

MULTIPLYING!

God's story of Multiplication Network Ministries

written on the occasion of our 15-year anniversary

by

Dr. John Wagenveld, Founder

INTRODUCTION

Looking to the future is like looking through the windshield in the journey of life. I spend most of my time there. But most vehicles also have a rearview mirror to look back. It is healthy and helpful to look back once in a while. Yes, the windshield should always be larger than the rearview mirror. But both are necessary. The following story is a look back to see God's faithfulness in the journey of Multiplication Network Ministries.

MNM is an organization made up of many leaders and partners who share a vision to train church planters who establish healthy new communities of faith around the world. People are curious when they notice that thousands of church planters are being trained to start new churches throughout Latin America, Africa, Europe, Asia, and the United States. (At the time of this writing, over 5,000 church planters are active in a yearlong sequential modular training system.) So it is

natural for them to ask how this organization got started. This document is an attempt to answer that question.

At the risk of sounding autobiographical, I will just write the story as I remember it. But let's state one thing clearly at the outset: The Lord has been the protagonist in this adventure, and His hand has been evident throughout this journey. May God receive all the glory in the telling of this story.

EARLY DAYS

Alfredo was so surprised at how many cars were in the parking lot that he turned around, went home, and put a tie on. He expected something small and casual. Instead, well over a hundred pastors and leaders answered the invitation to attend a workshop on church growth and development. Everyone was surprised at the positive response!

MNM traces its beginning to that day on September 30, 2000, when the first "Wholistic

Church Growth” seminar was given by Alfredo Vallellanes, Raúl Orlandi, Rosilio Román, and myself. At the time, however, there was no consciousness of this workshop becoming the basis for a new organization. That would happen years later.

My wife Angela and I were planting Prince of Peace Church in Bayamón, Puerto Rico, when a representative of FLET (*Facultad Latinoamericana de Estudios Teológicos*, Miami) came through and stayed with us for a couple days. While sitting in my office, Dr. Neal Hegeman spotted notebooks on my bookcase that I used for a seminary-level class on church growth and development. After perusing the Teacher and Student Manual, he asked me if I could put this in book form for FLET. This organization provides Spanish books for theological education by extension all over Latin America. It includes books by RC Sproul, Larry Crabb, Norman Geisler, and James Montgomery Boice, so imagine my surprise when I was invited to add a text! With the permission of my employer at the time—Christian Reformed World Missions (CRWM)—I worked on this book through most of 1999, and *Iglecrecimiento Integral* (*Wholistic Church Growth*) was published and printed in 2000.

As soon as the book came out, I decided to put together a corresponding one-day conference to help promote the book and make the ideas accessible to those who could not afford it. The Lord



Raúl Orlandi, Rosilio Román, Alfredo Vallellanes, and John Wagenveld led the first healthy church growth seminar in September 2000. This picture was taken ten years later.

led me to recruit some friends to help with the conference, and we set the date for September 30, 2000. I made posters and flyers and drove all around town promoting the event as well as making phone calls to organize the details. Raúl, Rosilio, and Alfredo were willing presenters. Alfredo also wrote the fourth session of the day.

Here were four leaders from different church traditions working together to promote the cause of Christ and His mission through the local church. Raúl had come to Prince of Peace from a Methodist Church. Alfredo was a local Pentecostal pastor with Defenders of the Faith and a former missionary to Paraguay. Rosilio was a pastor and denominational executive with the Christian Missionary Alliance. And I was a Christian Reformed missionary. Even

Poster promoting the first book and seminar, the event that became the birth of MNM's ministry.



though we had some theological differences, the four of us quickly became friends and joined together in the cause of mission. By God's grace,

the first international events was held in Mexico, where my dad organized an event with the Presbyterian churches there.

A spirit of unity in diversity remains a key characteristic of MNM to this day.

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Well over one hundred pastors and leaders were at this first event, held at the Disciples of Christ Convention Center on Route 167 in Bayamón, Puerto Rico. The conference was well received, and the evaluations were positive. In our office we have a framed, original promotional poster from that first event, identifying the place and date of birth of this ministry.

Following the conference, opportunities arose to lead more conferences in other venues. One of

Through the years, the book sold over 20,000 copies and was available in many Christian bookstores throughout Latin America and used in Bible institutes beyond what FLET was doing. Years later we would find out that even Dr. Samuel Escobar, the famous missiologist from Latin America, used it as a textbook in a Baptist seminary in Madrid, Spain!

CHURCH PLANTER BOOTCAMPS

The Church Multiplication Training Center (CMTC) is a small organization best known for its Church Planter Bootcamp, a retreat that has been adopted by several large denominations who contextualized it and made their own versions in the North American context. Dr. Gary Teja, the Spanish Language Director of CMTC (which is based in Fort Wayne, Indiana) invited me to join him to organize and teach a two-and-a-half-day Church Planter Bootcamp in Puerto Rico. CMTC had an interesting alliance of denominations, including the Christian Reformed Church, the Missionary Church, the Christian Missionary Alliance, the Baptists, the Wesleyans, the



The Disciples of Christ Convention Center in Bayamón, Puerto Rico. This was the site of our first training event in 2000.



Church planter graduates in East Africa. In order to multiply churches, our training principles are transferable across cultures.

Foursquare Church, and the Assemblies of God, among others.

BOOTCAMPS EXPAND

After the initial training in Puerto Rico, I was invited to help lead Church Planter Bootcamps in other places in Latin America. To become a trainer for the Bootcamps, one had to go through three trainings to become certified by CMTc. Gary made me go through *five*, and I'm not sure if that's an indictment of my learning speed or his rigorous teaching style! He would occasionally call, inviting me to lead international Bootcamps

in various Spanish-speaking countries, such as Ecuador, Argentina, Nicaragua, Mexico, and even parts of the United States. This opened doors for me to learn more about training church planters in different contexts. God used many leaders' feedback and multiple invitations to return to build my confidence in the training we were providing.

This was a formative time in my own development as a trainer. I asked Gary if we could add the Wholistic Church Growth one-day conference either before or after the Bootcamps, and he kindly agreed. This way we would have something available both for church planters establishing new

communities of faith and for pastors and leaders of existing churches. This was the beginning of the idea of sequencing workshops and trainings. By God's grace, we use updated versions of these tools to this day.

Several of us felt it would be beneficial to follow up with the church planters again, and we often discussed the need for a Bootcamp 2, but it never materialized. Our strategy at the time was simply to return to a city three times and leave behind three or four trainers who could continue the work. The essential insight from this process was identifying these national representatives who would champion the cause locally. We were aware of the power of indirect ministry, where others are owning, promoting, and multiplying the work without one of us needing to be physically present. But we only offered a one-time event with new people every time, so we were not able to verify if anything had actually happened as a result of the previous training. We were starting to sense the need to switch from an event orientation to a process orientation that actually had measurable and verifiable results.

A MOVE TO CHICAGO

In 2001, I was invited to move to Chicago and work as an Associate Director for Latin America at the Bible League, which placed Scriptures and trained church planters in over fifty countries around the world. They allowed me to use the

Wholistic Church Growth book and conference as a way to promote their existing programs. It worked well in attracting pastors and leaders to learn more about the Bible League's ministry. Several national directors of this organization caught the gist of the conference and enjoyed using it in their countries.

ANOTHER DOOR OPENS

Something quite amazing happened in 2002. I had been thinking of calling FLET to see if they would allow me to write a second book for them on the topic of my other passion, church planting. But I thought it best to first finish my doctorate in missions at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. A few weeks after this thought, I was on a phone call with the FLET director, and before hanging up, Dr. Larry McCoullough, Academic Dean, asked me if I would write a book on church planting! God's timing is amazing. Dr. McCoullough said he had just returned from Cuba, and people were requesting such a course. He said I was his second choice—always good for humility. His first choice had turned down the opportunity because he was working on a doctorate. I took this to be from the Lord, so I put my doctorate aside for two years to complete this project.

I told Larry I would write the book on one condition. I wanted to put together a team of authors/practitioners and have them write different chapters according to their area of

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expertise. Larry agreed, and we ended up with 22 authors from 11 countries and varied



denominational backgrounds working on the project.

Sembremos Iglesias Saludables (Let's Plant Healthy Churches) was published by Unilit and FLET in 2004. This book became an 800-page hardcover text and was therefore much more

expensive in the bookstores. Yet, with the endorsement of Luis Palau and other respected leaders, it sold over 20,000 copies.

Soon after the book was published, we put together a conference as we had done with the previous book. Now we had a one-day church planting conference that could also be used before the Bootcamps if needed. The fact that it could be taught in one day provided much more versatility for organizing low-cost trainings from which candidates could then be chosen for the Bootcamp. The conference answered four key introductory questions regarding church planting. It was well received by audiences related to FLET, Bible League, and CMTc. Within several years, almost every country in Latin America had been exposed to the books and the conferences in some way.

EXPANDING VISION

During these years, I kept learning from mentors and ministry leaders like Ron Vander Griend, Timothy De Vries, Bob Martin, Bob Craft, and Dave Stravers, who helped me understand modular systems of training. They also helped expand my vision and encouraged me to think more global by exposing me to work in other areas of the world. For their influence I am grateful.

SEQUENCING THE TRAININGS

I remember going with Raúl Orlandi to lead a Bootcamp in Comodoro Rivadavia, Argentina, in 2003. The event was sponsored by a Baptist church located only a few blocks away from where I had lived when my father was a missionary there. It was well attended, and leaders had even crossed the Andes from Chile to participate. There was great interest in the trainings.

On the plane ride home, I wrote some ideas on a napkin trying to envision a potential sequence of trainings for church planters. Raúl and I would discuss these matters on the trips we made together. Eventually, those notes and discussions—with additions and refining by others throughout the years—became the “path” that we use today.

In 2004, I wrote a proposal to Dr. Teja (and I have kept a copy all these years), outlining what I thought would be some ways to improve the



The “MNM path”: a decade in development (2000–2010)

program and multiply its impact. It seemed to me that having fewer than ten retreats in the whole continent any given year was too little compared to the need. I felt that we should be able to find ways to spread the teachings in an accelerated, multiplied way. We discussed some of the ideas, but the geographical distance between leaders, the infrequent communication, everyone's full-time jobs, and the lack of budget made it difficult to make much progress.

PUTTING MATERIAL ON THE INTERNET

I decided in 2005, in consultation with some of the above-mentioned friends, to create a website and put the first material related to the books on the internet. We would call it Multiplication Network, but start with Spanish, *Red de Multiplicación*. This name seemed to best describe what we were—a network of leaders who were interested in the multiplication of healthy churches. The idea was to put the book and conference resources on the web and provide a Teacher's Guide, a Participant's Guide, and a PowerPoint, so people could download everything and use it for free. We also put links to the names of different leaders in various countries so they could be contacted according to the need.

Some people recommended we try to charge something as an income source, but I wanted the ideas to reproduce fast. A few friends, a couple churches, and my family would pay some of those early expenses. With the website and the idea of a network of leaders who multiplied the trainings, our dream of this Multiplication Network was starting to mature conceptually.

CHANGES IN CMTC AND AN INVITATION FOR MNM (2006)

CMTC did not have much funding to support the expansion of the trainings, and Dr. Gary Teja resigned from his post as a volunteer director. CMTC Spanish-language Bootcamps were at a standstill for a season. Then Rev. Bob Ransom, director of CMTC, entered into conversations with me to see if MNM would be willing to steward the Spanish-language Bootcamps. I agreed to it on two conditions according to our values. First, we would unlock the material so that it could be modified, updated, contextualized, and posted on the internet to give people easy access. Second, we would not require training certification, but let ministry partners decide who should train their own people. While my request was initially not favored, Bob Ransom finally accepted these terms, and we signed a document of co-ownership of the Spanish Bootcamp. I believe that this holding to the values of multiplication was a critical moment in the history of MNM to accelerate our future ministry.

The strategy worked. More people were downloading the material, leading workshops, and training church planters all over. The word was spreading. We still had challenges, however, in being able to dedicate time to the growing potential of this nascent ministry. And we were not yet reporting or communicating actual results. It became increasingly apparent that coordinating the ministry would require a face-to-face meeting with the volunteer representatives from the countries that were using the training materials.

FIRST CONTINENTAL CONGRESS

The first meeting of international delegates related to MNM came together in Puerto Rico on April 12–14, 2007. Pastor Pedro Marrero, a good friend and co-pastor of Alfredo Vallellanes, organized the event. About ten countries were represented. For the first time ever we were able to do several things:

- Review the material together
- Agree on a sequence and system
- Share stories and pray together
- Strategize for next steps
- Grow in fellowship and encouragement
- Set some goals for the ministry

TWO KEY LEADERS

Friends throughout Latin America were leading workshops in and through their respective organizations. Two centers immediately stood out as hubs of significant MNM training: Puerto Rico and Ecuador. Rev. Alfredo Vallellanes continued to provide significant leadership and we continually discussed improvements to the



Dr. Juan Carlos Melo

material and strategy. Soon we were both interviewing a rising star on our horizon, Dr. Juan Carlos Melo, to consider him as a volunteer Latin America director.



About 10 countries were represented at the first meeting of international delegates, held in Puerto Rico in 2007.

Juan Carlos, an Ecuadorian, was one of the best students in church planting that I have met. He possessed a great passion for training others and taking the Gospel to the nations. He was also a missionary receiving support from FIDA International in Finland and was willing to include the MNM agenda as part of his job description. As funds came in we determined Ecuador had a higher need and afforded us a better opportunity to road test a low-cost, high-impact approach. Our second continental congress was held in Ecuador, organized by Juan Carlos, and this time 17 countries were represented!

THE ORGANIZATION IS FORMALIZED

Multiplication Network Ministries became a legal entity in April of 2007. Rev. Tim Koster, pastor of Emmanuel Christian Reformed Church, had been very supportive of the idea of incorporating the organization so that we could hire people and provide tax receipts to those who donated to the cause. Conversations with him helped further the cause and bring clarity to our mission. Pastor Tim was the first chairman of the Board

of Directors and is still in that position at the time of this writing. He introduced me to George VandeWerken, President of a regional bank, who did much of the heavy lifting when it came to all the legal paperwork and applications. Finally, I also recruited Paul VanderAa, a respected elder in the church, leader of our small group Bible Study, and Chief of Police in Crete, Illinois. The four of us made up the founding Board, and we had the first few meetings at my house. Early on we decided that it would be important for us to grow the Board slowly and with a focus on seeking people of wisdom who could lead and encourage the organization to fulfill its calling.

I read a book that presented various models of relationship between an organization and a church, and that book informed our decision to be a completely separate organization structurally, but with deep initial ties to Emmanuel CRC that helped provide the prayer, finances, and encouragement needed to start from zero.

When incorporating an organization, one is forced to have a well-articulated vision, mission, and values. This was a wonderful time that pressurized us to seek wisdom from others and work hard at answering the basic questions of why we exist, what our purpose and function is in the world, and how we would actually carry out our mission. Many conversations, internationally and locally, took place to arrive at some conclusions.

It was at this time that the ideas of having a presence in one hundred countries, material in over ten languages and the rallying cry of “More Churches, Stronger Churches” surfaced. Gary, Alfredo and Rosilio were key parts of these conversations, and we also engaged with friends at WellSpirit Consulting who helped us home in on our message. Our first brochure came out at this time, for which we not only finalized our vision,

mission, values, and tagline, but also developed our official name and logo. The long process of finessing who we are, what we do, and how we do it resulted in an identity we were proud of, and a brochure that communicated that identity clearly.

Our vision

is to see a healthy church representing the Kingdom of God in every community.

Our mission

is to equip leaders with the tools to strengthen and multiply healthy churches.

Our values:

- Christian integrity (Ephesians 4)
- Servant leadership and teamwork (Philippians 2)
- Excellence in training and material (Ephesians 6:6–8)
- High reproducibility; easy access (2 Timothy 2:2)
- Stewardship and accountability (1 Chronicles 29:10–14)



Rommel Salazar

FIRST FULL-TIME POSITION (2007)

MNM had hired three successive people part-time at Semisud (2005-2007), a Church of God seminary in Quito, Ecuador, to prepare PowerPoints, lay out some material, and do graphic design. Juan Carlos Melo and I decided MNM needed its own full-time person. After several interviews, we entered into a formal, full-time relationship with Rommel Salazar, who is still with us! One of Rommel's greatest initial contributions was the creation of our logo. We looked at no less than 20 different rough drafts until we ended up with the logo as it exists today. Our material took on a much more professional look to match the content, and this helped build credibility with ministry partners. In some ways we looked larger than we actually were!

THE DREAM TEAM

The DREAM Team (Development, Reporting, and Management Team) was formed to help with administrative support and to start creating some basic structure with volunteers. There were some minimal funds coming in to the organization,



and we needed help soliciting, tracking, and thanking the donors and occasionally organizing events. Nita Venhuizen, Donna Dykstra, and later Marguerite Balkema formed this initial team.

A DANGEROUS PRAYER (2009)

At Bible League, I was now the Executive Director for Global Ministry, supervising the work in 50 countries, with a department budget of about \$25 million. Meanwhile, MNM was growing and developing, and other institutions were showing an interest in what we were doing. The need to have someone lead the ministry was becoming apparent. In 2007, I almost left my full-time work to lead MNM, but I decided to stay where I was, and the Board continued to look for someone else to help develop the ministry under our leadership. Throughout 2008 we considered the options. More material was also being prepared, such as a tool called *Take Your Church's Pulse* to help churches diagnose their own health.

In 2009, I was driving to pick up my son from the Christian school, and I prayed something like this: "Lord, this is your work, and if this is your vision, then please make provision, and I will go. We teach this, we have seen this with so many leaders, but if you want me to move, please make it obvious by providing for my family to be able to make the shift."

The Lord answered. Within less than three weeks, two organizations, unbeknownst to each other, offered six-figure amounts to MNM to support the ministry! CRWM and Bible League Canada (BLC) decided to partner with MNM.

THE BIG BREAK: A PHONE CALL AND A CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE

The phone rang. It was Dick Kronendonk, then president of BLC. After the greeting he said, “How does a \$300,000 donation sound, to get started? We can grow it from there.” I jumped in excitement. The Lord was putting things together, and a new reality was beginning for MNM. What had not happened in a decade of incremental growth was now shooting to a new level of impact and possibility.

Now I had a problem. I had prayed this prayer, and the prayer had been answered. But it isn't all that easy to leave an influential position with a good-sized budget! I had to check my heart and my calling. I tried to practice due diligence by reading some relevant material for making decisions, praying, and discussing possibilities with my wife, my pastor, some mentors, and friends to seek wisdom from the Lord. At work there were also some push-and-pull factors that I needed to consider, plus the need to finish the doctorate and my desire to do more writing.

Then something special happened. I was on a plane returning from Rome to Chicago when I was considering all these things and struggling to know what was the best decision. I come from a very cognitive-type tradition, so this experience was quite unusual for me, and it is even hard to write about. But all of a sudden, as I was listing the pros and cons of the options, I felt an incredible warm peace just wash over me, and the decision was made. Things became crystal clear, and I had amazing peace about it. It was as if the Lord was releasing me from my work and pushing me into this new venture. At that point I knew there was no turning back. The wave was

provided by the Lord, and I just needed to ride it. God would lead the way.

Rev. Tim Koster, Chairman of the Board, drove with me to Grand Rapids, Michigan, to meet with the Canadian representatives and sign a covenant agreement to seal the deal with BLC. It was an evening of celebration and new beginnings. BLC now had a network of leaders throughout the Latin American region, with a particular interest in Ecuador, and MNM had an infusion of resources to go deeper in impact. I put in my two-week notice at work and moved to MNM to provide full-time leadership. To this day I am grateful to the Board of Directors who encouraged this step of faith and journeyed this path together with me.

TWO OTHER IMPORTANT CALLS

I remember exactly where I was when I phoned Juan Carlos to share the good news and to see if he was up to the challenge of training 300 church planters in the coming year. He said yes and has been a powerhouse for the work in the continent ever since. He has built up a team of a dozen people in Ecuador with representatives in many of the Spanish-speaking countries where we work.

The other call was to a co-author in the church planting book, Dr. David Ramírez. I shared my new direction, and he spontaneously invited MNM to come down to address his bishops of South America who were soon having a special meeting in Lima, Peru. One of the key topics was church planting! I told him I would gladly come with Juan Carlos. He and I presented a model for church planter training, even though at the time we still did not have all the material finished. We had no written modules, only the skeleton outline of what needed to be developed.



Signing our first serious denominational agreement—for the training of 2,000 church planters by 2020.

The second day of meetings we signed our first serious denominational agreement for the training of 2,000 church planters by 2020. This was the first partnership of what later was going to be a regular part of our way of working.

MNM TAKES OFF

The Board gave me permission to take the first semester to finish up my doctoral work at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. So I focused on that and on obtaining the first results that would be necessary to honor our commitments to our newfound partners. My studies actually took over a year to complete because our organization was growing so fast. We needed help. Audrey Podlin kindly came on board as a part-time administrative and office assistant. Emmanuel Church was generous in offering rent-free office space in their basement so that we could invest the funds directly into ministry. I like telling people, “It all started in a basement...and we are still in a basement!” Around the same time, an incredible number of leaders was leaving my previous place of work, and two very capable fundraisers—Steve Chittenden and Corrie Lenting—contacted me

and entered in a dialogue regarding the possibility of working with MNM.

To figure these things out and create viable financial models, I talked to a good friend, Tim Maxwell. He was the CFO at the same place I had worked and had also left his position just a few weeks after I did. Tim had also worked at the highest levels of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA). Before long we were discussing the possibility of Tim joining MNM also. God was smiling on MNM. These three capable friends and former colleagues were



Dr. Gary Teja (left) and Tim Maxwell



Church planter training in Colombia



Church planter training in Peru



Church planter training in East Africa

some of the best in their field and would form the first core team of the organization in the U.S. I asked Tim to be the CFO but to also play a larger role in the organization—leading the operations, which included all administration and reporting, insuring proper handling of metrics. His skill, competence, and dedication are largely the reason for our early success and growth.

FAST FORWARD TO TODAY

The team grew from there. We went full circle and invited Dr. Gary Teja to become our first ever International Ministry Director. Never did I imagine being able to hire my mentor from over twenty years ago who first introduced me to the Church Planter Bootcamps! BLC infused us with increased budget four years in a row, and we expanded our commitment in Latin America to 14 countries. Meanwhile, our growing number of U.S. donors was providing support for work in other places around the world. A strategic partnership with E3 Partners made our strategy and training available in East Africa, and others supported our work in European and Asian nations. Today we are in 35 countries with over 5,000 church planters in training and a full suite of reproducible and highly accessible materials. These results are in a powerful database that tracks church planting metrics so as to only report verifiable ministry. The Lord has also grown our budget to about three million dollars. God has been faithful to provide for His work.

CONCLUSION (BUT NOT THE END)

As we look in the rearview mirror, it becomes evident that God has brought many improbable events to happen in such a way that MNM would



God has done a great work!

be born and grow into a mission organization that will impact the world for His Kingdom. The team has since continued to grow in number and organizational capacity and in disproportionate results. God continues to use us to do verifiable ministry around the world, working through nationals and strategic partnerships.

Looking again through the windshield, we see many opportunities for continued growth as we try to keep in step with the Spirit and His mission of bringing about a new creation. We would like

to see 10,000 church planters starting healthy churches annually, so that more men and women might be gathered into thriving communities of faith that bear witness to the coming Kingdom of God. These churches become a “demonstration plot” or showcase of faith, hope, and love of Christ’s sovereign and redemptive reign over all creation. Their mission is to faithfully participate with God as ambassadors of the Kingdom to promote the kind of transformation that only He can bring and the world so desperately needs.

