

The entire trip to attend the Exponential Conference in Orlando was both an inspiring confirmation of my growing vision for church planting and a plenary investigation of what needs to happen in a planted church to bring glory to God and the gospel into a community. By diving deeply into three take-aways from the conference I will articulate here with greater clarity my vision for a church that may not yet exist, but I think the Lord may allow me to help birth into a community in the next year or so. That church will be founded on living the truth, power, and love of Jesus so that people will follow Jesus into God's family. So much of the Exponential conference spoke to that mission and filled it out with practical, theological, and philosophical elements. As a whole, the conference fueled my desire to be directly involved with church planting. I came away more certain than ever that reproduction is indispensable in a healthy church culture and I want to plant a church-planting church. The conference impressed this on me not in a hyped-up or fleeting way, but in a gut-level, confirmational way. But Exponential developed two other concrete pieces of my vision for ministry. First, ministry must happen together, that is, in collaboration with many parties. Second, discipleship must be smaller. Here I will explore these themes to incorporate them into a personal vision and plan of application from the trip.

***Church Planting: I'm In.***

Attending Exponential could not have occurred at a more appropriate time for me. Moreover, it seemed like every part of the trip was ordained by God specifically to address things in my life, vision, calling, soul, family, etc. Whether it was through plans I made for the trip before and on the trip, or "coincidental" things during the week, one thing after another surprised me with the specificity of their pertinence to me. Quite simply, it is as if God planned a

trip just for me to obtain direction in the very area for which I have been seeking His direction: church planting (Is it for me or not?). Over the last two years I have been steadily gaining vision for what I have concluded will be a church plant. Emily and I have even been preparing for “what’s next” (as we’ve come to call it) by sorting through and reducing possessions so we can be ready to move. We are actively working hard through counseling and conversations to prepare our family by growing emotionally healthier. We both see the need for the local church to integrate more into its community and see the gospel work into homes and towns in transformative ways that break the molds of “typical” church. There is so much spiritual need in our region of the state that my mind (and theology) have shifted from a compulsion to have a call into or away from church planting, to an Isaiah response to the “harvest and workers” prayer (Mtt 9:38): “Here I am, Lord, send me” (Isa 6:8), invigorated with a Pauline attitude to preach where Christ is not known (Rom 15:20-21). So, at Exponential my desire to plant a church grew and grew from the seed of an idea it had been.

First, Pres. Stumbo told his story of church planting based much less on a specific “call” from God and more on faith and boldness that *then* God ordained by moving the first town almost off the map and re-directing Stumbo and his friends to Evanstown, WY instead. Then Rob Parker stated that “the only reason churches don’t plant is fear” because they generally “lose” many resources when they plant (e.g. dollars, people, etc.). I am generally not a fearful man, but I identified that besides my idea that a church planter needs a specific call from God, fear is my main cognitive hold up to planting. “What will it do to my family?” is my biggest fear-based thought, but now I see more optimistic horizons than frightening ones in that domain. Parker closed with a challenge that gripped me: “Are you willing to intentionally engage in kingdom multiplication?” I am. Later, Danielle Strickland challenged us to get involved in

serving and knowing the marginalized and “other” by re-directing the words of “Reckless Love” to address others instead of ourselves: “There’s no shadow we won’t light up, mountain we won’t climb up to come after Muslims, LGBTQ, the poor, etc. to show *them* the reckless love of God,” and “If it’s none of your business, then whose business is it [to get involved with them]?” Albert Tate brought the challenge home when he said, “Christians all want to sit at the master’s table but not work in his field.” I immediately began thinking- and have not stopped since- about my theology of “calling” for church planting. Since then, I have concluded that one needs no specific call to plant a church. There is certainly room for that, but the decision is more one based on obedience and competency, than it is unique calling. We would have no global church if the disciples had not been scattered in Acts 8 and preached along the way. Authors Green and Allen pointed out that, while there was some strategy to Paul and the early church’s planting efforts, it was primarily rooted in their passion for the gospel and lost people. On this foundation I conclude that it is my intention to plant a church and if God leads otherwise, I am fine with that. At the last session, when Dave Ferguson invited attendees to come forward for a commissioning, I went forward immediately with deep conviction and great excitement. An older woman asked me how she could pray and I heard myself say simply, “I want to plant a church.” Exponential, then, was terrifically helpful in framing vision for how to plant and lead such a church.

### ***Ministry Must Happen Together***

Exponential’s theme this year significantly directs my conviction because church planting- indeed, simply being the church- requires great collaboration. Exponential’s Dave Ferguson opened the conference by stating that the evangelical church has done well with the Great Commission (“go...,” Mtt 28:18-20), the missional church has done well with the Great Commandment (“love...,” Mk 12:30-31), but the church has lacked in “the Great Collaboration”:

“...together” (Jn 17:21). Not only is this concept entirely biblical but it is also something I, too, see as instrumental for the next generation of effective churches.

To begin, church workers (e.g. pastors) must find gainful means of support for themselves and the ministry. One of the aspects of church planting I have been contemplating is the idea of bi-vocational ministry. I see the day approaching in my generation when many churches cannot pay their pastors, *and* the community’s where those churches minister will not appreciate paid pastors. In fact, I believe full-time paid pastors may even lose credibility in some circles and communities as more and more moral failures are broadcast nationally. Thus, the first element of “together” that I consider is how the pastor’s (i.e. my) employment can work together with everything else. I believe it can, vitally so in fact. I attended one of Ralph Moore’s seminars on the subject and he discussed how the world’s system can actually invest in the church without realizing it by hiring its pastors. Pastors need not debate between pastoring and “working,” he announced. “Why waste your time waiting for your church to support you full-time when you could start a career [somewhere else]” that more than pays your bills, it blesses your church, too! He believes that “the next twenty years will not sustain large churches and salaries.” We have sadly “professionalized” the gospel by equating pastoral ministry with paid church staff, Moore teaches. With Moore, I agree that our Post-Christian society increasingly disdains, or at least suspects, churches that require large budgets to function since the greater part of those budgets is typically for internal purposes (i.e. facilities and personnel). Such churches contort a pastor’s invitation to outsiders to say, in Moore’s words, “Won’t you come to my church and Jesus (so you can get us big enough to pay me).” It is time for a different paradigm.

I envision working in a business that puts me in contact with “regular” people whom I can treat with unparalleled dignity and love and, where possible, give a kind but bold witness for

Christ. This probably means I would work with a Christian business owner or start my own (which Moore and his friend, Myron Pierce, heartily endorse). Rooming with Nate Turnbull brought inspiration in this area. Besides forging a fast and fairly deep friendship on the trip, Nate and I dreamed a little about what planting a church and supporting our families might look like. One idea that particularly excited me is that of starting a rural fish and agricultural farm. This could bring jobs to a community, particularly to those from other countries who find limited employment. Farms and contractors often hire these workers and many are taken advantage of. What if Christian owners started a farm, employed immigrants of whom they took exceptional care, and then followed those workers' relationships back to their home countries to begin missional partnerships, micro enterprise, and innovative agricultural practices that could even transform whole communities abroad by rejuvenating less arable land? This could become a source of income that meets significant needs in communities here and abroad, all while cultivating a deep interest in the people, not the profits, from which a congregation could emerge. I can see farmers and their towns in rural NJ taking notice of an innovative farm that piqued regional interest in their town and developed local agriculture by building a culture of love, truth, and power. To this end, the warnings Bryan Halferty gave at the C&MA's pre-conference meeting about the ways church planting attacks almost every area of life do come to mind because being business owners and church planters requires "double vision": vision for church and vision for business. Will this result in a business that runs a church, or a church that runs a business? The tug-of-war is real, but perhaps it does need to be a "war." This brings me to the next component of "together": local partnerships.

I believe the greatest tangible asset (cf. intangibles of truth, power, love, the Spirit, gospel, etc.) a church has is its people who serve real needs. This was a key theme under the

“Together” theme of Exponential. John Stumbo called churches to practical service, saying, “I don’t care if your town knows you’re C&MA...But they need to know you’re *there*.” To one listener’s question about common themes among the 69 churches the C&MA planted in 2019, Stumbo replied: “serving local groups and needs.” Stumbo added that many Christians believe they are “trying to bring something people don’t want” (i.e. church, faith). “That is a lie! They do want it! They just don’t know it.” Hope, community, love, forgiveness, all that comes from the gospel- these are things for which people are desperate, Stumbo rightly asserted. Serving local needs is something many local businesses and certainly municipal governments affirm. Planting a church in cooperation with a business and making local service a core value of both gives more solidarity between the two parties (church and business) and pushes the focus from inside to outside.

Even if something like the aforementioned business never occurred, serving together with local groups is nonnegotiable for church plants. I plan to discover local service groups in whatever town I end up and partner with some to genuinely make the world a better place while living the truth, power, and love of Christ in bright, attractive ways. Service opportunities are also something my family enjoys together, so for them it makes ministry less about sitting and watching and more about going and helping (and having fun). That is a win! I will remember also what Oscar Muriu advised about serving: “Every time you go to serve the ‘lesser’ make sure you receive from them also.” Serving cannot resemble paternalism or condescension. Allowing those who are served to direct the servers is important, as is restoring their dignity as contributors to not only their own needs but also others’ needs. I plan to see service become a tool for empowerment of those who are served and not just the servants, though service is a wonderful leadership development tool also. In all, as Michael Carrion wryly said, “pastors smell like

sheep” because they hang around them in their environment and among their needs so much. May that be true of me and the Christians I serve beside at any church.

Finally, I want to build into a church a culture of creative collaboration between other churches and like-minded organizations. Ralph Moore mentioned that Hope Chapel, the church movement he led, planted churches of various denominations because they did not care about the labels like they cared about the kingdom’s expansion. Wherever I end up, I plan to approach every local congregation and befriend the pastors and suggest regular meetings for mutual prayer, encouragement, and kingdom collaboration locally (e.g. joint service projects, prayer summits, shared services, etc.). This collaboration would expand across cultures and countries, since, as Muriu stated, we have much to learn from others. In our society, Christians who comport themselves as listening learners winsomely gain respect if only because they contrast the current image of the average vociferous evangelical (e.g. Pres. Trump, et al.). Working, serving, and “gospeling” (*euangelizomai*) together is one ministry piece Exponential gave me.

### ***Disciple Smaller***

Two perspectives of “smaller” discipleship struck me at Exponential: the multiplicative potency of small churches and the efficacy of “small circles” of discipleship. First, small churches are wildly capable of reproducing quickly and systemically through a region. This is something I have held a growing appreciation for over the last year, beginning with research for Rob Reimer’s “Missional Leadership” class last semester. Terry Smith began the thought at Exponential by inviting small churches to engage in church planting because “little is much when God is in it.” Pres. Stumbo followed this trajectory by entreating Alliance churches to plant because it is “not a sidebar thing [in the C&MA]; it is core” to what we do. Multiplication must be in the DNA of every church, which means that the *size* of the church hardly matters for the scope or timeframe of if or when they plant another. After all, as Dave Reynolds pointed out,

A.B. Simpson started the Gospel Tabernacle with just seven people, “so if your church is over seven people, you’re ahead of Simpson!” Churches must, in Reynolds’ words, “give themselves away,” which complements Parker’s observation that churches do not plant because of the toll they anticipate it will take on their resources. Alan Rathbun described ways churches can and need to make multiplication normal because it is “biblical, central, and doable.” Stumbo warned that American churches too often build consumerism into their DNA, which keeps us focused on our church, not churches that could exist. To those who argue that their town does not need another church, Stumbo gives this challenge: “How many auditoriums and services would it take to have just 25% of the town’s population in church?” Likely far more than possible for the existing churches’ capacity. When multiplication is built into a church’s identity, giving away happens early and often, namely in the form of church planting. He suggested that churches without multiplication at their core unwittingly build into their formation a “sunset clause” such as, “Let’s ride this church experience out for us and then die.” This sparked a mental picture for me that hit a nerve.

Contrast sunsets with sunrises. Sunsets are easy to see because they occur during typical waking hours. No extra effort is required to look outside sometime around the dinner hour and observe their beauty. Amidst the waning noise of transit and outdoor activity, one can witness this natural marvel as if it were some signal flare to the end of civilization’s party for the day. But it takes more sacrifice to witness sunrises. One rises early, before much of society has begun its daily rat race. In the still and quiet, a gentle beauty begins to bleed into the black sky as heat from the sun burns away the chilly, stagnant air. Out of absence comes light, heat, and the cue for life to re-commence its cycles. Churches that do not plant enjoy the works of God on *their* schedules, with *their* agendas. Theirs is the sunset experience that marks not the beginning, but

the end of a ministry's day; they see beauty, but it is fading to black. Reproducing churches may emerge more quietly into voids and dark spaces. Their work may be unnoticed, and it is hard and sacrificial. But the beauty they see marks the beginning of life in a community; they see the possibilities of ministry's day revealed around them moment by moment. I want to work with *sunrises*.

Ralph Moore loves small churches, choosing them as the most viable model for reproducing in our culture. He notes that younger generations are critical of large "wasteful" churches that lack familiarity behind the professional excellence of Sunday gatherings. One fourth of the U.S. lives in towns of less than 25,000 people, but most churches and plants target the suburban middle class. The early church spread the gospel not so much on the lips of the apostles as on the lives of the average saint, argues Moore. I want to plant churches in small towns that intentionally cap their size in order to "force" outward multiplication, thus essentially planting many potential churches through each church over time. This retains multiplication in the DNA.

The other aspect of "smaller discipleship" that I found at Exponential is the idea of "small circles." I only stumbled into Pastor Steve McCoy's seminar of the same name because it was the last one to offer free lunch! It rocked my world. McCoy began Small Circle ([smallcircle.com](http://smallcircle.com)) to remedy the problem of discipleship, which includes emotional and spiritual maturity and leadership development, that stayed superficial in traditional "two circle" church models of large gatherings and small groups. "Small Circle not only focuses on making disciples, but producing disciplemakers," according to McCoy. The problem in American discipleship is systemic. Only 1% of churchgoers have discipled someone like Paul discipled Timothy. McCoy led us through a series of scenarios for which we gauged our comfort level with divulging

information about the issue in one of three circles: large gathering, small group, or trusted friend. *Your marital struggles. Your pornography addiction. You found drugs in your kid's bedroom. You may go bankrupt.* These issues across the board landed in “trusted friend only” for most. And these are the issues that, unconfessed and undiscussed, create secrets that kill spiritual life. Besides, contends McCoy, half the world are introverts who are not even comfortable sharing in a small group. He argues that Christian maturity and unity begins at a one-to-one level like Jesus and his Father enjoyed (cf. Jn 17:21). McCoy’s team has developed a free and organic method of one-on-one relational discipleship that begins with cultivating the relationship in spiritual growth and encountering the Word, and then leads to rehearsing the process to begin with another (i.e. discipling). Typical church models do not emphasize practices that lead to the greatest retention and transformation rates. McCoy disclosed that people remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, 50% of what they see and hear, 70% of what they personally discuss, 80% of what they personally experience, and 95% of what they teach. Leading people into deep one-on-one spiritual relationships utilizes the latter stronger practices. Here McCoy quotes Larry Crabb: “I’m more convinced that a certain level of life change depends on a certain level of relationship.” Therefore, I intend to form into a church’s discipleship paradigm the practice of cultivating (and creating opportunities and invitations to do so) one-on-one friendships for the purpose of personal growth and then repeating the process with another. Because McCoy believes the process is only truly great if it is repeated, he even calls the first book of four in his roughly year-long Small Circle curriculum (if one uses his tools) “Book 0” because he wants people to see that personal growth really “counts” when it is passed on to another.

### ***Conclusion***

Personal mission. Together. Smaller. It is fitting to observe that this is precisely how God works reproduction in his world. It does not take an entire city to reproduce a population. It takes just two individuals and from those individuals just two cells to bring another human being into the world, though it takes collaboration to raise that child. Wherever we find life in nature, it always comes down to the smallest number working together to reproduce. Reproduction is first microscopically cellular- but hardly ever independent (i.e. asexual)- before it is multiplicatively global. God's kingdom grows no differently. We long for mass revivals with thousands of conversions and by God's grace that has happened and will again. But every one of those thousands is unique to God. I am excited to collaborate with some others that God leads me to in order to dream and plant a church in every small town in northwest NJ through valuing multiplication, local service, and personal discipleship relationships. God used Exponential to shape my heart and vision for church planting in so many ways, but the above captures the most significant pieces.