­Text

Description automatically generated­

**“*Consider the Ant: Diligent Work to Become a Multiplying Church*”**

by Matt Rogers

The wisest man who ever lived invites us to “consider the ant” (Prov 6:6-8). The ranks of pastoral ministry are filled with men who have been diligent to study the Bible, prepare for ministry, and give themselves to the leadership of the church. Unfortunately, that same diligence may not be applied to the work of multiplying churches and leaders. Many current pastors aspire to lead a church that plants and revitalizes other churches, but often that goal may be purely aspirational. The result is multiplication by happenstance rather than intentionality. Those pastors might stumble into a church planting opportunity from time to time, but many lack a nuanced and well-defined plan to proactively pursue the task of multiplication. The Proverbial ant, in contrast, “prepares its provisions in the summer; it gathers its food during harvest (Prov. 6:8). Later, the writer suggests that “there is profit in all hard work, but endless talk leads only to poverty” (Prov. 14:23) and “the plans of the diligent certainly lead to profit, but anyone who is reckless certainly becomes poor” (Prov. 21:5). These wise words apply to much more than spiritual disciplines or marketplace vocations, diligence should be a defining attribute of pastors seeking to multiply (Acts 1:8).

This chapter will suggest four phases of intentionality that help a church move from aspirational vision to practice. A warning is needed at the outset. It would be easy to read what follows as a pragmatic gimmick or tool for multiplication. These prescriptive pointers, however, result from a robust consideration of the task of pastoral leadership and ecclesiology. This chapter assumes this foundation and will limit consideration to practical guidance due to the limited constraints of a single chapter. However, the reader will do far more harm than help merely trying to apply these principles without a foundation of healthy ecclesiology and polity.

**Circles and Gates**

Let’s think about the four phases of movement from vision to practice as concentric circles. Each circle has a gate that opens to the next concentric circle. Within each circle there are a number of habits of healthy churches, which, taken together, serve to discern whether or not the gate opens to the next circle, within which there will be another series of actions that the church should take. This visual representation describes this process well because church multiplication isn’t as simple as linear steps. You don’t do action #1, then follow it with action #2, and so on until you get to a new church plant. Instead, the leaders of a church should be doing a few things all at once before they move on to the next series of actions. We will work from the outermost concentric circle, which is the vision to multiply, to the innermost bullseye, which is the actual birth of a church plant or revitalization project.

**Circle and Gate #1**

What should church leaders do first if they want to multiply? They should focus on prayer, ecclesiology, preaching, and weekly worship gatherings. These are four areas that all churches, regardless of size or age, can address.

**First up, consider prayer.** All churches should begin by praying for the Spirit’s guidance in how and when they should multiply. We must press beyond merely the lead pastor or the mission pastor praying about this matter. Pastors should commit to praying about multiplication as a group. They should organize their meeting agendas such that they are not merely praying about the past or present needs of the church body, but also praying for future guidance in the work of multiplication. As opportunities for multiplication come along, the pastors should commit to seek the Lord’s help and direction through prayer, rather than praying after they’ve already made up their minds about what they want to do. Members of the church should pray also. Pastors don’t have to have fully developed plans for how and when we are going to multiply in order to ask the church to pray that God would send leaders and make the way possible for multiplication. A steady prayer of a healthy church should be for God’s help to multiply. It may even be helpful to point exploratory vision before the church. Such as, *“The pastors sense that God might be leading us to start a Hispanic church in the city. We don’t have the answers right now of exactly how we are going to do that, but we would love for you to join us in praying that God would make a way.”* There is power in the church knowing that we are expecting God to send our members and pastors out on mission. Multiplying churches are continually led by the unique outworking of God’s providence through answered prayer.

**Next, ecclesiology.** Simply put—churches will multiply the type of church they are—not what they say they are, but what they actually are. Churches might give money to fund other planting endeavors that aren’t reflective of their congregation, but those churches that are able to create a pipeline for multiplication will replicate the ecclesiology that defines their church. So, leaders should focus on developing the type of healthy church that forms future leaders as they are meaningful members of the congregation. These leaders will often build churches that model the habits and priorities of the church from which they are sent and not merely the theoretical constructs they’ve learned in a residency or internship. Therefore, multiplying churches focus on their own health,  practice the ordinary means of grace, and create a context where the Word is taught and obeyed. Of particular importance, multiplying churches should strive to ensure that they have a healthy, functioning pastoral team. Once these churches get into the nitty-gritty of multiplication, the elders will have to make a large number of prudential decisions that lack a clear biblical prescription; therefore, a healthy elder team that trusts and respects one another will be critical.

**Preaching is next on the list.** There is wisdom in highlighting the need for everyone in the church to know and teach the Bible. It’s also true that preaching isn’t the only thing that a church does when it gathers. However, it’s hard to overstate the importance of clear, accurate, and effective preaching for church planting and revitalization. In my two decades of engagement with church planting conversations, I have yet to see a church plant survive that did not have an effective and fruitful preacher at the helm and I don’t see many churches who multiply who do not have effective preachers giving oversight. There are different styles of leadership and personalities that can thrive as a lead planter or revitalizing pastor, but those who do this work share a gift in preaching (1 Tim 3:2). Good preaching is often cultivated in a church that fosters a high view of Scripture and of faithful exposition. Churches desiring to multiply can ensure that a sending assumption permeates their preaching. Existing preachers can, and should, use their preaching to convey their own work in sharing the gospel, discipling new converts, and investing in sending missionaries. Preaching should also highlight the regular means of multiplication within a church, such as the start of a new small group. Finally, a multiplying church can periodically have outside preachers who have been faithful to lead churches to multiply to share about the work and testify to God’s power, plan, and provision in their own multiplication endeavors.

**Finally, consider Sunday gatherings.** Does multiplication inform your church service, beyond merely a token mention on mission Sunday? Wise church leaders find ways to “missionalize” their liturgy from week to week. Multiplication shows up in the prayers that are prayed, the songs that are sung, the offerings that are collected, and the various priorities that are mentioned through the service. The weekly service provides a prime time to pray for another church planting partner and celebrate the work of mission through the church. Any time a church planter or missionary is in the worship service, multiplying churches should celebrate them, pray for them, and use them to model the work that is being done through them. If an offering is taken, that giving is connected to the way generosity empowers sending. It’s overly simplistic to pit mission against gathering. Rather, we should see our weekly gatherings as a means by which we are built up in maturity, wisdom, and worship so that we can engage effectively in the work of mission. In other words, we should swell (in size and maturity) through our gatherings in order to send.

These four factors—prayer, ecclesiology, preaching, and gatherings—serve to open the gate leading to the next circle. You might think of the gate as a question: “What is God saying to our church about what we should do next?”

God uses a focus on the aforementioned four areas to bubble ideas to the surface for the church, and especially the pastors, to consider. Sometimes that’s a new leader; other times it’s a need or a potential place to plant; sometimes it’s simply a member with a burden to pray. Leaders should watch for the hand of God’s providence to clarify what’s best next.  One word of warning—churches shouldn’t rush this process. Keep preaching and praying, keep focusing on building a healthy church, keep laboring to create God-honoring Sunday gatherings and see how He directs over time and be patient for the gate of clarity to open.

As God clarifies, begin to create something of a strategy map for planting and revitalizing by listing the locations and opportunities that make the most sense for future work. Here are some questions to guide that strategy map?

* What is our church good at?
* How has God worked in our church? Often you will find that churches are most apt to get behind work that models what God has done in their church. For example, a church that has been revitalized might be drawn to another revitalization project.
* Who do you have in your church? If you have a strong subset of people from one location or country, then that might make sense to start with that group..
* Where does the person you’ve identified as a potential leader feel led to go?
* Where are your church members connected? If there is a pocket of the membership who came from a certain city or country that they know to need a church, then you might start there.
* Where do we have connections? Consider how God is opening doors for effective ministry.
* What does our city and/or our region most need?

This strategy map can be a part of the ongoing eldership process, even before you have a clear leader picked out. When that leader is identified, you can then show that person that they are stepping into something the church’s leaders have been talking about for some time.

**Circle and Gate #2**

Then the leaders move into circle 2. Here the focus is on leadership. Who will lead the planting or revitalizing endeavor? The person is far more important to the long-term viability of the work than is a place or a project.

**Start by looking for people who rise to the surface.** It’s good and wise for churches to have internship and residency programs, but these programs alone will not plant churches. In fact, many of those in church planting residencies are not the type of leaders who can serve as the catalyst for a new work. Pastors have to do the hard work of seeing who rises to the top and would be a good fit for leadership. It’s wise to consider the qualifications listed in the Pastoral Epistles as the starting point for a leader’s character and competence. Beyond those, here are some questions to consider as you look for that person:

* Who do others in the church notice as above reproach and faithful in ministry?
* Who tends to make things better when they show up?
* Who is fruitful in making disciples?
* Who do those who are being baptized in the church credit with sharing the gospel with them?
* Who aspires to lead?
* Who might be interested in one of the places the pastors sense God might be leading them to?
* Who demonstrates good pastoral instincts?
* Who is a source of encouragement, and not a drain, to the pastors?
* Who is scrappy and finds a way to make something happen?

Leaders should ride the backs of those whose names show up as answers to these questions. Pastors should be seeking out these people for further conversation. It’s amazing how many current planters are doing what they are doing because someone saw rudimentary gifts in their lives and affirmed those gifts (1 Tim 4:11-16). If the church doesn’t have someone yet, then focus on people who are willing to pray for God to send that person (Matt 9:38).

**Once pastors have an idea of who that person is, then they should begin to foster deeper, more consistent, connection with him**. Pastors are well served to follow the Pauline paradigm to watch this person’s life and doctrine closely (1 Tim 4:16). To do this, they will need a front row seat to his life. The future leader will also need a front row seat to an existing pastor’s life. Such proximity cultivates a paternal relationship between the current and the future leader. There may be a formal process of mentorship, or an informal “withness” in which the existing pastors seek to bring the person close in order to assess and train. The same should be said for the pastor’s wife. Someone needs to get to know her, invest in her development, and ensure that she is qualified to take on such an important role. Be careful not to overcommit to the person early. Simply because this leader rises to the top doesn’t mean that he is fit for the work. Expect some starts and stops as you zero in on a leader only to find out that the character or competence isn’t where you want it. Have the wisdom to know when to course correct in the event that the leader isn’t moldable and teachable. Over time, some will demonstrate the level of competence and character that allows you to move forward in sending.

At this point church leaders will often say something like, *“What do we do if we don’t have any leaders like this?”* or *“We just don’t have anyone who aspires to the work and is capable.”* There are three good answers to that problem that also happen in this circle. First, **form partnerships with other like-minded churches who are planting churches.** Especially if the church is young, it’s wise to ride the coattails of a church(es) who have planted already. It’s a great gift to get a win by partnering with other churches who already have a leader and a plan in place. Ask anyone who has done ministry for any length of time and they will tell you that much of what transpires as fruitful ministry hinges on the quality of relationships. It’s all about who you know, so you need to know as many people as you can who are doing good work and come alongside them. In turn, sometime down the road, they may be able to come alongside you.

**Next, don’t be shy to recruit potential leaders from the outside.** Many times you can find future planters who are currently serving in other churches but who aspire to plant or pastor and aren’t getting help in their context. Or a church partner may have a surplus of future leaders and be willing to send someone your way in order for more development opportunities. Or, lastly, another church might have a leader who fits the needs that your elders are seeking to fill. For example, they may have a brother who is well qualified to pastor a revitalization work in a mill village that is just the fit for the need that you’ve discerned in your context. Also, **focus on age-graded ministries and play the long game with planting work.** Weave multiplication into children’s and student ministries and give the leaven of mission time to work into these young hearts. When the time is right, send homegrown pastors into the mission. Those who are raised and trained in your church are going to be loyal to those who send them and pastors will have the most access to discern competency and character from those who’ve been around the church since childhood. Finally, **don’t fail to recognize the competency and potential of those on your staff.** Some of the best planters or revitalizers are likely sitting in your staff meetings and they need a call and a push to leave the nest and undertake their own work. If you’ve worked with someone for a long time, you might need to see them with fresh eyes by giving them unique opportunities to lead so that you might see areas of growth. Of course, this will hurt—you’ll send your best leaders and lose some of your trusted friends.

This work on finding a person serves to open the second gate. Again, envision this gate as a question — *Do we have someone who aspires to the role and who has the character and competence for the work?* Once you have a person and some sense of clarity that this person is a good fit you can begin to press forward into circle three.

**Circle and Gate #3**

**Start by going with who you’ve got.** The person is far more important than the place or the plan, so be willing to scrap your plans if the leader in question is poised for effective ministry in a way that you hadn’t imagined. For example, you might be positioning your church to revitalize a congregation in the middle class suburbs, but God sends you a Peruvian brother who would make an effective Hispanic church pastor. Or your strategy map might include a major city on the West coast, but God sends you a pastor-quality man seeking to minister among a mill village community on the other side of town. Take what God gives you and develop it. One way to start the development toward multiplication is to discern if their developing leader is better suited to plant a church or to revitalize one. I would suggest this framework:

* A church planter is someone who excels in creating something from nothing.
* A revitalizing pastor is someone who excels in taking something broken and making it better.

Start there. If he thinks he is a planter, empower him to start something your church needs and see how he does. Maybe it’s a Bible study in an apartment complex across town or maybe it’s an arm of your church that seeks to share the gospel with the urban poor. If we think he is a revitalizer, give him something that is broken or underdeveloped in your church and see what he can do with it. Even if the ministry isn’t front and center to his wheelhouse, see what he can do in the short run. Need someone to develop a ministry for college students? Put him in and see how he does. Need someone to take a fledgling international partnership and cultivate a meaningful relationship? Let the potential revitalizer run with it. In both cases, give the future leader some basic experience in the type of skills that will be needed when he steps into the work.

**Then build the plan with plenty of margin**. Give the leader time to develop. Don’t rush into the work or articulate a predetermined timeline too quickly. Anyone who has planted churches can testify to the fact that this process is filled with many surprises. You’ll want to watch how the potential leader changes and morphs as added weight is given and as he and his family live in the spotlight of ministry leadership. It’s often wise to buy the developing leader some margin as well. For example, you might create a part-time role on staff or empower the future leader to raise some support in order to allow this person to spend more time in the church and around the leaders there. You’d also be well-served to give the future leader some formal assessments along the way. These can be related to theology and ecclesiology. The questions and answers can provide fodder for ongoing development and direction. These assessments may also inform places where the existing elders and the future leader may differ. Finally, the pastors themselves will need enough margin to give the time needed to develop the future leader.

During the developmental period, **look closer for the habits that will prepare this person to be an effective leader in the church**. Here are a few questions to guide this more detailed assessment based on some common patterns that tend to derail young or new pastors.

* *Does he share his faith?* While you can’t manufacture fruit, you want to see someone who is active in evangelism and faithful to liberally scatter seeds of the gospel.

* *Does he give counsel and care to people on the basis of God’s word?* It’s common to see men give lip service to a high view of the Bible but not depend on it when push comes to shove.

* *Is he respected by people older than him and people different than him?* Anyone can get like-minded peers to follow, but a planter or revitalizer will have to get older men and women to support his work. He will also have to build trust with people who are different in order to avoid creating a homogenous church. See if older and different people in the church like and follow him or if they merely put up with him.

* *Is his preaching improving?* You would expect that the more reps he gets, the better his preaching will become. Watch to see if there is incremental improvement as time passes, which would suggest ongoing growth once he’s pastoring.

* *Can he handle chaos?* Sometimes you might even want to create chaos just to see how he responds. Pastoral ministry can be seen as a steady process of reacting to unforeseen circumstances, so you’d be wise to discern if he crumbles in chaos or thrives.

* *How does he handle diverse responsibilities?* Is he always complaining about being busy? Does he run around putting out fires with no apparent plan? The early years of pastoral work require someone who can move into the mess and bring order. Help him learn to not resent thorns and thistles, but to prune them.

* *Is his wife likable and mature?* The one-flesh union creates a synergy that empowers healthy ministry. In unhealthy marriages or unhealthy wives, the spillover effect derails ministry. Make sure that she can handle chaos, engage with the complexity of ministry, avoid gossip and anger, and regulate her temperament to cater to the spotlight that comes from ministry.

As you ask good questions and develop this future leader, don’t forget the church you are called to lead. There are ways that your current leadership aids or detracts from the upcoming work. A primary way you help is to **lead your church to live lean.** This exhortation is primarily in the context of ministry programs and budget. There’s a nuanced discussion beyond the scope of this chapter regarding the dynamics of church size and the ability to send. Suffice it to say here—you want the church to be large enough and structured enough to be able to support those you send and help to sustain the work, but you don’t want the church to be so large and so complex with programs and structures that the pressure you feel to sustain internal ministries hinders your ability to send. You also want to ensure that your budget has enough flexibility to facilitate open-handed generosity to outgoing leaders, rather than being hamstrung by internal needs such that churches can’t send.

Finally, here it’s important to **cultivate relationships in the place you’ve identified for this leader to go**. This harkens back to the strategy map the elders made at the outset. Now that you have a leader and you know this leader, begin to foster relationships that connect this person to this place. As a pastor, you can leverage your reputation to call a party of leaders in that area who might be interested, gather an informational meeting at your church, or find ways to get this leader before those who might aid them in the work. It may be as simple as starting to pray with the leader in the place you sense they might be sent. It might mean linking them with an aging pastor in that area for ongoing conversation. Or it might mean paying for them to take a trip to their desired destination to explore the work in more detail.

You are now ready to see if the gate opens that moves you to the final circle: Do we have a leader, a place, and a plan that we can put before the church? If so, let’s move to the final circle.

**Circle and Gate #4**

**You start by putting the leader and the plan before the church**. This should come as no surprise to a sending church. Your congregation knows that you aspire to send, they know that the elders are seeking out opportunities, and they likely sensed you elevating the leader in question. You want to create a context where the members say, “Oh, that makes sense” when you put a plan before them. Use your membership meetings to disclose a formal plan. This allows you to highlight the developing leader and ensure the church is ready and willing to lay hands on that person and commission them into the work. Be careful, however, that you don’t present a plan that is too rigid. Give members enough information to show that you’ve done due diligence for the work, but don’t constrain yourself to a tight timeline or arbitrary structure. Even at this point in the development process, you should expect some challenges and changes.

Now you can also **give the future leader a backstage pass to elder meetings** or you may even deem it wise to formally appoint the man to the elder team for a season prior to being sent. You should never send someone else to start a church or pastor a church that you do not think is competent or capable to pastor in the existing congregation. This backstage pass is important because it allows the future leader to see the interworking of plurality in practice. In my estimation, this experience is a primary gap in the training for future leaders, many of whom affirm the biblical basis and practical wisdom of plural elder leadership but who have never seen it fleshed out in practice. Especially senior or lead pastors need to see current leaders in that role who know how to defer to others in love, give guidance and direction without dominating, and affirm the strengths of their fellow elders. The future leader’s ability to utilize and serve with other elders will often be the make or break issue with a plant’s viability. The leader also needs to learn how to find his voice at the elder table. For a season, the future leader will likely experience an adolescent season where a squeaky, shaky voice will be normative. They will need practice in knowing when to speak, how to speak, and what it sounds like when they are adding strength to a conversation in a meaningful way. One way to foster ongoing mentorship is to debrief the meeting with the future leader after the fact. Process his role in the conversation. Ask him questions about what went down in the meeting. As a lead pastor, share some of the challenges you faced in the room and externally process why you engaged the way that did.

**Then you can begin to empower the leader to build a team.** Again, this is a broader conversation since the dynamics of the place and the plan can dictate different strategies for the type of team you should send with the future leader. But, in general, ideally you want at least one other man who is elder quality to go with the new work. You also want a few mature Christians who can lend strength to the work of evangelism and discipleship. Then, you may see fit to have a few younger Christians who simply live in the location or who are interested in helping out. An often overlooked role is that of women in the work. Most lasting plants that I’ve seen over the last 20 years have had at least one strong, mature, single woman on the church planting team. She often aids in female discipleship, administrative support, care for the pastor(s) family, and the varied needs of early church life. Now that you know the future leader, you should know the type of people he needs around him to thrive. Help him weed through potential team members in order to develop a team that complements and supports him and his family in the work. You want to give the future leader freedom to recruit teammates. How this brother goes about recruiting is a tell-tale sign of his humility and submission through the process.

As this team forms, you should be ready for conflict. Conflict is a friend at this point. It allows you to see the relational habits of the leader. It’s wise for you to help the leader think through this conflict, since the ongoing work of pastoring will involve constant navigation of relational challenges. Expect the leader to have some bumps in navigating conflict well. As you watch them work through these challenges, ask whether their weaknesses are immaturity or inexperience that they will grow out of or whether there are habitual patterns that will disqualify this brother once he is out from under your care.

**Next, articulate (in writing) a formal plan for the sending.** Unspoken assumptions sink battleships when it comes to supporting the work. Make sure that the current pastors and the future leader are clear on what the ongoing support is going to look like. Obviously this includes finances. You want to make sure you structure a financial partnership that both models generosity and forces scrappiness. It is entirely possible to over-fund a church plant. You want to create enough tension that the future leader has to cast vision and build a support team for the work. But the partnership isn’t just funding. You also want to ensure that you have a plan for ongoing conversation, the potential for short-term trips, and any other ways that the church plans to lend strength for the new work. Try to get as much of this on paper as possible so there are not unnecessary surprises once the person is sent.

Finally, **allow the church to affirm, send, and support.** At the beginning of this stage you’ve already put the general plan before the church, but now you have a chance to commemorate the sending with the backing of the church as a whole. Akin to the Antioch church in the book of Acts, the church can “fast, pray, and lay hands on them, and send them off” (Acts 13:3).  The congregational backing both encourages the team that is being sent and holds up the model that sending is something the church does and not something a few leaders do in the back room. The level of public support also prepares the church for sending again.

This sending is not a one time thing. Pastors should continue to help the church foster relationships with those who are sent. This can be through adopted families who pledge to check up on the sent ones, or via care baskets at key times throughout the year. One huge blessing is having people in the church send gifts or notes to the children of those who are sent. The kids often feel the challenges of leaving and starting over in a distinct way and it is helpful for them to know they are not forgotten. Other ideas for ongoing support include annual mission conferences, helping scholarship those who are sent to conferences, or providing a vacation weekend for the sent ones to get away and relax.

Once they’ve tasted the joy of sending a new church out, you will likely find church members asking about when you are going to do it again. However, you should not be naive. The process of sending is painful. My wife likes to say, “Everyone around here always leaves and we always stay.” Such is the reality for sending church pastors. We invest in the work by sending extensions of ourselves and our churches to make much of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

The movement through these four circles and gates aren’t the end. In many ways it just begins the work of being a sending church. However, these four circles and gates provide a path of diligence for faithful pastors who want to send, and send well.

**.**