

Organic Multiplication

Dave Patty, 1999

Multiplication is a tricky thing. As a young youth pastor I often visited other youth programs to see what I could learn from their models. One of the popular programs that was sweeping our area was a high energy, large numbers approach that had been birthed a few years earlier at an innovative Chicago church. I dropped in on two or three groups that had adopted this model, and, frankly, was not very impressed. The music was hot and the energy high, but as I talked to students I didn't sense a vitality in the walks with God or a hunger for spiritual growth. The staff seemed burned out and preoccupied with the details of running the program. All the props were there, but I didn't sense much life at the core.

A short time later I had the opportunity to visit the original version. As a skeptic I was not prepared for what I experienced there. Much of the structure and form was the same as what I had seen elsewhere - competition at the beginning, heavy use of music and media, large numbers of energetic teenagers. But something very basic was different, a difference that I sensed immediately, yet had a hard time explaining. Young people were passionate about reaching their friends for Christ, people talked in their conversations about encounters with a living God. The programs and the methods were somehow filled with life, a reality that impacted me even as a visitor.

I walked out of the meeting a bit confused. Why were the copies so different than the original? Something had happened in the process of transfer that had stripped the model of life, at least where I had seen it. Ministry had been reproduced, but the copy existed in form and structure, not as a true living version. The program was the same, the setting had been duplicated, the sound system was hot, but it seemed to me an empty shell.

Multiplication is a tricky thing. As youth pastors committed to the cause of global youth ministry we cannot be satisfied with single versions of effective disciple making ministries. Vital local youth ministries must be reproduced and spread, effective country-wide movements must jump over national boundaries and be multiplied in other settings. But how do we do this without losing the life that beats at the core of the original? How do we reproduce living things that grow and adapt, rather than just empty copies of methods and programs that worked in another setting?

As I have wrestled with this question in recent years, several metaphors have been extremely helpful. It seems there are two main methods of multiplication in use around us, the farm method and the factory method. One is concerned with multiplying living things, the other with effectively producing an inert product. One is engaged in organic multiplication, the other in synthetic multiplication.

The factory makes a valuable contribution to our lives. The products that roll out in ever increasing numbers can be a real benefit to living things. But they do not, in and of themselves, produce life, nor are they capable of reproducing themselves. As the system grows it needs an ever increasing infusion of resources - the factory needs raw materials and management, the distribution system needs to be maintained, broken machinery needs to be fixed. The moment external input is withdrawn from the system, it shuts down. The production line stops, the machinery ceases to function, and an expensive investment becomes a scrap heap.

On the plus side, factories and products can be quickly and reliably reproduced. All you need are resources and good plans and a Goodyear tire company that is effectively rolling out rubber in Denver can be exported to Gary, Indiana, and perhaps even function better there. Exact copies can be made and functioning structures multiplied.

Farms however, are a different kind of a system. Since they are concerned with producing living things, primary energies are invested in managing natural processes of reproduction. A farmer studies a life form carefully to determine the conditions needed for it to flourish and the dangers from which it must be protected. At the same time he recognizes that the growth process itself is largely out of his control. A carpenter can take his tools and some wood and build a wall, but a farmer cannot build a tree. If he did it would be inert and impotent, lacking both reproductive ability and the capacity to bear fruit.

A farmer has to obey certain organic laws that limit the speed at which he can expand his operation. Animals have set gestation periods and growth cycles that control the rate at which the herd can expand. Corn has to go through the entire life cycle of growth and fruit bearing before there is seed for another field. The only way around these limitations is to bring life in from outside the system, purchasing a couple of Herefords from a neighbor or seed from someone else's crop.

In spite of these limitations, the life at the heart of farming is a beautiful thing. As I write this I am visiting my father, who is an avid gardener. A few minutes ago I took a break and went out to inspect his work. He was on his knees in the rich soil, transplanting tomato plants and weeding around young broccoli shoots. Looking up with a grin on his face he said, "It sure is fun to watch things grow." He was working hard, but reveling in the fact that life was bursting up all around him, growing and producing fruit "all by itself".

I am convinced that if we want to produce lasting change, we must follow the farm model rather than the factory approach, and work toward organic multiplication, the reproduction of living things. This is a harder route in the short run and there will be great pressure to shortcut the process. But in the long run it has great power and the ability to spread naturally without losing its potency and power. Christ recognized this when he said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches." Matt 13:31-32

This approach was perhaps more natural in preceding generations when the majority of people worked the land or raised animals. Today we are surrounded by products, systems, computers and industry, all of which are producing inert products. We watch as well crafted companies such as Coca Cola and McDonalds penetrate the far reaches of the globe with a packaged approach that seems to work in almost any setting. These approaches can become our primary models as we seek to spread the Kingdom of God. We fail to recognize the difference between a hamburger and a living thing. The later is multiplied in an altogether different way.

If we follow the synthetic approach we may see our material spread around the world, without producing any real and lasting change. We may change the way people talk without affecting how they live, or rearrange their programs, without actually producing more disciples of Jesus Christ.

So what are the principles that must be followed if we want to see disciple making movements spread in a way that reproduces not just form but organic life? I am sure there are many, but I would like to propose the following as a start.

1. Only life produces life

Scientists have attempted to circumvent this law for years, but the simple fact remains that life does not spontaneously generate. Even if all of the resources are gathered and the proper conditions set up, it will not form on its own, there must be a living organism to begin with. This means we cannot expect to multiply a ministry or a national movement with dead things such as training materials, resources, programs, or methods. Reproduction begins with a person who embodies a disciple making lifestyle, and lives it out in a powerful way. Over time this person impacts others around him as they experience the reality of his life.

At some point it germinates in them and begins to grow. When life takes hold, resources and programs can nourish and strengthen it, but they can never take its place.

We have seen this principle at work recently as we have tried to multiply several programs in the Czech Republic. One is a weekend training day for ministry teams that meets every 2 months. At its core is a group of leaders who lead disciple making ministries and desire to see them multiplied in other youth groups. They have created a community where the truth is not just taught, but experienced, as the youth leaders who visit are shepherded and cared for in a disciple making style.

Last year a group on the other side of the country began to see the results of these training days and wanted to do the same. We provided the materials we were using, described the basic schedule, and provided them with all the "know how" needed to run the event. They carefully copied our approach and the event looked much the same - and had a very different impact on people. You can probably guess why. The man in charge did not embody the principles we are trying to reproduce. He is a great organizer, a gifted teacher, and even understood a disciple making ministry theoretically. However, the "life" was not there and because of that the event was empty.

This year we are trying a different approach. We have taken Dan, a key leader who has worked with these training days from the beginning and "lives" them, and relieved him of responsibilities in the original program. He will have the responsibility to reproduce the event in two new places. Dan understands how these training days can be used to impact youth groups because his group was deeply impacted by them. He understands the end product because his ministry is living out the priorities we are trying to teach.

Not everyone on his team embodies discipleship in the same way that Dan does, but we expect that his presence will make the difference between a well organized program and a powerful experience. We expect that life will beget life.

2. Life does not reproduce exact copies, but common characteristics.

We expect two copies of the same computer programs to be exactly the same, but are surprised to find identical people, or two trees that cannot be distinguished from each other. Factories strive for

uniformity, yet life reproduces in great diversity. However, within this diversity there are common characteristics that identify a type or species. Every human, for instance, shares a basic set of common characteristics that are easy to recognize and distinguish them from other living creatures.

Within this basic motif, life has the ability to adapt, to respond, to grow and to accommodate. When the disciples were scattered following the Jerusalem persecution, they preached the gospel wherever they went and spontaneously began new fellowships of believers. I'm sure the conditions were very different in each of those locations, and that the new fellowships were not cookie cutter versions of each other. Yet they all shared a basic "DNA" that was immediately recognizable and identified them as followers of Christ.

As we think about multiplication we should not expect, or even work towards, ministries that are exact copies of successful models. Rather we should seek to distill the basic characteristics of the "life form" we are trying to reproduce, and work until these essentials are evident in the new setting.

A corollary of this principle is that life reproduces after its kind. If you want to know what kind of men will be produced by a discipler, look at his life. No matter what he teaches, he will reproduce not what he knows, but who he is. If you want to know what kind of ministries will be produced by a trainer, look at the ministry they built before they begin training. That is the ministry they will reproduce.

I am convinced that we must become expert "fruit inspectors." The measure of a man through whom a ministry can multiply is not his credentials, education, position, gifting, communication skills or understanding. Choose men who embody what you want to reproduce, and who are regularly bearing healthy fruit. They will impart life.

We made a firm decision early on in the ministry that we would only allow people to train in an area when we were convinced they were living it out in their local setting. Not long ago we inadvertently violated this in the face of political pressure and invited a man with a position in our denomination to teach a section of training. He was interesting and well prepared, and held the students attention with his effective delivery style. Afterwards, however, a godly local pastor came up to me concerned about the effect of his teaching. "There was no power in what he taught," the man shared, "because I don't think he has ever lived out the things he was teaching." Life reproduces after its own kind.

3. The more advanced the species, the more time is required till it reaches maturity and reproductive capability.

The reproductive capacity of mice is legendary, due to their ability to reach maturity quickly and bear multiple offspring at a time. But then again, the end product is not particularly advanced or desirable. Humans, on the other hand, are not considered to be a fully mature until after 21 years of growth and development. With this disadvantage we have still managed to both populate and dominate the globe. Higher capacities certainly give one an advantage, even if the process of getting there is a bit longer.

This means that for our top leadership we must either find someone who has already experienced a significant and extended investment into their lives, or be prepared to take the time and energy to make that investment ourselves. We also must realize that nothing is fully mature until it has the

ability to reproduce itself.

4. Organic reproduction occurs naturally and spontaneously, building momentum and energy as it goes along.

With synthetic multiplication, each piece draws its potency from the same source. Because of that, growth strains the system and often dilutes the product. Lets say a teacher comes up with a hot new seminar and starts traveling with it to different youth groups. It is so good that the news travels and soon other groups want to get in on the action. As demand goes up, the teacher is busier and busier. The same resources that were invested in one seminar a month are now spread out in five. Growth begins to tax his reserves and dilute the product. Not only that, but he now has no energy for the careful study that produced that hot seminar. He doesn't have the space to produce another.

The teacher now has a couple of options. One is to limit his engagements to only the bigger groups. But many of the smaller ones are in need of it more, and the big setting also limits the possibilities for interaction. Another possibility is to hand off his seminar to another teacher. But as he begins to do that he notices that the quality drops considerably. The other teacher didn't struggle through the development process and is not as passionate about the material. The illustrations are all second hand, and when questions come up, it is obvious that he doesn't have the well of resources to draw on for answers.

Are there any other options? Yes, but they are of a different nature. The teacher can pull someone close, and work to create in them the reality that produced the seminar in the first place. He can work to reproduce the life that is expressed in that training event This may take time, but in the end, both may teach the seminar better than the first one did in the beginning. Not only that, but the new teacher understands the process that led to the product, and may produce more seminars like it, all on his own. Organic growth adds energy to the system, organic multiplication strengthens rather than dilutes.

Not long ago I was driving to my house and ran into Peter, a young man I have poured my life into for over two years now. I rolled down my window to greet him and then asked where he had been. "I was just meeting with Olda," he said, "getting him ready to teach at youth group next week. I've been watching his growth and I think he is ready for a new challenge. Besides, I need to get him ready to lead this youth group when I leave and plant another one."

I had a big grin on my face when I drove off. Without prompting or special instructions, Peter was already passing on the things that had been built into him. It was natural, spontaneous, and powerful. My sense was that Peter was even doing it better than I had. When life is caught, it draws in energy, and naturally reproduces.

Additional thoughts

I'm sure there are many other principles that describe the work of organic multiplication, but I trust these get us thinking in the right direction. To expand the picture just a bit, let me add some bullet thoughts about how this fleshes out.

- Organic multipliers work from the bottom up rather than the top down. They recognize that a branch that extends without proper support will break off. They know that growth without

roots will wilt at the first dry spell.

- Organic multipliers recognize that geese fly in flocks, but eagles have to be hunted down one at a time. The most valuable leaders will probably not respond to a general call, they must be sought out and individually challenged.
- Organic multipliers are more tribal story tellers than technocrats. They collect and repeat live examples of the principles they teach and make heroes of the guy who is actually doing it. They raise the gene pool by highlighting the healthy and making memorials to godly growth.
- Organic multipliers are careful not to inoculate people to truth by teaching it in a way that does not require application. They recognize the tendency of people to simply re-label old boxes and reorganize a ministry rather than renew it. Because of that they measure effectiveness of their teaching by transformation in the local setting, and don't move faster through material than the student can process and apply.
- Organic multipliers build delivery systems that reflect their core convictions. Community must be taught within community, discipleship must be taught by discipling the student, a love for Christ taught by people who are in love with Christ. Recognizing that the method and context often teaches more powerfully than the content, organic multipliers work to create the reality that they want to teach.
- Organic multipliers recognize that methods, structures and programs are extremely important but must be kept in their place. Methods maximize the energy of growth, structures serve as trellises to support and sustain growth, programs create a context and environment for growth. All, however, must be infused with life and are empty without it.

Application

How do we apply these principles to the task of reaching the youth of Eastern Europe? First of all, we must take a careful look at who we are and make sure that the life we want to spread is first of all resident in us. Then we must carefully craft programs and structures that nurture and support life, not just transfer information. And finally, we must always return to the only source of life, the One who came that we might be born into spiritual life. Leaders transformed into His image will naturally spread His life to those around them.

This organic approach to leadership development can function like the mustard seed of which Jesus spoke in his parables. It starts out small, but when grown, can fill the entire garden with life.