**[Seedless Grapes](https://tedesler.substack.com/p/seedless-grapes)**

Paradigms that keep us infertile

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When we first moved to Croatia, our landlady gave us a huge cluster of fresh grapes. They were wonderful, full of juice and flavor. She sat with us as we enjoyed them and asked us if we ate them in the US. We did, but my wife noted they were mostly “seedless” grapes.

She laughed. There was no such thing in her mind. She thought Annette was joking. We assured her that there were seedless grapes.

“Grapes are a seed,” she responded, “there can be no such thing as a seedless grape.”

This conversation ran through my mind the second night of the Missio Nexus conference, which ended this past Friday. Those who were there will remember that Shadonkeh Johnson, a missions leader from Sierra Leone, reframed the “unreached people group” paradigm from one of statistics to one of fruitfulness.

As I have written before, s[tatistics challenge us in Great Commission ministry](https://tedesler.substack.com/p/the-2-know-the-limitations). On the one hand, they are necessary and helpful in understanding what sort of progress there might be as we go about obeying Jesus’ command to disciple the nations. Most of us are very aware of the progress meters, showing us both the number of unreached in the world and the percentage of Evangelicals and Christian adherents.

Shadonkeh challenged us to consider not the quantity of believers, but the quality of the churches. If we change our goal from simple numeric addition and instead focus on multiplying churches, the numbers will take care of themselves.

“What good does it do to plant ‘seedless grapes’?” he asked us.

An important word from an African leader.

I have noticed some US ministries touting their efforts at planting “Healthy Churches.” Amen to that. Yet, when I peruse the attributes they tout about their healthy churches, there is nothing about multiplication.

Western Christians (and in fact, many non-Western Christians in tradition-bound churches) have never attended a church that has a multiplying dynamic. The most we experience is a church that has a few “church plants” as opposed to one that is growing disciples who can fulfill the mandate of 2 Timothy 2:2 (“and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”). Instead, our churches tend to follow 0 Timothy 0:0 (“and what you have passively listened to while sitting in the pews, invite others to come and hear as well, so they can sit passively and invite others also”).

Sorry for the snark.

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Several years ago, I visited Shadonkeh’s ministry. It had a big impact on me. I have told one important anecdote in numerous talks about multiplication. It illustrates an issue in our church paradigms.

As we arrived at the main ministry building where the office is, our little team of Westerners entered a foyer. A secretary was sitting behind a desk, taking calls and directing traffic coming into the building. After a short introduction by one of Shadonkeh’s staff, our group started up the stairs. I hung back and wanted to engage with this faithful secretary, which I like to do because often, these unsung heroes are the ones making the ministry happen.

“What do you do here?” I asked. It was, of course, obvious she worked the front desk.

“I am a church planter,” she replied, “my husband and I have a few small churches we have started in our neighborhood.”

I was taken aback, but I wondered if she had been coached. We went upstairs and I found that the main group was being shown the radio ministry. In the corner was a glassed-in sound booth. The door was open, so I wandered over to the booth and stuck my head in. A sound producer dropped his headphones down and smiled at me.

“Hi,” I said, “what do you do here?” returning his smile.

“Ah, that is a hard question to answer. I am a church planter by night, but by day I help here in the radio station.”

As we toured that ministry, I repeatedly asked the same question. The answer was always the same. Every person saw themselves as a church planter, intent on multiplying congregations of believers. At the end of our trip, we piled into a taxicab. I had to ask.

“What do you do here?”

“I drive taxi and I also have a side job,” he replied. “I am working with my wife in our neighborhood to start small Christian churches. Driving the taxi pays our bills. Gathering people to read the Bible pays our hearts.”

We learned as the conversation unfolded that he had been impacted by Shadonkeh’s team and had been won over to the idea that all Christians are called to participate in the multiplication of churches.

I have asked many Americans if they could see themselves as a church planter. It is rare to get a positive response. We have created a church structure that is inherently passive, hard to multiply, and sets expectations for leadership way beyond the grasp of the average believer. Note that the secretary, the sound producer, and the taxicab driver were all working “regular jobs.” They were not “professional Christians,” being paid to do ministry. We have adopted a view of the priesthood borrowed from the Catholic Church. If we had a true “priesthood of the believer” mentality, each person could live up to their full potential in the effort to spread the Kingdom.

Our churches (and our Christians) are like seedless grapes.

**They have lost the ability to reproduce. Imagine the change if everybody saw themselves as a church planter.**