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*ERICH BAUMGARTNER AND ANDRES FLORES*  
**CREATING A SPIRITUAL LEARNING  
SPACE: THE CHANGING LEADERSHIP  
ROLES IN THE LIFE CYCLE OF A  
CHURCH PLANT**

**Abstract:** The role of a church planter is multifaceted and unique. Church planters and their teams venture out as faith entrepreneurs in obedience to Christ's commission to share the gospel in every community. They have to experiment with creative ministry approaches in a particular context. Then, as they find methods which meet the needs of people in that community context, experimenting gives way to more predictable ministry structures. Church growth requires constant fine-tuning of leadership roles to deal with new challenges and growth pains, calling often for new skill sets that the original church planter may not possess. Thus, as church planters have to steer a path between creative vitality and routinized programming, they are faced with multiple demands to adapt their leadership to new circumstances.

This study tracks the transformation of a successful Chicago church plant in its first five years from an experimental ministry laboratory to a mature and effective ministry community. It also describes the related leadership role changes of the original church planting pastor and his team at EPIC Church in Chicago. As EPIC church celebrated its fifth anniversary, it launched its second campus at the end of October 2017.

**Keywords:** *entrepreneurial leadership, church plant, organizational life cycle*

### **The Vision**

When Andres Flores drove up to the conference building that housed the headquarters of his denomination, he wondered how his dream to plant a multicultural congregation in the heart of Chicago would come together. After a few minutes of cordial small talk, he came right to the heart of his question: How will the conference support this venture in new church planting?

Andres had recently finished his coursework for the Master of Divinity degree at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs,

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Andres Flores, MDiv, is the founding Pastor of Epic Church in Chicago.

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Michigan. After weighing several options for ministry he started to dream about a new type of urban church right in the center of the city of Chicago. He, an inspiring preacher, and his wife, a professional musician, had been a formidable team when ministering to second-generation Latino young adults. What would happen if that youthful energy was harnessed into venturing out for God through church planting? After talking with some church leaders, he had been encouraged to pursue this dream vigorously. So here he was, just weeks after the birth of his first daughter, resettled into the Chicago area, ready to get started. But how and where and with what resources? This is where the role of the conference comes in. In a connectional system like the Adventist denominational structure, the support of the conference office is crucial.

“Andres,” came the reply, “We do support you. We pay your salary and we will back the development of the congregation. But you have the most important element to get started right in your own hand: the attractiveness of the vision.” This was not the answer he had expected, but it turned out to be crucial advice that put Andres on the right path. Church planting, like any new enterprise, starts with a vision that becomes a catalyst to do something new for God.

To venture out on the basis of a dream without any concrete direction felt, at first, a bit disorienting. But there was no going back. So he turned to a small group of co-conspirators who had been attracted to the vision for the new church. Together they designed a series of four open-house events to draw attention to the project and recruit a core team. They began to run announcements of the events in local Adventist churches and to pass out flyers in the community and on street corners. Rather than bringing people to a building, they invited them to a rooftop, store-front, theater, and school, all places familiar to the community. The events were to appeal not only to young adults from the church, but also to members of the community. These open-house meetings gave people a foretaste of the new church and an opportunity to join the team.

The results of the open-house meetings were amazing and energizing as people began to spread the news in their social circles and bring their friends: first a few dozen, but soon over 200. Each open house event brought a few more people willing to commit to being part of the launching team. In these intense conversations about what the new church should look like, the vision of a multicultural, multigenerational church emerged. They would name it EPIC. As they looked for a facility that would be suitable for their new venture they settled on Pritzkel School in the heart of Chicago, where they started EPIC Church on October 20, 2012.

### **Church Planting and Leadership**

Thus started the journey of EPIC Church and Andres Flores as a church

C R E A T I N G   A   S P I R I T U A L   L E A R N I N G   S P A C E

planter. It is a journey that has been lived in one form or another since Christ commissioned His disciples to go into all the world to spread the Good News about God's love. But as exciting as the apostolic task may be, success is not assured. Ever since two of the earliest church planters had a "sharp disagreement" over the qualifications of a missionary that split the team (Acts 15:39-40), church planting has been a calling to leadership that is fraught with peril.

New churches are as diverse as the people who plant them. Yet, the growth trajectory of a church plant tends to go through predictable life cycle stages: inception, birth, adolescence, maturity, old age, and even death (Moberg, 1999). Each of these phases is characterized by different challenges and needs that require different leadership responses (Adizes, 1999; 2007, pp. 21-32). Thus church planters are confronted with the reality that their leadership role changes over time. As the church plant grows, the skill set of the founding leader may get overwhelmed by problems that demand different strengths than those required for its launch. While church planting books often describe the changing role of the church planter, few studies have documented the actual roles of a church planter accompanying the growth of a church plant. This study describes the changing leadership roles the church planter experienced at EPIC, from its inception to its fifth birthday, when it gave birth to a new church, thus achieving one of the signs of adulthood.

### **Tracking Organizational Life Cycle Roles**

Organizations have life cycles. They are born, grow good at what they are doing till times change, and they begin to fade away. One of the most prominent models of the organizational life cycle comes from Adizes (1999), author of the book *Managing Corporate Lifecycles*. He describes three major phases: (1) initial growing stages encompassing courtship, infancy, go-go, and adolescence; (2) the prime stages with several subphases including "The Fall;" and (3) the aging stages of aristocracy, Salem City, bureaucracy, and death that can only be avoided if the organization find ways to adapt to constantly changing contextual realities. For a long time, many business writers and literature on church planting have shared the conviction that the initial startup of any enterprise requires a high dose of entrepreneurship (McClelland, 1965; Schumpeter, 1939). But researchers have also noticed that while the energy and personality of an entrepreneur is a crucial ingredient of successful startups, that same personality can also become a problem that has brought many enterprises down (Brockhaus & Horwitz, 2002; Kets de Vries, 1985). Kets de Vries (1985) describes "the dark side of entrepreneurship" when he claims that some entrepreneurial personalities have a hard time fitting into a typical organization because they are "misfits who need to create their own environment" (p. 162). Thus, as the

organization grows, major tensions should be expected.

What does that mean for this study? First, this study was designed to look for these tensions and document the leadership roles of the founding pastor-entrepreneur during the first five years of the church plant as it grew from a new plant to a mature congregation recognized by the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. Second, in the Adventist denomination, new church plants are usually spawned by a mother church and organized as a company until they have grown in membership and financial strength to become a duly recognized church. The Seventh-day Adventist *Church Manual* leaves no doubt that becoming a “normal” church comes with a host of expectations that regulate the typical internal church life and structures. These structures often differ from the more flexible forms of church life developed and valued by the new church plant as they experiment with new ways to reach the people in their community. The present study was designed to explore how the new church plant navigated these expectations to conform to traditional church practices.

A review of the short history of EPIC Church revealed several phases that seemed to require different ways to lead. In the prenatal phase, which Adizes (1999) calls the courtship phase (pp. 21-32), church planters are entrepreneurs that attract people through their vision. In order to become a viable church plant they have to find ways to attract people and turn them into responsible followers of Jesus Christ. In this phase, the evangelistic role of the leader grows prominent as the church plant seeks to attract new members. If the church is able to keep up the momentum, the founding pastor soon sees the need to train leaders to head different ministries to support the members in their Christian journey. The roles thus described move from visionary entrepreneur to creative evangelist and teacher, and finally leader developer to consolidate growth. As I interviewed Andres Flores, I saw many of my early hunches confirmed, yet there were also some surprising twists I had not expected.

### *Vision Caster and Recruiter/Entrepreneur*

The early experiences of Andres as a church planter demanded incredible determination and initiative to connect people with the vision. The role of a church planter differs from that of a typical pastor of already established churches. Church planters are faith entrepreneurs, willing to venture into something new, and possibly fail. They don't know how the dream will work out. But they have a sense of calling that carries them forward and that is infectious. Very early, Andres was joined by a small group of people excited to be involved in the new venture. For them the experimental nature of the journey designed to reach the people in the community was an exciting adventure with God. Designing the open-house events gave them an opportunity to recruit their own

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friends into the venture. On October 20, 2012 when they saw 157 in attendance, they were excited and hopeful. EPIC had started with a bang and they were on the road to something good.

Attracting a crowd soon turned out to be the easy part. Developing a community of committed members structured for continuous growth turned out to be difficult. In fact, for weeks they experienced a decline in attendance they had not expected and that created contentious discussions they had never before experienced. What was happening? Why did people not continue to come and join something so good? The glitter of newness soon gave way to some basic realities that led them to change worship venues and move into the fabled Den Theater in Wicker Park.

There the atmosphere changed. The place was more welcoming. Attendance became more stable. It was here that they asked serious questions about the type of people they were trying to reach. At the time, the average age of attendees was about 27. But they sensed that beyond focusing on reaching urban millennials they wanted to be open for all generations. This conversation prepared the way for also attracting families with children and teenagers.

Most of the programming revolved around worship and Bible conversations, called Sabbath School in traditional Adventist churches. Since they met in a theater, that conversation took place near a bar, which is a typical place unchurched people meet other people. It turned out to be an environment in which many visitors felt comfortable. A tender moment came when a bartender who had been listening to the inspirational messages started to participate in the conversations. One day she confessed that she had been thinking about going back to church for some time, and now God had brought the church to her. That church was EPIC.

For Andres, this was one of those moments that helped them see the value of community for discipleship and outreach. For some time, he had been concerned that their small groups tended to be insider fellowships that would meet for hours. The problem was that these groups tended to absorb a lot of energy without ever reaching out to unchurched community people. It soon became clear to the leadership team that if EPIC were to grow, a more serious conversation was needed around what the church was all about. The open-house events had brought church and community people who were eager to check out the new initiative and hang out with friends. What was needed now was a commitment to a deeper journey for the purpose of discipleship.

Not everybody in the audience and even in the core team was ready to buy into that new truth. The dwindling attendance of the first few weeks had been a painful reality. For Andres, it required taking on a new role. The church not only needed a chief vision caster and recruiter. EPIC now needed a leader able to foster a dialogue about the core mission and its implications for how they did church.

### *Mission Educator and Course Corrector*

For Andres, this time of dialogue was also a time of correcting course. This was a role that he had not expected. He knew that many in the congregation had been drawn to the welcoming culture they had developed. But how was he to transition people into buying into a discipleship culture that asks for a commitment in time and resources? It was a role that meant clarifying issues, dialoguing, and also disappointing some. He started with the governing team where he faced serious questions about what kind of church they wanted to be. Leading that team Andres had to learn that at each stage of the church plant's life cycle the leadership role of a church planter has to adapt to the challenges at hand. In the process he had to be willing to deal with ambiguous situations, help the team to deal with the challenge they were facing, while learning in conversation with those he led and listening to that which God was calling them.

### **Managing Expectations**

In the face of the initial dwindling attendance, Andres felt a bit in a pressure cooker with the heat rising. Now that they were an official company of believers, pressure came from several corners. There were those who came from traditional Adventist churches who had a rather predictable Bible school and worship pattern. This pattern is governed by what Adventists call the *Church Manual*. It contains guidelines about what an organized Adventist congregation looks like and which are followed with some cultural adaptations around the world. The value of such a manual for church planters is that they can connect to a system of established configurations of activity and resources.

The potential friction point comes with those who consider the *Church Manual* the legal contract for a franchise which does not tolerate creative variation. Such attitudes make it hard to relate to millennials, who have been called the most entrepreneurial generation in history (Irving, 2016; Waldorf, 2017). It is also a generation which holds against the church that it is (1) "intolerant of doubt," (2) "elitist in its relationships," (3) "anti-science in its beliefs," (4) "overprotective of its members," (5) "shallow in its teachings," and (6) "repressive of differences" (Jenkin & Martin, 2014, p. 96). Yet the leadership team of EPIC sensed that its core vision of the pursuit of discipleship called for a form of church that put its activities and events into the service of discipleship. This vision had been established with the desire to create an environment where anybody could explore their quest for a meaningful life and a faith that wrestled openly with the questions. How could EPIC become such an environment where young adults would experience the thrill of becoming committed disciples of the Lord Jesus? This was not just a rhetorical question for the EPIC team. It turned out to be the crucial axis around which the real life of the church began to turn.



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## **The Power of Metaphor**

In this search for ways to make discipleship central in EPIC, the first challenge was to find a metaphor that would speak to this generation about what discipleship means today. Interestingly, the church team soon found this metaphor in the story of the *Karate Kid*. This 1980s movie features a badly harassed boy, Daniel, who is rescued by a caretaker, Mr. Miyagi, from a group of bullies. Mr. Miyagi soon takes an interest in the boy and teaches him not only karate, but the art of life. Could discipleship be depicted as an “art of life,” centering around how to follow the Master Jesus Christ?

As the leadership team explored the implications of the metaphor, they had to wrestle with the role of leaders in the discipleship process as disciple-shapers. They launched the *hajime* discipleship training in the last month of their first year of existence. *Hajime*, the Japanese word for beginning, is used in the traditional Japanese martial arts like karate as a verbal command to “begin” (Wikipedia Contributors, 2018). *Hajime* communicated to those attending EPIC church that in order to become a Christian, there needs to be training to become a Daniel yielding to the discipline of a Mr. Miyagi, their metaphor for disciple-building Christian leaders. But as in the *Karate Kid*, discipleship aims at making every disciple of Jesus also a disciple maker.

Moreover, the leadership team soon decided to adapt the key structures of the church to the new vision. Discipleship training replaced the vague fellowship focus of the small groups who were now discussing how to be a Christian in everyday life and how to use their own experience as a basis to share their faith to invite others to become part of the journey of discipleship. The small groups, also supported by the Sabbath morning sermon, started flourishing under the new emphasis. Just as Mr. Miyagi, the karate master who was investing himself into Daniel, leadership was now redefined as finding “sons” and “daughters” in order to cultivate them as disciples destined to become disciple makers. As people caught the vision new language developed that made sense only to those guided by the new vision: “Hey, Andres, God gave me a Daniel-daughter (or a Daniel-son) to invite to our group.”

A month after the launch of the Hajime Discipleship training, on the first anniversary of EPIC, Andres Flores, its founding pastor, was ordained as a Seventh-day Adventist minister. Looking back, Andres feels that this realignment of expectations and leadership commitments led ultimately to ministry structures that became the vehicles to attract new members. This discipleship vision became also enshrined in the official mission statement of EPIC which reads “Disciples Making Disciples.”



### *System Designer and Culture Developer*

As Andres developed the *hajime* discipleship vision through sermons and the intentional training of his leadership team, his team became intentional disciple makers. Through this process and the implementation of small groups, an additional leadership role of church planters began to surface: the church planter as a systems designer, shaping the organizational culture of the church plant.

### **Ideas Have Consequences**

When the leadership team began to embrace the vision of the *hajime* discipleship model, it soon had structural system consequences. First, it redefined the role of church leaders to embrace their role as trainers responsible for cultivating disciple makers who can self-reproduce. Second, it made the small group the crucial matrix for growing discipleship makers. Third, it underlined the importance of supporting intention with structural reform. Fourth, it turned the discipleship process into a leadership development process. Fifth, it led them to see the need to make the central church programs serve the new vision.

For example: the traditional Bible school program called Sabbath School in traditional Adventist congregations soon became “Discipleship Conversations.” These conversations focus on issues of vital importance to the daily walk of emerging disciples. The traditional church board became a board of ministry leaders fostering accountability to the mission of the church. The sermon supports what is going on in the small groups. Thus being a member of EPIC church became something precious. And each part of the structure served and reinforced the new vision. One of the positive results of this consistent emphasis on discipleship was the steady growth in attendance and a more solid commitment to the church’s mission among those attending.

### **Systems Shape Behaviors**

In this phase, the church was no longer just experimenting with new ways to be church, but designing a system that could faithfully embody and transmit its values. Once the leadership team had first-hand experience in being disciplined by the pastor and in winning and training new disciples, EPIC’s model became reproducible. They now knew the processes that had been shown to be effective in living out the mission of the church. More importantly, they had found a way to honor the *Church Manual* in spirit while developing their own “system” of structures that put the typical SDA structures into the service of the central vision and mission of EPIC:

- The traditional Adventist Sabbath School was intentionally restructured as discipleship training.
- The church board became a Ministry Council.

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- The church developed a culture of small groups that focuses on discipleship, developing maturity that leads to reproduction.
- Ministry leaders were now expected to mentor emerging leaders.

## **Reflections**

My conversations with Andres about the history of EPIC were very productive. They revealed an amazing array of issues that need to be addressed by church planters, even as they journey with their congregation. One issue was the importance of collaboration as a mode of leading. Another was the crucial role of evaluating what was happening on the ground floor to the balcony (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). A larger perspective was necessary to make sense of what was happening or not happening in the day-to-day operations of the church. But ultimately, the church planter had to be willing to step in to help the leadership team and congregation decide what was most important to them, what they were willing to give up in order to build the new community, and then to put the structures in place that would enable the congregation to become in reality what they had intended to be in principle.

## **Support for Creative Deviants**

The story of EPIC as a multicultural, non-traditional church plant reaching urban millennials in Chicago challenges traditional Seventh-day Adventist expectations of what it means to be a church. While it was expected that in the early phases the church planter had to be an entrepreneur, traditional expectations do not expect the church planter to be a system re-designer. To the contrary, in the mind of traditional Adventists, the shape of the church is already spelled out in the *Church Manual*. What we have not recognized enough is that many faith-entrepreneurs use their need for independence to create something new that may not easily fit traditional expectations. Thus, many new church planting efforts have failed because they could not find support for innovation and creativity. Sometimes, new approaches are labeled “congregational,” insinuating that any deviance from accepted practice is contrary to the character and mission of the denomination. Fortunately, in the case of EPIC, both conference and union leaders actively monitored and supported the non-traditional methods and structures that emerged in the process of giving shape to the vision of EPIC: to be an intentional community that focuses on developing mature disciples that can disciple others.

## **Resisting Patterns of Rigidity**

The literature on organizational life cycles recognizes the role-shift from entrepreneur to professional manager (Adizes, 1999; Flamholtz & Randle,

2007; Mintzberg, 1984; Queen & Cameron, 1983). This literature also predicts that organizations then shift to more predictable patterns sanctioned by the central office. But in most cases, the organizational life cycle eventually steers towards old age and oblivion. This seems to be the stage of many traditional congregations around the country who are now struggling to survive. Will EPIC be able to keep their life cycle in the dynamic growth stages? The fact that they have already spawned a new congregation at the end of their fifth year is a good early sign.

One issue needing urgent attention is the fact that traditional denominational systems are often unprepared to deal with the unconventional ministry patterns of church plants that are out of step with typical Adventist church life. Church plants often have to prove their orthodoxy over and over again and justify their deviation from accepted practice to those who have a stake in maintaining the status quo.

### **The Abiding Value of Entrepreneurial Leadership**

Adventist institutional expectations typically see church planting as a pre-pastoral role in an initial entrepreneurial interim period. This study has described a more complex role that retains entrepreneurial characteristics even when the church has reached maturity. This role complexity is rarely recognized and needs broader discussion. It is hinted at by experts (Comiskey, 2009; Logan & DeVries, 2013; Moore, 2009; Ott & Wilson, 2011; Robinson, 2006; Stetzer & Bird, 2010; Towns & Porter, 2003). But it may also be important in the revitalization of congregations (Roxburgh & Romanuk, 2006).

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

There is a need for more systematic research accompanying successful church planting attempts. The current study focused on a young church plant which just celebrated its fifth anniversary by launching a new campus. This milestone indicates that it has reached initial maturity. Will it be able to buck the trend towards fossilization and decline predicted by Moberg (1984) and Saarinen (1986)? Only time will tell.

The role of the church planter at EPIC does not conform to traditional expectations. Rather than settling into a traditional pastoral role, the founder of EPIC found it necessary to rethink and redesign traditional congregational structures and use his influence and authority as the founding pastor to re-educate the leadership team and the members into a new paradigm of congregational life. This shift needs further documentation and exploration. Have other successful church plants followed a similar path? Do church planters in other denominations face similar issues? What are the implications of such

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shifts for the broader outlook of the church?

We would be interested in continuing this conversation beyond this article. Please feel free to contact us at [baumgart@andrews.edu](mailto:baumgart@andrews.edu).

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