

## *What about the Lifespan of Organic Churches?*

By Neil Cole

One of the common questions I am asked about organic churches is regarding their lifespan. In discussing the longevity of organic church movements, we must address the fact that organic church communities typically have far less longevity than more established institutional expressions. I do not deny this even though having only been at it for ten years now we hardly have any empirical data. I believe, however, that a movement's longevity is not determined by the lifespan of the churches alone.

The contrast between micro churches and mega churches has often been compared to the differences between rabbits and elephants. The analogy is about the reproductive rate of very different creatures. Compare the two:

<b>Elephants</b>	<b>Rabbits</b>
Fertile 4 times per year	Almost continually fertile
1 baby per pregnancy	Average of 7 babies per pregnancy
22 month gestation period	1 month gestation period
Sexual maturity at 18 years	Sexual maturity at 4 months

If you locked away a male and female elephant for three years, you may end up with three elephants. If you locked away a male and female rabbit for the same time, believe it or not you would need a much larger room! At the end of three years you could have 476,000,000 rabbits.

The rate of reproduction is significant in the success of a species. Both rabbits and elephants are beautiful living creatures that reproduce. The elephant lives much longer than the rabbit—but the rabbit will never be on an endangered species list. The elephant often is. In fact, the earlier variety of elephant known as the Woolly Mammoth is extinct, never to walk the earth again. The world would be a lesser place if either species were eradicated. But there is something more to the analogy. This is a lesson for us about the longevity of a movement, not just its reproductive rate. When it comes to survival of a species a rapid reproductive rate is far more potent than a long lifespan.

### **From a Single Legacy to a Saturating Presence**

The survival of a species is determined by a few factors: birth rate, longevity and death rate. From the year 2000 to 2005 there have been 4,009 new conventional churches planted and 3,707 churches that died—a net gain of about three hundred. (David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007, p. 120) I guess that means we can continue. But there is one other factor we must measure if we want to survive. We must also consider the population increase of our nation; then we can calculate how many churches must be in the plus side of the equation if we truly want to determine viability.

According to David Olson's work in *The American Church in Crisis*, we needed to have a gain of 3,000 more churches than we did during that same time period just to stay even with population growth! (Olson, p. 120) To actually break-even we needed to start ten times as many churches. So we are not staying steady, we are rapidly losing ground, heading past irrelevance and nearer extinction every year.

The question of sustainability and longevity is not just an intellectual exercise. It is not just our influence on society that we are talking about but our very survival. Christ will build His church and we will survive, and I believe the rising organic church movement is part of His solution.

While the lifespan of the organic churches is shorter than more institutional churches, the reproductive rate is many times higher. In a recent survey of CMA leadership nearly one hundred percent of the churches represented (52:53) had planted a church in the previous year. Of the churches that started a new church in the previous five years 30% of them started six or more new churches. About 30% of our daughter churches have had grand-daughter churches.

While more institutional expressions of church have a longer potential lifespan, more organic expressions have far greater reproductive rate. Both qualities factor into the longevity of a movement. Many prefer the longer lifespan; CMA has chosen to invest more in the reproductive rate. It is not really possible yet to determine the lifespan of our organic churches as we have only been at this for about 10 years. I am currently part of a church that is thriving nine years after its initial birth.

In the church world a lengthy lifespan has been the primary concern for a long time. I believe that for far too long we have over emphasized the church's lifespan and over looked the church's reproductive rate.

For us, if a church lasts one year but plants 3 churches it is still a success and the life of the Church lives on. If a church lives 100 years and does not plant any daughter churches it is less than successful, no matter how large it grows. We are commanded to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...not to live forever as we are now.