

# Shifting Leadership Roles of Church Planters Over the Lifecycle of a Church Plant

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## Introduction

- Church planters are faith entrepreneurs working with a team willing to take risks to venture something new and possibly fail.
- Attracting a crowd is often the easy part. Developing a community of committed members structured for continuous growth is difficult.
- As the new church plant moves through a life cycle the leadership role of church planters has to adjust to new challenges learning as they go.
- This study documents some of the ever-morphing leadership roles of the founding pastor of EPIC, a church planted in 2012 in Chicago.

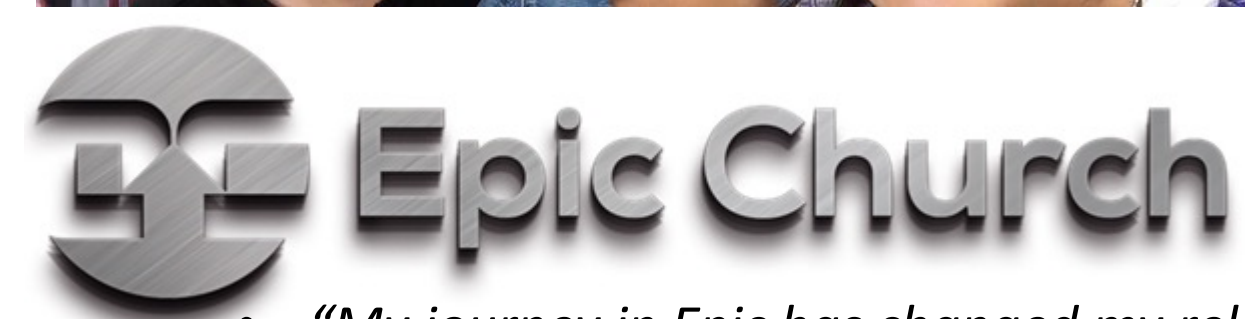


## Background

- EPIC was launched in 2012 by Andres Flores to reach the unreached in Chicago. Andres' team was a 30 member multicultural core group which emerged in a series of experimental open-house events in the community attracting some 200 people.
- When they launched EPIC church on October 20, 2012 in a school building they counted some 157 attenders. The first leadership challenge happened in the initial month when they experienced a steep decline in attendance as they moved from an event-based church to a commitment-based community.
- But Andres and his team decided that discipleship had to be part of their DNA. They looked for a building where they would be able to live out that commitment. In April of 2013 EPIC moved to the Den Theater in Wicker Park.
- Milestones: On the first anniversary of EPIC, Andres Flores, the founding pastor, was ordained as a Seventh-day Adventist minister. On the fifth anniversary of the church, EPIC launched a second campus.

## Methodology

- This qualitative study partnered with Andres Flores, the founding pastor of EPIC, the new church plant in the metropolitan area of Chicago, in order to document the changing patterns of leadership experienced in the first five years of growth.
- The data were gathered from oral records of the church, through interviews, participant observation, self-reflection, and communal reflection.
- The goal of the study was to develop a theory of Church Planting Leadership that is based on discernible role changes in the leadership of the church planter and his/her team.



- "My journey in Epic has changed my relationship with God. It has shown me what I believe people saw when Jesus was here on earth." (A worship leader)
- "Discipleship is not just a Bible study here and there. It's investing in a person and leading them to become a mature follower and, in turn, equipping them to do the same for someone else." (An elder)
- "What really made me stay was two-fold: the transformation that took place in my heart and . . . the empowerment that I gained to help others grow closer to Christ through the same process I went through. This life-changing process . . . was indeed a new paradigm-shift to my life: to make disciples of all nations . . . Never had I once thought about this prior to Epic Church." (A small group leader)

## The Changing Roles of a Church Planter

After 6 months EPIC moves to the Den Theater in Wicker Park Flores develops the "Hajime" discipleship vision through sermons, and empowers his leadership team to do discipleship training in small groups.

### 2 Mission Educator & Course Corrector

- Recruiting a core team and experiment with new forms of evangelism was the exciting phase of the launch culminating on October 12, 2012 with a dedication event to start EPIC.
- Excitement was high when 157 people showed up on October 20 for the official launch of EPIC at Pritzell School.
- Disappointment set in when attendance fizzled and some of the curious stayed away.
- The governing team faced serious questions about what kind of church they wanted to be.

### 1 Vision Caster & Recruiter/Entrepreneur

The first task is to recruit a core team willing to venture into the unknown with no guarantee of success. Church planters see a future before that future becomes reality. They must be willing to venture out in faith, while dealing with potential failure and managing fear.



- In 2014, Flores consciously attempted a course correction. He led the leadership team to embrace the "Hajime" (Japanese for "making a beginning") discipleship model that aims at helping each member to become a disciple maker.
- The church experienced a transition period that implanted the discipleship vision first in the leadership team.
- A key structure for implementation was the small group.
- The central church programs were put into the service of the new vision and resulted in steady growth and in more solid commitment among those attending.

Systems shape behaviors.

In this phase the church is no longer just experimenting with new ways to be church, but designing a system that transmits its values and processes that have been shown to be effective in living out the mission of the church. The church now moves into a rented church building.

### 3 System Designer & Culture Developer

- During year 4 and 5, Flores shifted his attention to vision execution and system's building. This required negotiating the traditional SDA church structures and creatively putting them into service for the central vision and mission of EPIC.
- The traditional Sabbath School time were intentionally restructured as discipleship training. The church board became a board of ministry leaders that fosters accountability to the mission of the church.
- This central vision led the church to develop a culture of small groups that focuses on discipleship, developing maturity that leads to reproduction.
- Ministry leaders are expected to mentor emerging leaders.

## Conclusions

- The story of EPIC, a multicultural non-traditional church plant reaching urban pre-Christians challenges traditional Seventh-day Adventist expectations.
- The role of the church planter shifted dramatically from early chief entrepreneur to chief mentor/educator to system re-designer.
- The church planter had to redesign traditional program structures to put them into the service of the core vision of EPIC: to be an intentional community that focuses on developing mature disciples that can disciple others.
- The discipleship process of EPIC is a leadership development process.
- The literature on organizational life cycles recognizes the role-shift from entrepreneur to professional manager (see Adizes, 2012; Flamholtz & Randle, 2007; Queen & Cameron, 1983).
- 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, 2011; Robinson, 2006; Stetzer & Warren, 2010).

## Future Work

- More systematic research is needed to understand role transitions of successful church plant leaders. This study followed EPIC up to its fifth anniversary when it launched a new campus. This step signaled that it had reached initial maturity. It remains to be seen if it will be able to buck the trend towards fossilization and decline predicted by Moberg (1984) and Saarinen (1989).
- 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 reeducate 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? What are the implications of such shifts for the broader denominational outlook?

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