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Transforming Chaos into Beauty: Intentionally Developing Unity in Church Plants

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The first few years were great: Young Christians were excited about the Gospel, Christians that lived in the region were enthusiastic that there would be a church in their area, and seekers were happy to meet Christians who had personally met God. There was a sense of unity, camaraderie, and solidarity in the young community. In spite of the multitude of diverse cultural origins, French, Americans, Irish, Congolese, Ivorians, Caribbeans, and various individuals from another ten or twelve cultures were getting along.

And then reality hit. While the missionaries were leading all the activities, there was no problem with unity. But once we started handing over responsibilities to various people in the church, KABOOM!

But this was to be expected.

Even in monocultural church plants, where the ethnic make-up of the young community is fairly homogeneous, unity does not come naturally. In any group, individuals come from different backgrounds, having different capacities and spiritual gifts. Each individual has had different experiences with the Gospel and has different expectations for the community. Today, however, there is an unprecedented cultural blending occurring in world class cities such as Paris, where we worked. Many church planters today are confronted with new problems due to this multiculturalism. Unity does not come naturally to these young churches!

The Importance of Unity

On a practical level, unity is extremely important. First of all, a church characterized by internal strife is not going to grow, especially if it's small enough for everybody to know one another. Non-Christians come to Christ in order to find peace and love. They do not want to become Christians to join a church where the leaders are fighting one another. Conflict will push them away from the Gospel rather than draw them towards it.

From a theological level, unity is also extremely important. A major theme of Jesus' prayer the night before his crucifixion was the unity of his disciples (John 17:21-23). A sign of a healthy church is unity (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-35). If a person is truly regenerated through Jesus Christ, he should seek unity with fellow believers (Phil. 2:1-4, Eph. 4:1-6) by modeling Christ-like attitudes (Phil. 2:5-8). The basis for unity is a common commitment to Christ's teaching (Rom. 16:17-18, I Tim. 1:3-4) and the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life (Eph. 4:3).

Understanding Cohesiveness: Two Dimensions

One of the most important aspects of unity in a church planting situation is what social scientists call *cohesiveness*. This is a measure of the forces and factors that cause people to stay

in a group. If there are not enough reasons for people to stay in a young church, they will leave. However, if they do have plenty of reasons for staying in the church, they'll stay, and hopefully grow spiritually and serve the Lord with their gifts. Without cohesiveness, it's impossible for a church to experience unity.

There are two basic reasons that people will stay in a group. The first factor is the relationship factor: They like (at least some of) the people who are in the group and they have positive relationships with them. The group members find one another respectable and enjoy interacting with one another. The second factor is the task factor: They like what the group stands for and does. They share the same key values and beliefs. They understand what the group is trying to accomplish and believe that it is moving in the direction that it should go.

These two factors can be present in various degrees in any young church. They can be thought of as two dimensions of cohesiveness. A church that is high in *relational cohesiveness* will have many healthy relationships among its members. Most people in the group will know several other members and have positive interactions with them regularly. If people can find others in the group who are very similar to them in background, personality, and culture, these relationships will develop more naturally and require relatively little effort. On the other hand, a church that is low in relational cohesiveness will have many people who have few significant relationships with other people in the church. Many will have little or no significant interaction with other members, even when they are present at the activities. Interaction outside of church activities might be non-existent. The only people that are recognizable to many of the people in the church are those who are up front.

The other dimension, *task cohesiveness* can be present in various degrees as well. In an Evangelical church, this cohesiveness should be based on the Gospel. In a church high in task cohesiveness, the members will know what the church believes and what it is doing in response to these beliefs. The majority of the members will have a clear vision of why they are meeting together and what they hope to accomplish together. The purpose of the church is clear and, ideally, each person knows what role he or she should be playing to accomplish this purpose. In a church with low task cohesiveness, it would be less clear what the church believes or what its purposes are. Individuals might be quite sure that they know what the church should believe and do, but their beliefs might be quite dissimilar to others in the group.

These two dimensions can be represented on a grid, resulting in four quadrants. If the vertical axis represents task cohesiveness, and the horizontal axis, relational cohesiveness, we can see how different combinations of cohesiveness can manifest themselves in the church (see Figure 1).

The first quadrant represents a church that has both high relational cohesiveness and high task cohesiveness. People enjoy being with each other and they both understand and are committed to the task of the church. When they think of the church, they think "I'm working together with my friends." Both the vision of the church and relationships between members are understood, relatively unambiguous, and something valuable to the vast majority of people in the church. This is the optimal condition for developing biblical unity within the church.

Quadrant II represents a church where many members might feel that it's a good church, but that they don't really have a place in it; they're "just a number" or "a cog in the wheel." The church has a well defined vision that is supported by the members in general (high task cohesiveness), but the relationships among people in the church are weak (low relational cohesiveness).

The third quadrant represents a church least likely to have biblical unity. Either the vision of the church and its task is not clear, or the people in the church do not really believe in it (low task cohesiveness). In addition, most people don't have good friendships with others in the church and aren't especially attracted to them (low relational cohesiveness).

Quadrant IV represents a church that's a little bit healthier. Although there's a lack of clarity or commitment concerning the task and vision of the church (low task cohesiveness), people have developed healthy and enjoyable relationships with one another and, in general, enjoy being together (high relational cohesion). People might say "It seems like my family." Sometimes the church grows, sometimes it shrinks. What counts is making everybody happy and keeping the situation stable.

Moving Towards Quadrant I: Increasing Relational Cohesiveness

I would like to present five basic but often overlooked ideas to increase relational cohesiveness. All have been studied by psychologists and sociologists and have been shown to help people develop positive relationships with one another. Most importantly, all are also either prerequisites or manifestations of biblical love (John 14-17, I Cor. 13, Phil. 1).

1. Repeated contact with the same individuals. It's only through repeated exposure to one another that people can experience *mutual recognition*, a condition that is absolutely essential for a relationship with any meaning to develop. If two people can't recognize each other, their understanding of one another is very limited and there is no basis for a biblical relationship where love is manifested. For example, if a newcomer is greeted in a friendly, loving way each time he comes to an activity, it doesn't count for much if it's always different people he's meeting. In fact, it would be a far more positive experience for him to talk to the same Mr. Ordinary four times in a row than to meet a new Mr. Charisma each time he visits the church.

A key for repeated contact with the same individuals is physical proximity. People need to be near each other to have contact. This can be facilitated by having attractive activities that people want to attend which enable them to meet and interact with one another regularly. The smaller the group is, the more likely each of the participants will have meaningful interaction with someone, but the more difficult it will be to have an attractive program due to the limited number of leaders who can motivate people to come regularly. Early in the church planting process, the church planter should invest much time in leading small groups and finding and training appropriate leaders. In larger group situations, such as a worship service, opportunities must be created for allowing people to meet the same individuals over and over. For example, people can be encouraged to sit in the same area of the meeting room each week or to greet all the people they've previously met once the meeting is over. In one of the churches we started, we found that asking people to stack the chairs *immediately* after the worship service gave people a reason to not flow out of the room as soon as it was over, and it provided enough space for people to freely mingle and have contact with whomever they desired. Before we started this, the meeting room would be empty within ten minutes of the end of the service, but when we would ask them to stack the chairs, people would often stay a half hour or more.

2. Pleasant interactions with people. It's not enough just to have repeated contact with a group of individuals to develop a sense of relational cohesiveness—It helps immensely if these interactions are pleasant, creating positive emotions in both parties. Often the agreeableness of an interaction is based on things that are fairly superficial: The way the person dresses, physical attractiveness, and race. Other factors that make interactions pleasant include expressive,

animated behavior, laughter, and participation in group discussions. Factors that produce disagreeable interactions include lack of self-revelation, arrogance, sadness, very distinctive unusual physical features, hypocrisy, and inconsistent behavior. Certainly, some of these factors can be controlled, and others cannot be. But in general, people manifesting the Fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) will appear more attractive to even non-Christians.

In one of our churches, a dynamic, joyful, caring African teenage girl started coming to the young church. As she grew in her faith, she invited her friends and we were able to start a youth group which became the most dynamic group in the church. We also had two somewhat gruff, poorly dressed older men who also invited people. Their ministry was less effective, possibly due to their inability to have consistent, pleasant interactions with others.

3. Fulfillment of Affiliation needs. Just like we need food and water for our physical well-being, humans also need to be with others and be accepted by them for their psychological well-being. This need is called the need to affiliate. From a biblical point of view, our need to affiliate is a reflection of God's triune nature and motivates us to create Christ-centered communities characterized by love.

People vary in their affiliation needs. Some need to be with people all the time. Others need to be alone more often. All of us, to some degree or another, need to be associated with a group as well as to have close personal friends. The more these needs are met in a church, the stronger will be the church's relational cohesiveness. Closer friendships and fellowship cause one's commitment to the group to grow.

On the practical side, this means church planters need to encourage friendships among members. Church activities need to provide significant social interaction that allows these friendships to develop. In many cultures, if not most, eating together is the primary means of social bonding and developing friendships. In that case, meals together or in one another's homes should be encouraged as much as possible. This can partially explain the success of Alpha Groups and youth groups who eat together regularly.

4. Perceived Similarity with Others. People prefer being with people whom they perceive as being similar to themselves. If they see themselves as different, they tend to feel as outsiders and not having a place within the group.

In modern, multi-cultural situations, this presents a major challenge. The ethnicity of a group's members is among the first things people notice when considering joining a group. People also tend to seek out people of similar educational backgrounds, personalities, and interests. To combat the human tendency to withdraw from highly diverse groups, the church planter needs to make sure that the group members do have something in common, specifically, a commitment to the Gospel. Putting the Gospel and its implications for today's world at the center of the church's activities will create a context where this shared understanding will allow those committed to Christ to find much in common with others. The ministry of teaching is not distinct from fellowship building—It is, in fact, a essential element of it.

At the same time, the church needs to encourage affinity groups to form. There need to be Christ-centered groups for women, for men, for youth, for young couples, etc. The more the groups can be based on a common situation in life (middle schoolers, the recently divorced, teachers, etc.) or common interests (music, fishing, ministering to the homeless, etc.), the greater the bonding will be to the whole church. People want to be in a place where they feel they belong.

5. Expression of Mutual Appreciation. One powerful way to help people feel part of the group is to express appreciation. People need to receive information indicating that they are

welcomed into the group, that they are valued and appreciated. The more people (and not just the pastor) express their appreciation to a person, the more the person's commitment to the group increases. Similarly, if one individual expresses his or her appreciation and positive evaluation of another, the personal attraction between the two increases and a friendship is more likely to develop.

A church planter would do well, then, to express genuine appreciation often and encourage others to do so also. Public expressions of appreciation (during announcements, in a newsletter, etc.) show that people are valued by the leadership. Small group activities that encourage members to say what they like about others allow appreciation to be expressed on an individual level.

Moving Toward Quadrant I: Increasing Task Cohesiveness

Unity in young churches won't be biblical if it only grows through closer relationships; the unity must also be founded on accomplishing God's purposes for the church such as worship, evangelism, and discipleship training. It's not enough to just have relational cohesiveness, or the church will become an unfocused Quadrant IV church. But it's not enough to just have task cohesiveness, or the church will become an unloving Quadrant II church. Some cultures might naturally put an emphasis on relationships and some might naturally put an emphasis on task accomplishment. The responsibility for finding a culturally relevant, biblical balance falls soundly on the missionary church planter and the leadership team that he chooses and trains. I would like to present three elements of church planting that are essential for task cohesiveness but are easily set aside because they are so difficult.

1. Clear Vision. The essence of leadership is moving a group towards goals or purposes. If these goals and purposes are not clear, there is little a missionary can do besides maintain the status quo or try to make people feel good. The effective church planter has a doubly difficult task. Not only must he lead the church to a clear understanding of its purposes as a church, (such as those formulated in Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church*: Worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship, and discipleship), but he must also instill a vision for the church to become independent of missionary presence and support, to become a sending church rather than a receiving church. No matter where the young church is in its life history, it will always be easier to maintain the status quo than to move ahead in these areas. However, that is no excuse for not knowing what God wants for the church and doing all that is possible to move in that direction.

2. Culturally Relevant Leadership. Most cross cultural church planting missionaries want to follow the Apostle Paul's example of planting one church, putting leadership into place, and moving on to plant another church. But we also need to follow Paul's advice not to turn responsibilities over to wrong people (I Tim.5:21-22). Poor leadership allows the church to lose its focus. No matter how willing people in the new church are to lead, if they aren't gifted in essential leadership skills relevant to their culture, they won't be able to lead the church to where it should be going. Task cohesiveness will be minimal.

I Tim. 3 and Titus 1 give various requirements for being a leader. It's especially important to find out about the potential leader's reputation with outsiders (I Tim. 3:7), a concept closely related to cultural relevancy. For insights as to whether a potential leader has culturally relevant leadership skills, it's appropriate to look at his career path. If a young person is on a career path that will lead to a position of influence within his culture, this indicates leadership potential. If the person has had a career which has not led to increasing leadership

responsibilities, this could indicate that leading the church is not within his gifting. The church planter needs to find out as much information as possible to see how naturally gifted and culturally relevant potential leaders might be. An abundance of these qualities, however, will never make up for a lack of true, Christ-centered spirituality which manifests itself through the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

3. Leadership Training. North American missionaries tend to be quite egalitarian. We are often sorely aware of our foreignness which can be seen by the color of our skin or heard by our accents every time we open our mouths. In addition, we so much want to get the young church in the hands of locals. "If I can do it, than surely a local person can do it just as well." We might not think of all the years of education and training we have received, especially when we're working primarily with the poorly educated who have had little or no training.

Leadership training must be based on high standards and high accountability. Poorly trained, low skilled leaders will provide poor leadership. God certainly uses the weak of this world to confound the strong (I Cor. 1:26-27), but church leaders must be able to master and teach God's Word (I Tim. 3:2), a requirement that excludes most Christians (James 3:1). Training must be both theoretical (what to say and do if such and such a situation arises) and practical (carrying out responsibilities under the direction of and with feedback from the church planter). It must be complete, covering all essential areas of biblical teaching and dealing with all elements of the host culture. Anything less will not enable leaders to stay focused on the biblical task within the cultural context—task cohesiveness will fall by the wayside.

Young churches are often chaotic in nature. Diverse people with a multitude of backgrounds coming together to worship and serve God can be beautiful, but it is also a formula for conflict and confusion. If the church planter is aware of the dangers, many of them can be avoided. Instead of chaos, the church can grow in both relational and task cohesiveness, producing a unity that is not only beautiful to the members in the church, but also to those who are outside and, more importantly, to God.

Author Information

Dave Dunaetz served as a church planter for 17 years with WorldVenture in France, starting two churches near Disneyland Paris. He is presently at Claremont Graduate University where he is working on a Ph.D. in social psychology and teaching French.
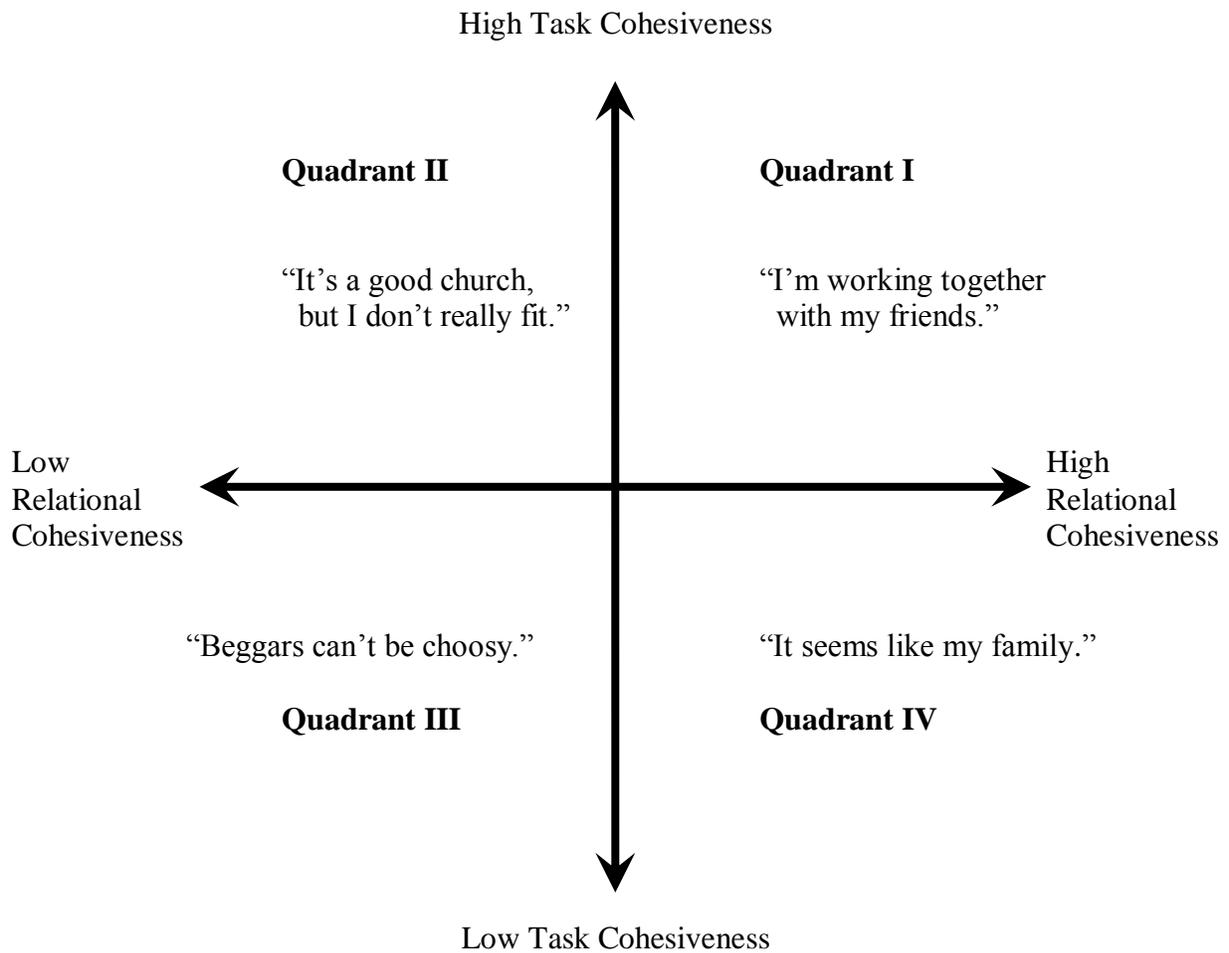
High Task Cohesiveness

Quadrant II

"It's a good church,
 but I don't really fit."

Quadrant I

"I'm working together
 with my friends."

Low
Relational
Cohesiveness

High
Relational
Cohesiveness

"Beggars can't be choosy."

"It seems like my family."

Quadrant III

Quadrant IV

Low Task Cohesiveness

Figure 1
The Two Dimensions of Cohesiveness