broader perspective of the here and now.

If we truly saturate our society with vital followers of Christ capable of making disciples, the world will change. I believe that simply connecting God's children to their spiritual Father in such a way that they listen to His voice and courageously follow His lead will transform society in broader, holistic and longer lasting ways than anything else we try. But the change will not be for every generation. In fact, it could very well be that thinking the decisions we make today will be permanent causes our most serious problems in the first place. We end up establishing methods without the people hearing from God themselves and making their own choices and the result is a lifeless religious institution.

Can We Change the Future?

Homer Simpson once said: "I guess people never really change; or, they quickly change and then quickly change back again." In a real sense, all transformation is only momentary. There is a reason for this. We are called to live in the moment. Love is always a choice and we are to love God with our whole being...everyday. Who you are is really a lifetime of decisions made in specific moments, which make up the person you see in the mirror. God wants us to choose him every moment of every day, not just once at a middle school retreat campfire.

From the point of view of the historian, one generation cannot make the decisions for the generations that follow. Each generation must face its own tests and make its own choice. Our children do not become Christians because we chose to follow Christ, but because they do. If they are only living out the choices of their parents their faith is not true and will remain fruitless religious conformity. This is also true for religious organizations.

That relieves us of having to be responsible for how the future looks, except that our decisions now lay seeds for the future and set an example for others to follow. That is what I hope to do with my own life. As Paul said of David: "He had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay."

At the same time, who can argue that William Wilberforce did not leave a lasting mark on history? Martin Luther is remembered in more than just the Lutheran family because so much changed from his life. Some changes in values do shape the future culture. People can leave behind lasting contributions to the future, which is usually the desire of every artist, scientist and politician. Our legacy can be more than a street named after us, or a building on some college in the Midwest.

What can we leave behind for future generations?

1. *An example.* I have learned much by studying the lives of people like Paul, Count Zinzendorf, John Wesley and Watchman Nee. Perhaps our grandchildren's grandchildren can study our lives and learn something to apply to their own generation. Hopefully, they won't mindlessly do what we did, any more than selling tickets to a seat in the pew will work for me like it did for Wesley. The process of contextualizing truth for a new generation is dynamic and produces more than better methods but more enlightened leaders as well.
2. *Written enlightenment.* Many today cite a book written almost a century ago: *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?* by Anglican missionary Roland Allen. When I write I think first about the immediate impact upon a leader today, but I also wonder what relevance the book will have 75 years from now. I probably don't hit the second target very often (the first target is also debatable), but I do aim for it. We all stand on the broad shoulders of previous generations.
3. *Changes in cultural values and laws.* Sometimes the work of a few becomes the legacy to the many. Where once slavery was the norm for virtually millennium, today it is seen as an abomination because a few people, Like Wilberforce and the Quakers instigated a movement.

All of these changes can be lasting and inform the future, but nonetheless the leaders of the future will have to face their own tests and make their own choices. We cannot do that for them and any attempt to establish a system that will override the free will of future leaders is actually the very thing that brings about the slow death of institutionalization.

Suicidal Tendencies

Church Multiplication Associates, having figured out the content represented in this article so far, has attempted to live by these principles. We remain vibrant and alive because we choose to not maintain our life. In fact, as an organization goes, we have consistently made suicidal corporate decisions.

Indications of our suicidal tendencies are all over the place. We have many resources we have spent money, time and energy producing that end up not reproducing in multiple contexts and are now collecting dust on a shelf. We call it the Shelf of Shame. Many of the resources on this shelf produce excellent addition results (church growth) in a specific cultural context, but will not work overseas or will not produce exponential results. We could make a profit by making these tools available to the church growth market. Even though we have a vested interest in the success of these resources, we chose instead to not make them available to others.

I have found that good is often the enemy of the best, so we shelve anything that is less than fruitful in multiplicative results on an international scale. I believe any healthy ministry should have a shelf of shame where they are willing to put aside valuable resources that no longer are contributing to the overall purpose of the organization. This is an expression of dying to oneself and the life that comes from it is found in the vital resources that have passed the scrutiny of the shelf of shame. Because we were willing to allow good ministry tools to die better ones emerged in their place, thus proving the concept that if we die for Christ's sake we will find life.

For three years in a row we have lost thousands of dollars hosting a conference for our leaders. A business could never survive with such decisions, but we are not a business. We believe that God wanted us to host the conference and that if that were so He would provide, and He has. I have to wonder if God is more gracious in provision because we are generous in this way.

The Greenhouse Organic Church training is by far a key factor in our success as a movement. It has nearly doubled in people being trained every year. If we had a self-preservationist mentality we would consider the Greenhouse our bread and butter staple and protect it, but we do not. We decided to give it away to any faithful practitioner who asks for it. We will give them the complete powerpoint, sample film clips and workbook masters to anyone who asks as long as they have started three to five organic churches after they went through the training. By not protecting our bread and butter but giving it away we have doubled and then tripled the number of proven trainers and our movement has longer legs because of it.

These are just a few of the examples of how we have chosen to not sustain ourselves in conventional ways so that God Himself can be our source of provision and life. It is our hope that as long as we cling with white knuckles to Jesus for our sustenance and hold loosely to all else we will continue to have a vibrant expression of life and delay the decay of institutionalization. That is our theory and it has been proven right so far. Who knows how long our movement can live if we are unwilling to keep it alive?