

# Planting and Growing Churches from the Inside-Out Theological, Ecclesiological, and Organizational Criteria for Deep Growth

By Kenneth W. Howard

## Background

### Inside-Out vs. Outside-In Approaches to Planting & Growing Christian Community

**Outside-In.** The vast majority of new church plants in the Episcopal Church USA employ what might be called an *Outside-In* approach to creating and growing Christian community: proselytizing, conversional orientation to evangelism, an individually confessional approach to membership, and community based on broad doctrinal uniformity. Even theologically moderate dioceses have tended to employ this approach, based perhaps partly on the largely unquestioned assumption that only this is the only way to achieve growth, and partly on the fact that church growth research and resources has been focused on this approach. The *Outside-In* approach has been highly successful in producing rapid congregational growth. However, as recent experience around the country has shown, these congregations also tend to be more conservative in their theology and congregationalist in their ecclesiology, and much more prone to schism.<sup>1</sup>

**Inside-Out.** A small but increasing number of church planters – myself being one of them – have begun to question the common wisdom about church planting, and have begun experimenting with alternative approaches to creating and growing Christian community with the intention of creating a different kind of community: one that is more tolerant of theological diversity, more committed to communion with the larger church, and less prone to schism. In my own experience as a church planter, and in my discussions with other church planters of similar intent<sup>2</sup>, it is possible to plant and grow Christian communities with these characteristics by employing what might be called an *Inside-Out* approach: a conversational, relational approach to evangelism, a communitarian, creedal approach to membership, and community based on Christ's love and a kerygmatic, generous approach to doctrine.

**Key Differences Between the Two.** This is not to say that these two approaches are different in all respects. Many of the practical aspects of church planting and church growth are equally applicable to both approaches.<sup>3</sup> The differences lie in the kind of community each approach is attempting to create and the few – but critical – changes in strategy required to create them. Nor is this to say that one approach is entirely negative and the other entirely positive, only that the *Inside-Out* approach produces qualities of community which are more consistent with Anglican/Episcopal theology and ecclesiology.

- **Differences in Approach.** For a summary of the key differences in missional theology, ecclesiology, and evangelism strategy between these two approaches, see [Table 1 – Outside In vs. Inside Out: Key Differences in Missional Theology, Ecclesiology, and Evangelism Strategy.](#)
- **Differences in Results.** For a summary of the differences in the qualities of community these two approaches create, see [Table 2 – Outside In vs. Inside Out: Key Differences in Results.](#)

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<sup>1</sup> The percentage of new church plants that have cut off funding to their dioceses or have left the Episcopal Church appears to be significantly higher than established congregations.

<sup>2</sup> The author's conclusions are based on observations of a number of communities in the greater Washington, DC area. Examples of *Inside-Out* church plants: St. Anne's, Reston, Virginia, St. David's, Ashburn, Virginia, St. Nicholas, Darnestown, MD (replanted), and Holy Spirit, Germantown, MD (the first five years). Examples of *Outside-In* church plants: South Riding, Fairfax, VA, Apostles, Fairfax, VA, St. Nicholas, Darnestown (first plant), Holy Spirit, Germantown, MD (1990's).

<sup>3</sup> For a review of the church planting and church growth research, see Church Planting and Church Growth: A Research Review (2007) by Kenneth W. Howard. Available online at: <http://www.saintnicks.com/CGResearch.php>.

## **Inside-Out Planting & Growth: The Scriptural-Theological Basis**

The Inside-Out approach to creating and growing Christian communities is Christocentric and Pauline in its theology and ecclesiology. Consider the follow teaching of Jesus and Paul:

### **The Teachings of Jesus on Spirituality & Community**

**It's What's Inside that Counts.** It could honestly be said that Jesus invented the inside-out approach. When confronted by those who wanted to regulate the spiritual life via a broad range of externally imposed doctrines, Jesus always rejected that approach, saying that the outside seldom made its way in to the heart, but that what was in the heart would inevitably find its way out into peoples lives. Another reason he criticized the broad-doctrine, outside-in approach was that it inexorably resulted in the religious authorities' own human traditions being enshrined as divine truth (Matt. 15:1-20; cf. Mark 7:1-23).

**Love is the Key to the Spiritual Life and Spiritual Community.** Rather than attempting to regulate spiritual life and community through external doctrine and rules, Jesus proposed a simple ethic of love: love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself, and everything else will take care of itself (Matt. 22:34-40; cf. Mark 12:28-24, Luke 10:25-27). Jesus taught that the distinguishing characteristic of those who followed him was that their spiritual community would be based on love (John 13:31-35).

**Make Learners, Not Converts.** It is worth noting that in giving his followers the "Great Commission" Jesus did not ask his followers to attempt to convert anyone (as in changing religion). Rather he told them to make learners (about himself and the way of life that he lived and taught).

### **The Teachings of Paul on Spirituality & Community**

**Keep It Simple Stupid (and Centered on Christ).** In the communities that he planted, Paul did not live, preach, or teach an approach to spiritual life and spiritual community based on externally enforced doctrine. He very intentionally kept it radically simple, deciding instead to know "know nothing among [his communities] except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1-3). In fact, not only did Paul not insist on a broad uniformity of doctrine, he seemed to be very suspicious of doctrine, saying that it distracted people from what really mattered, which was becoming one in the knowledge and love Christ (Eph. 4:11-16).

**Spiritual Community is Created from the Inside-Out.** Paul was insistent that individual spirituality, spiritual community, and even the whole of humanity, could only begin inside individual believers, and that whenever a new believer became one with Christ, it began a process that transformed them, their spiritual community, and the world. (2 Cor. 5:17; cf. Gal. 6:15). When he speaks of new believers in Christ, he never speaks of them as converts (though his words are often mistranslated as such). Rather he speaks of them in terms that imply ongoing growth and transformation, words which mean "first fruits" or "newly planted" (Rom. 16:5; 1 Tim 3:6). Clearly, Paul envisioned that Christian community would abolish all human distinctions (Galatians 3:28; cf. Colossians).

## **Celtic Christianity: A Model for Inside-Out Church Planting & Growth**

Since what we know about Paul's approach to planting and growing Christian communities is confined mostly to what we know in the scriptures, it might be useful to fill out what we know about this approach with a later movement influenced by his approach – one about which we have greater historical knowledge. Perhaps the best Post-Pauline example of the Christocentric, Pauline approach to planting and growing churches can be found in early Celtic Christianity.<sup>4</sup> A few examples of what is known about Celtic Christianity:

**Centered on Christ (More than Church).** For Celtic Christians Jesus' love, life, and logos was the lens through which everything else was viewed: life, God, Holy Scripture, Christian community.

**Centered on Agape Relationship (More than Doctrine).** Love God, love neighbor, leave the rest to God. The boundaries of Christian community were very permeable. Fellowship was more important than membership. Evangelism tended to be non-proselytizing (rather than try to convert, love and let go).

**Love of the Gospel Story (More than Doctrine).** Celtic Christians tended to evangelize by engaging people with the story of Jesus Christ as a way of introducing them to Jesus Christ. They had a strong belief in the transformative power of the Story.

**Back-to-Basics: Core Beliefs Lived “As If” (More than Broad Agreement Doctrine).** Celtic Christianity tried to strip away cultural accretions and recapture the key beliefs of the ancient Church and in order to apply them in their own day. They celebrated paradox and mystery because they believed the paradox and mystery that lay at the heart of the faith (e.g., that Jesus was God and Human). They believed in the presence of the Holy Spirit. And they believed in the power of the Scripture and the Gospel, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to change hearts. They tended to “let go and let God” when it came to other's relationship with God.”

**Focused on Call and Gifts (More than Hierarchy/Rules).** Celtic Christianity tended to view the roles of deacon, priest, and bishop viewed as reflecting the particular gifts of individuals (bishops, for example, were people good at training up and mentoring priests; deacons were chosen for their particular delight in serving others). Celtic Christianity tended to be more collaborative between priest and lay, men and women.

**Tolerated if not Celebrated Diversity (Rather than Requiring Uniformity).** Celtic Christianity tended to view diversity held together by the love of Christ as evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Acceptance of the Marginalized/Love of the Marginal.** Celtic Christians sought out, loved, and cared for the last, the least, and the lost. They were willing to live on the margins of life (and sometimes even sought them out).

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<sup>4</sup> This is not as unusual as it might seem at first glance, since there is strong historic evidence that Pauline theology made its way into Celtic Britain from Galatia (in the eastern Mediterranean area), by way of southern Gaul (in what is now France), and Galicia (in northwestern Spain).