

# Starting churches that start with people who are just starting with Jesus...

By

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In the late eighties I was involved in starting multiple churches in Southern California. We had a strategy that focused on communities where thousands of new homes were being built and hundreds of thousands of people were relocating to establish a new life for themselves. The ramp up time from landing in a neighborhood to launching a Grand Opening worship service was somewhere around three months.

We ambitiously believed that God would help us land, birth, grow and reproduce a church in roughly one to three years, a season which we called a 'life cycle'. And, by God's grace, support from other churches, hard work and some flesh-inspired ambition we saw numerous churches celebrate their Grand Opening with great fanfare. Some of them even became nationally known mega churches, but not the great majority.

At the same time that we celebrated the growth and expansion of the church, however, some of us who were "on the streets" realized that we were leaving behind many of the people with whom we had started a journey of faith. These new friends... simply didn't comprehend what was going on when we invited them to a Grand Opening church service.

For these Sojourners, Church was not Sunday mornings and Sermons; it was meals in homes, discussions about Jesus and connecting at the local parks. The expectation that we would suddenly morph into this other THING seemed strange to them, and so they declined to participate and waited for us to turn back into ourselves again, but we didn't.

One man that I befriended during those years was a vice-president at a financial institution. He carried a lot of responsibility at work and his wife nobly picked up the pieces at home. We began meeting around simple Bible discussions and then he joined a men's group that met in my home on Saturday mornings. In those meetings, he came alive. He expressed that God was doing something in his life that he didn't understand, but thought was good. He wanted to experience more. With his family he agreed to have a Bible study meet in his living room with other friends and even serve red punch to children in his white carpeted family room. Sometimes we had 20 to 30 people gathered in his home. When it came time for our Grand Opening worship celebration, he visited once and then stopped. We never heard from him again in a substantial way.

To be sure there were other circumstance surrounding his decision to pull away from the new church, but I couldn't help learning the lesson of authentic spirituality at this point in my journey as a church planter. I'm afraid that what we promoted as godly activity and celebrated as a Grand Opening of a church was more like an item for me to check off my "to do" list than the launch of a spiritual community. Thankfully, I'm seeing a more organic, spirit driven approach emerge that honors a process we can all learn from as we follow Christ together.

I've described this more relationally real pattern of starting churches in terms of a

“life cycle” that begins with Submerging which moves to Emerging and settles into Converging before Submerging again. The process is not as neat and clean as these three steps would indicate... there’s a lot of overlap, but it describes something of the journey of the Church Planting leaders I’ve met in Seattle and other parts of the world as they form a faith community that emerges out of true friendships and loving relationships.

To unpack this alternative life-cycle a little more, here’s what I’m seeing:

### ***Submerge :::***

This begins with a leader and a few friends, maybe a family with some connections, kind of like the way Jesus sent the 70 out into the countryside of Judea while traveling toward Jerusalem. The co-laborers who submerge become an Incarnational presence in their neighborhoods. Whether they submerge in an actual geographic neighborhood or “relational neighborhood” like a college campus or gym is not the issue, they are experiencing the joys and agony of being with those whom they live.

In the process of knowing the people who share life with us, we also become known. When we submerge we are converted by our culture just as our friends are converted to Christ. WE in fact become more like Jesus, not less in the process. Going deep into relational connections we offer, I believe, two significant gifts to our “neighbors”... we offer the gift of conversation and the gift of gathering.

### ***Emerge ::: ::***

Through the significant relationships formed in culture a faith community begins to form and have a public presence. The band of friends begins to rise, emerge, with their culture communicating with words and deeds that readily translates the Gospel

message into the heart language of the “neighborhood”. One church planter I know began gathering friends together to hear Seattle street musicians and artists perform. Not all the Artists presented a Christian message, some weren’t even Christ followers, but the community now enjoys a monthly gathering of their extended family of 70-80 friends in the basement of a church where they hang out and listen, talk, drink coffee and do life. The good news, believe me, is not that they get to hang out in the basement of the church listening to music. The Good News is Jesus present in their gatherings.

The emerging church, the community of faith becomes known in their neighborhood almost as much for their choices as the life they experience together. People begin to see choices that represent investments in what is good and honorable. Artists, athletes, parents and students find ways to connect with one another around shared ambitions and even celebrate their relationships

Emerging is as much about blessing the neighborhood as it is becoming known in any public way.

Emerging churches know enough about a neighborhood to be a blessing. Often church planting activities start with the assumption that we can scientifically know our demographic group and then provide services that attract people. While some leaders find that approach suitable, the vast majority of new church leaders discover much more diversity in the lives of people they are reaching than any demographic profile would support. Getting personal in our neighborhoods helps the church become a blessing in personal ways.

### ***Converge ::: :: ::***

As I see it, faith communities that come together through this process of Submerging and Emerging, never entirely

leave this tension of ministry. They always experience the tug between what is now and what will become, between worldly culture and Kingdom life, between sanctification and glorification, between having enough and needing more. It's just that at some point the faith community, the New Church is strong enough to sustain their mission from within culture. They thrive while in tension.

Convergence is not finally arriving, but rather a place in a church's existence where they understand and can articulate God's unique call for them as the Body of Christ. The mission is sustainable and recognizable and becomes reproducible, not because they have "stuff" to give away but perhaps because they realize how much of the harvest is still untouched by their community.

It is the realization of distance geographically and relationally that creates a new tension among some members of the faith community to submerge again. Sending members to reach more people, to gather more sojourners, to discover what Jesus is doing will lead communities, and I pray, to multiply churches where they are and to the ends of the earth.

Where are you in the process? Do you hear the voice of the Holy Spirit calling you to be the Body of Christ for people who only think they've heard the Gospel? Do you hunger to express the Gospel in words and deeds for people who have learned to ignore the church? I do. I hope to have many more years living out the gospel and seeing the Light shower blessings in places where darkness previously reigned.



## Personal Bio...

Neil serves as a coach and equipper for church planting leaders in his role with Church Resource Ministries in the U.S. and various parts of world. His current projects include forming Church Planter Networks and developing several Missional Church Planting projects in and around the Pacific Northwest where experimentation is alive and well.

Previously he served on staff with New Song Church, San Dimas, California developing leaders for small groups and new church projects. Currently he coordinates a Church Multiplication program at the Northwest Graduate School in Seattle.

For fun, he watches over four kids with his wife Margaret while taking laps around "the Sound" for Baseball practice, skateboard parks, art festivals, camping trips and stops at the local coffee hangouts.

## Links...

[www.crmnet.org](http://www.crmnet.org)

[www.nwgs.edu](http://www.nwgs.edu)