

Organic Networking

A Biblical survey aimed at inspiring and promoting an edifying pattern of inter-assembly connectivity.

Structures that enhance good social order are very important. Early in Genesis God introduces the family unit, the basic structure of society. Parents have authority over their children. Families interact and form villages and communities. When, after the flood, God said to Noah “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (Gen. 9:6), He introduced and sanctioned the concept of human government. Humans were to organize themselves in such a way they could punish wrong behaviour. Thousands of years later, after many examples of abused authority, the Word of God still urges Christians to submit to human authority, “for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God” (Rom. 13:1). The study of social structures is important because they help us function together in a constructive way, recognizing and supporting the role of genuine authority.

The Christian church, as a group of human beings, also requires a structure, an organization. Some say that the church is a “living organism” and not an “organization.” That is very true, but living organisms work well because they are wonderfully organized! The “natural” way in which the different parts of living organisms interact is called “organic.” Organizationally, organic relationships are fairly flat in structure – as opposed to hierarchical. The components of living organisms support common life by exchanging nutrients, complementing functions and defending each other from external threats. These “organic” relations even contain corrective and healing processes which seek to renovate, repair and adapt after something has gone wrong. Interestingly, the characteristics of “organic” relationships describe very well, not only the relationship between Christians as individuals, but also, as we shall see, the relationship between Christian congregations.

Allergic to organized religion

With the help of Constantine and the backing of the Roman Empire, the church became well organized, rich and powerful. A quick look at church history from then until now is enough to make us feel ashamed at the abuses of religious authority. The painful divisions experienced by so many Christian denominations, associations, circles of fellowship or groups of churches

have made many believers allergic to all forms of organized religion. Such believers pray and feed on the Word of God at home. They have not given up on Jesus, but they have given up on organized Christian fellowship.

Some Christian congregations function as “stand alone bodies.” They recognize that all true believers form part of the Body of Christ, but choose to isolate themselves from all other congregations. There are different reasons for doing this. Sometimes local leaders like to feel in control of their little flock, like Diotrephes (3 John 9-10). Some congregations have painful memories and seek to protect themselves from possible outside interference or control. Some are so absorbed with their own internal affairs such as pastoral visits, youth work, teaching, counselling, avoiding internal division, solving family problems, etc., that they have no time and energy to look outside their own walls. Other assemblies are large enough to feel self-sufficient, they consider that they don't need contacts with other assemblies. There are also those who suffer from a “small heart” and are simply not interested in anything outside their own congregation.

If an assembly chooses to “go it alone,” is it moving away from God's design? Most of these reasons for avoiding inter-assembly connectivity have their logic, but does the Bible provide us with guidelines on how assemblies should interact with each other? This paper is divided in three parts. Part 1 consists of a Biblical survey which points to an organic type of relationship between assemblies. In Part 2 we shall explore some challenges associated with these organic inter-assembly relationships, and in Part 3 we shall end with some practical suggestions that may help your assembly move towards expanding and developing an organic inter-assembly network.

Part 1 - A Biblical survey

In searching for Biblical guidelines on inter-assembly relationships, some Bible students suggest Scriptural references from both the Old and the New Testament. For example, some borrow ideas from the Old Testament hygiene rules, like how the nation of Israel would deal with a leper, a dead person or defiled tent, to suggest that this is how local churches should cooperate together to isolate “sick” assemblies.

But the fact is that the Church of Jesus Christ was not known before Christ. Although the arrival of the Messiah is prophesied in the Old Testament, there is silence about the arrival of the Church. Considering future developments, Jesus said “I will build my church” (Mat. 16:18). Paul, an expert in the Old Testament writings, states that teachings concerning the Church were a “mystery made known to me by revelation” (Eph. 3:1-7). Clearly the Old Testament provides useful teaching for all Christians today (Rom. 15:4, 1 Cor. 10:11), but to learn about the Church, we must restrict our attention to the New Testament.

While working with others in church planting in Colombia, we enjoyed searching the New Testament for guidelines on how a local church should function. We found instructions on leadership, use of gifts, and assembly responsibilities. Years later, when serious tensions arose between some Brethren assemblies in Europe, I began to search for Biblical guidelines on inter-assembly relationships. After realizing that the Old Testament could not answer this particular question, I turned my attention to the New Testament. There are basically three possible sources of information: (1) Explicit instructions, (2) Pictures and analogies, and (3) Examples in Scripture. We shall now look at each of these in turn.

(1) Explicit instructions about inter-assembly relationships

Does the apostle Paul provide guidelines on how one assembly should help another? Does the Lord Jesus or any of the apostles explain how one local church should handle a problem situation in another church? I was particularly surprised by the absence of instructions. We find explicit instructions on how individual Christians should relate with each other and also on how an individual assembly should welcome genuine visitors and reject dangerous visitors (2 John 4-11). But nowhere in the New Testament do we find explicit directives on what one assembly should do or not do with another assembly! In the absence of explicit directives, I turned to the other two sources of information.

(2) Pictures and analogies of the church

Much is taught in Scripture through pictures or analogies. We learn about Jesus through images such as that of a good shepherd, the bread of life, the door, the light of the world. We learn about the Christian life through images such as that of a soldier, an athlete, salt of the earth, a farmer. Similarly we can learn a lot about the church through dozens of Biblical analogies. For example, the Church is referred to as the body of Christ, the family of God, the household of God, a holy nation, a chosen race, a flock, a holy temple, salt and light, the bride of Christ, and so on.

Each of these analogies looks at the church from a particular angle. They help us better understand: (1) What the church is in its totality, (2) the role of the individual Christian, (3) the relationship between the individual Christian and Christ, and (4) the relationship between individual believers. If you look at each analogy carefully, you will notice that they are used to illustrate how individual Christians should relate to each other but not on how individual assemblies should relate to each other.

Consider, for example, the very instructive analogy of the church as the body of Christ. What do the “body members” represent? Notice that the apostle Paul uses this figure to illustrate the relationship between believers and not that between assemblies. For example, in Romans 12:5-5 we read, “we who are many, form one body... we have different gifts... if a man’s gifts is...” The “we” is referring to saints and not to assemblies. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 and 17 we read, “we are all baptised by one Spirit into one body... Now you are (the) body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” The “you” is referring to saints and not to assemblies. In Ephesians 4:25 we read “each of you must put off falsehood... for we are all members of one body.” The “you” and the “we” are referring to saints and not to assemblies.

What does the apostle Paul illustrate about the believer’s individual behaviour with the “body” image? (1) Since Christ has only one body, every born-again believer forms part of that one body, (2) since each part of the body is different and necessary, every individual believer is different and has a special contribution to make to the wellbeing of the whole body, (3) since each part of the body receives direction from the head, every individual believer receives direction and nourishment from Christ as head, and (4) since different parts of the body cooperate, help and care for each other, we as individual believers are called to cooperate, help and care for each other. The New Testament, therefore, uses the body picture a number of times to illustrate personal relationships: with Christ and with fellow believers. It does not provide us with information about the relationship between assemblies.

Similarly, when the church is compared, for example, with a flock, a family or an army, its members are made up of sheep, children and soldiers. These sheep, children and soldiers represent individual believers and not assemblies.

The seven golden lamps

Of nearly 100 analogies (or possible analogies) of the church, I found only one that makes a clear statement about the relationship between assemblies: That of the seven golden lamps. In this analogy we are explicitly told that “the seven lamps are the seven churches” (Rev. 1:20). What can we learn from this analogy about inter-church relations? These seven lamps were not structurally connected like the seven branch lamp in the Tabernacle. Each lamp independently gave its own light and Christ himself walked between them (Rev. 1:13). He congratulated each assembly for the good they were doing and warned each assembly to correct its own deficiencies. Notice that it was not the task of one congregation to judge or correct the other. That was Christ’s task. Notice also that Christ held no assembly responsible for failures in another assembly. Christ Himself was the only link between these congregations.

(3) Examples in Scripture of inter-assembly relationships

We turn now to our last source of information: the behaviour of assemblies as described in the New Testament. It is incorrect to assert that Biblical examples in themselves are normative. But it is also incorrect to suggest that Biblical examples are irrelevant. It is both interesting and instructive to see how, as Christianity spread from Jerusalem to the distant corners of the known world, assemblies of believers were formed. These were not disconnected-autonomous-isolated local groups. But neither were they centrally or regionally administered or controlled. Consider the following characteristics of Biblical inter-assembly activity:

Church planting: The first assembly was that of Jerusalem. Soon God blessed and many became Christians in Antioch. “News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch” (Acts 11:20-22). Notice that the church at Jerusalem took the initiative to support the formation of a new Church.

Missionary support: Years later, the assembly at Antioch recognized the call of God on Barnabas and Saul, “So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off” (Acts 13:1-3). This assembly actively supported teachers and evangelists who served outside their own town. Later Christian congregations from other towns joined in supporting these missionary efforts (Phil. 4:16).

Mutual visitation: Gifted evangelists and teachers visited different assemblies to encourage and build up the believers (Acts 18:22-27; 2 Cor. 8:18). There were also social visits, to express and enjoy Christian fellowship. Visitors who were unknown at the assembly of destination sometimes carried a written recommendation from their home assembly (2 Cor. 3:1).

Interchange of information: Some letters, like the apostolic writings, were sent to encourage, correct and edify the churches. Other letters were sent to warn against a dangerous teaching or a dangerous person. Some letters also contained brotherly greetings and requests for prayer (1 Cor. 16:3, Gal. 1:1-3; Col. 4:7-16; 2 Peter 3:1; 3 John 12). Sometimes saints visited with reports about other areas. “Tychicus will tell you all the news about me... He is coming with Onesimus...They will tell you everything that is happening here” (Col. 4:7-9).

Welcoming visitors: Hospitality was very important. Believers opened their homes and helped support visiting believers from other assemblies (Acts 28:14-15; Rom. 16:1,2; Phil. 2:28-29; 3 John 5-6).

Financial cooperation: Collections were made to meet serious needs of assemblies in other regions (Acts 11:29-30; 2 Cor. 8 and 9).

Logistics and cooperation: Not every assembly has all the gifts. Common opportunities, threats or problems are good reasons to cooperate. In Acts 15 representatives of a number of assemblies came together to seek a solution to a common problem.

Role models: An assembly that runs well, becomes a good example and an inspiration to other assemblies. The church at Thessalonica, for example, “became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia” (1 Thes. 1:1-7).

Diversity among assemblies

The Biblical model of the local church has a useful structure which adapts very well to different cultures. As the Christian message spread around the world, congregations with their differences proliferated. The New Testament evidence points to an organic type of relationship between congregations that allowed congregations with differences, even with deficiencies, to benefit from each other and be an encouragement to each other. One reads of real tensions between assemblies in the New Testament, and yet they still found ways to connect.

It is easy to idealize the New Testament assemblies and conclude that fellowship among them was possible because their practice was homogenous and they had no serious problems. This is far from the truth. The assembly at **Corinth** was morally slack (1 Cor. 5). Brothers were polarized in “groups” and many competed with their gifts to such a extent that Paul wrote: “Your meetings do more harm than good” (1 Cor. 11:17). The assemblies in **Crete** lacked teaching or guidance and were running in a deficient manner (Tit. 1:5). The assemblies in **Galatia** contained infiltrated active legalists (Gal. 2:4). The **Jerusalem** assembly found it difficult to make a complete break with some Jewish traditions (Acts 21:20). The assembly where **Gaius** fellowshiped had serious leadership problems (3 John 9-10). The assemblies in **Asia** had their practical and also doctrinal deficiencies (Rev. 2-3). Problems and deficiencies were not ignored. In each case we notice that there was activity to help assemblies correct and improve. But the inter-assembly contacts continued to be an encouragement. Some relations were strained and a degree of distancing occurred from problematic and unrepentant assemblies, like with the congregation where Diotrephes ruled (3 John). Visitors who did not act “in line with the truth of the gospel” were opposed face to face locally (Gal. 2:11-14). But we read of no situation where an assembly is “formally” excluded by others. When an assembly reaches such a low state, Christ himself, as head of the church, says to such assembly: “If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lamp from its place” (Rev. 2:5).

Organic relationships, organic fellowship

There is a natural way in which living organisms interact with each other. We refer to this God related way of relating in the natural world as organic. This organic type of inter-connectivity enhances growth, adapts to change, feeds its components, receives feedback, corrects errors, balances deficiencies, heals itself, responds to perceived needs, protects itself against threats... in short, God has designed organic systems as the best way to support life. Organic arrangements adapt rapidly to changing needs and conditions. They are very flexible. Our brief Biblical survey suggests that the word “organic” describes very well the type relationship between assemblies that we read about in the New Testament.

Part 2: The challenge of organic inter-assembly networking

Current alternatives to organic networks

Today many congregations design and then submit to a “hierarchical authority structure,” where some persons are given supervisory authority over a number of congregations in a region. These believers in turn submit to the directions of some national committee. This has its organizational benefits but lacks Scriptural precedent. Christ is the head of His church and the elders in each congregation are held accountable to the Lord for decisions taken locally (1 Peter 5:1-5). There is no authority level between Christ and these elders.

In the Old Testament, each one of the 12 tribes of Israel was responsible for the good behaviour of the whole nation. Some try to apply this model to the church, suggesting that, in principle, each congregation is responsible for the good behaviour of the Body of Christ on earth. In practice such congregations form an “association” or a “circle of fellowship” where they practice “collective responsibility.” Some hold that important decisions must be agreed by all. Others hold that a decision taken by one assembly binds all other assemblies in their “circle.” When a congregation does not submit, it is excluded from their “circle.” Decisions taken by assemblies outside their “circle” are usually ignored. This model has its benefits, but presents also time-consuming disadvantages. It’s fundamental weakness is that it conflicts with the Biblical historical evidence. As explored in Part 1, the New Testament shows significant differences and disagreements between congregations. We read about assemblies with errors, even serious errors, which are encouraged and urged to change and improve. But they were never formally excluded. There is no Scriptural evidence to suggest that one assembly was held accountable for what happened in another.

Many evangelical congregations today like the idea of being completely “free.” If fits well into the Western mentality of personal independence. Decisions in such assemblies are easier to take. This model also has its advantages. But, as we have noticed earlier, in Scripture every congregation had its own activities and responsibilities but they did not function in isolation. There were links between assemblies. They were organically related. The networking between New Testament congregations is shown as something useful, happy, constructive and natural.

Benefits of organic networking

To show some interest and concern for the wellbeing of believers in other assemblies requires the investment of energy, time and resources. Is it worth it? The prime motivation for practicing organic networking is that it follows a Scriptural pattern. This way of relating between assemblies has very practical benefits. It allows gifts in your own assembly to be a blessing to a wider group of believers. It allows external gifts to help build and encourage your assembly. Some missionary and evangelistic activities are better carried out as a team effort among various congregations. Sometimes there are economies of scale. Some projects are simply impossible for smaller congregations. Assemblies can help each other to respond to those challenges, to protect themselves against common threats and make good use of common opportunities. Meeting and working together with believers from other congregations can be a real joy. Genuine Christian fellowship always refreshes the soul of both young and old.

The porcupine’s dilemma

In seriously cold winters, animals need each other to keep warm. Sometimes an animal’s survival will depend on such “fellowship.” For some animals like dogs, cats or cows, this “fellowship” is relatively easy to practice. But how do porcupines manage? In this well known

analogy, they are faced with a dilemma: If they stay apart they freeze and if they get too close they hurt each other. I notice a similar dilemma among Christian assemblies. We are to recognize all genuine believers as our brothers and sisters in Christ and, where possible, seek to be a blessing to them and their congregations. We should also be open and allow the Lord to bless us through the ministry and fellowship from other congregations. This is possible because we have a common base. What sometimes hinders closer cooperation is the presence of significant differences in doctrine or practice. When we get closer, we begin to hurt each other. How can we solve this? One option is to shave off the porcupine's spikes, that is, agree to set-aside or disregard our differences. This may enhance inter-connection but it will be harmful to the porcupines in other respects. Is this the only way?

Similarity facilitates cooperation

How did the first generation of New Testament assemblies work together in spite of their differences? Sometimes a local believer was excluded or visitor was opposed if considered detrimental to wellbeing of the local assembly. But we don't read of any assembly being rejected. There is evidence that they made an effort to cooperate together, and, as is to be expected, assemblies which were more similar found it easier to work together. Non-exclusive networks of assemblies developed, fostering closer links with assemblies of similar tradition, culture, language or background. Assemblies in Judea retained a strong Jewish flavour. Notice that the difficult discussions in Acts 15 lead to a letter being addressed not to all believers but to "the Gentile believers." (15:23). Timothy allowed Paul to circumcise him in order to work more freely among Jews (Acts 16:3). The assemblies in Galatia of Gentile background did not find it easy to interchange speakers with assemblies from Judea (Gal. 2:11-13). The apostles clearly aimed to serve all the assemblies, but given their talents and calling, some specialized, Peter working among Jews and Paul among Gentiles (Gal 2:7). Is this a sectarian attitude? It can become one, but properly understood, it simply facilitates work. It is natural. It is a feature of organic networking.

Church planting in Colombia

In the late 1990's, while living in Pereira, Colombia, I travelled every two weeks with 2 or 3 believers to Caicedonia, about an hour and a half by car. We visited a family that was open to the gospel and ran evangelistic activities from their home. The family also invited a small team from another congregation who also visited them every two weeks. Between us we could sustain an evangelist meeting in Caicedonia every week. This worked well for over a year while our focus was on reaching the lost and basic discipleship. But when we started work on helping the group of believers form their own local church, the "spikes" began to hurt. We focused special attention on a few men, trying to develop them to form a leadership team; the other congregation insisted on sending one of the sisters of their congregation "to pastor the new church." We did not see this was a Biblical model, so we distanced ourselves, and they carried on without us. In time, we lost contact with this group.

During that time we were also visiting a couple of families in a town called Armenia. Together with the cooperation of teams from similar assemblies in Zarzal and La Paila we sustained weekly meetings and evangelistic activities. As the group of believers began to function as a local church, we pulled together in a similar direction. There is now an assembly there with its own leadership and which still networks happily with Pereira, Zarzal and La Paila.

We should not be afraid of differences, neither should we limit our cooperation to congregations with identical Biblical convictions. But it is a practical reality that congregations with similar Biblical convictions can work together more closely and on a wider scope of projects.

Dangers of inter-assembly cooperation

As we begin to work together with active, lovely and genuine believers who hold convictions that we consider not Biblical, sometimes even harmful, we can slowly adapt to these errors. Unless we have developed our own convictions from the Word of God and they are alive in our soul, our love and tolerance can erode our convictions to such a degree that we lose them. We become pragmatic. Since most believers today see it “that way,” why should we be complicated and different. We reason that since God is clearly blessing this joint project He must agree with everything that is being done – or at least, the non-Biblical elements don’t really bother Him.

On the other hand, there is the real danger of requiring such a degree of assembly similarity that we seldom cooperate with others.

Some assemblies choose an exclusive path in order to isolate their younger believers from books or contacts with genuine believers who they consider hold incorrect teachings and practices. In some serious cases this may be a good and natural thing to do. But in most cases over-protection eventually leads to well-intended manipulation, chronic immaturity or some sort of crisis. God’s truth, properly understood and explained, can stand up to attack. As noted earlier, Timothy, whose father was Greek, was circumcised by Paul in order to facilitate their ministry among a “different type” of assemblies (Acts 16:3). This was not viewed as a shift in theology neither as a compromise. The apostle’s final advice to Timothy was not to isolate from those who disagreed with him, but to “continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it” (2 Tim. 3:14). We also need to help our young believers to develop Biblical convictions, to such an extent that they will positively influence fellow believers rather than passively follow others.

If not careful, healthy organic networks can slowly evolve into more formal and rigid arrangements which may exert well intended but carnal pressure on individual assemblies to conform. Organic relationships are a blessing but require constant vigilance.

Part 3: Moving towards organic inter-assembly networking

When you reflect on the dynamics of your family friendships, you will notice that families with certain similarities naturally move closer together. These similarities may have to do with the age of our children, family values, common interests, shared projects, and the like. You may enjoy an evening out with a couple who are heavy smokers. They may give you some useful tips on how to bring up your children, and yet you may decide not to go on holiday with them. You consider their heavy smoking unhealthy for your family. A similar dynamic should naturally occur between assemblies. In an organic relationship parties draw close enough to benefit from each other and distance themselves when they sense they will harm each other. Organic networking is open to bless and be blessed, it has no formal list of members. There is no formal reception or expulsion. Before concrete steps can be taken to explore or develop some genuine organic inter-assembly relationships, potential obstacles need to be addressed. Your assembly may require some preparation.

Replacing a sectarian mentality: The Biblical principles underlining organic relationships between congregations must be clearly and patiently taught and explained. Brothers and sisters must learn to capture the large picture, a picture that extends beyond their own congregation. Holding firmly to your Biblical convictions, your assembly can be used by God to bless other assemblies, and others can be used to bless yours. The name of meeting places

of believers frequently include words such as “Gospel,” “Bible,” “Fellowship” or “Evangelical.” The names outside congregations can be useful but can also be divisive and misleading. They are supposed to identify the place, not the people. To relate organically, we must learn not to allow the name or shape of the bottle to define its content. It is possible to relate organically between congregations that use different song books. We must learn to look beyond names, notice boards and simplistic caricatures and learn to assess the possibility of developing a new relationship based on what a congregation believes, what they do and how they live.

Awareness of your own identity: When an assembly is not clear about its own identity, it will find it difficult to decide with what other congregations it can constructively relate to. Should it continue with its inherited network? Should it restrict itself to Brethren-type assemblies? Should it explore contacts with evangelical or state churches? [Two companion papers that may encourage your assembly explore its identity are: “Is your assembly changing?” and “Assembly distinctives” – both freely available from www.philipnunn.com]. As we seek to relate to other congregations it will be helpful to distinguish between your assembly’s Biblical distinctives and your valid but adaptable local traditions and preferences. Without this clarity, it will be difficult to know with who we should relate, how close to get, on what issues is special care needed, and when we should take some distance from another congregation.

Letting go of “ownership” of mission field: For many years some assemblies support “their” missionaries as they evangelize, teach and church plant abroad. It is easy to see how the new congregations that are formed can be considered as “our” assemblies by the sending churches. On the mission field very similar assemblies can function in the same city with virtually no contact between them because the missionaries who planted them valued their independence or wanted to protect their new congregations from possible outside influence. In Colombia, for example, I know of 6 “networks” of Brethren assemblies which for different historical reasons have developed independently. Happily a degree of organic networking is growing among some of them. I am learning as I observe this development. The sense of “ownership” should be resisted and replaced with loving and supportive interest, freeing and encouraging such congregations on the mission field to develop their own edifying organic relationships.

Deciding to forgive: Sometimes the differences within a congregation or between workers is so large that temporal separation becomes a practical necessity – like between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15. But sometimes defamation and carnal animosity has been part of the division process. Genuine repentance, confession and forgiveness are necessary to free the way for organic relationships. Forgiveness may not necessarily mean that a divided assembly will necessarily return – they may continue as two “slightly different” assemblies. But forgiveness heals the soul to lovingly relate to others without fear or prejudice.

A new type of relationship: a parable

A father had a son who was similar to himself. They had clear ideas and were both strong willed! When the son reached the age of 18 the atmosphere at home was frequently tense. They argued over what career the son should study, over eating habits, type of music, what friends he had, and more. After a particular hot argument, the son ran away from home, and began to live his own independent life. At first the son felt very insecure, but over the next decade he finished his studies, got a job and later his own car. He developed a number of friends and soon was blessed with a wife, a house, a cat and two children. One evening, he found himself telling his children a bedtime story he had learnt from his father. They loved it. Sometimes the behaviour of his children brought back some happy memories of his own childhood. One night he went to bed but could not sleep. His children had never met their

grandparents. The next day, after more than a decade of silence, he decided to take some action. It was an emotional and risky step. He phoned his father. They agreed to meet for lunch. How did it go?

During those years of separation, at least 5 things changed to make a new type of relationship possible. (1) The father still loves his son and is concerned for his wellbeing, but he no longer feels responsible for the behaviour or the future of his son. He knows that the son is a grown man now and has his own family. (2) The son no longer feels dependent on his father. He has proved that he can care for himself. (3) The son no longer feels afraid of his father. There is no way the father can exert any control over him even if he wanted to. (4) The son has matured being now a father himself. He can be more realistic and show grace towards the shortcomings of his own father. (5) The father and the son demand no exclusiveness in their new relationship. The father and the son have now their own circle of close friends. In time they may share some common friends, but they don't interfere in the other's circle of friends.

This parable illustrate some of the social dynamics that occur after a local church divides in two or after a formal network of churches "explodes." It depicts what I currently see among some Brethren assemblies here in Europe. This "decade," be it 10, 50, 150 or more years, is now behind us. The 5 characteristics that make possible a new type of relationship, an organic inter-assembly relationship, are generally present: (1) Out of love we may feel concerned for other assemblies, but no assembly feels responsible for what is said or done in another assembly, (2) there is no sense of dependency on other assemblies, (3) we no longer fear what other assemblies might say or do, (4) we have learned that running an assembly is no easy task and are more willing to show grace, and (5) we now demand no exclusiveness in our dealings with one another. Every assembly is free before the Lord to carefully develop its own edifying relationships. Does this describe what you see around you? This may be a sign that the time is ripe to explore a new type of relationship. A mature Christian relationship. A Biblical relationship. An organic relationship. Perhaps the Lord may place on your heart to take that emotional and risky initial step. Where are those who are now going to take the initiative, pick up the phone, and suggest a lunch?

Realism and inter-assembly organic networking

For my wife and I every human being on this planet is, in principle, a potential friend. The practical realities of life, however, force us to be selective. It is not that some people are more valuable than others, but some nice people simply live too far away. Others speak Chinese and we don't. We may not pursue some friendships because we consider them dangerous for ourselves or our family. Some friends are selected because of common values – we stimulate each other positively in the same direction. Some people will choose not to be our friends, at least not now. They may have many valid reasons for this. This same phenomena also occurs among assemblies.

When you discover and cultivate relationships with assemblies of similar convictions, you reinforce those shared Biblical practices and values. Through shared conferences, camps, youth work, publications and mutual visitation, we encourage the next generation to understand, value and practice what we have in common. All congregations are changing. Similar assemblies can help each other in the changing process, to resist the pressure to be pragmatic and explore new ways of applying the same Biblical truth in a way that touches the next generation. We should not be afraid of differences, neither should we limit our cooperation to congregations which are identical to our own. But it is also true that assemblies with similar Biblical convictions can work together more closely on a wider scope of projects.

Conditions that allow organic relationships to grow

For organic relationships to develop between assemblies, also among individuals, certain natural conditions are required: (1) Contact: There must be some pattern of regular contact. They must enjoy some shared interests or activities, (2) Help: In some way, the contact should be perceived by both as beneficial. The energy invested in the relationship should return some form of blessing. This blessing may simply be joy! (3) Trust: Without trust, a relationship shall remain cold and formal. It won't be a channel of life. Trust develops in time and requires mutual acceptance. Trust grows more rapidly when values are similar. (4) Variety: The distance between different assemblies is not the same. Organic relationships are never forced into a standard mould. Each assembly will naturally develop closer ties with some assemblies and more distant ties with others. (5) Elasticity: As circumstances, needs and assemblies change, so will the relationship between them. The distance between assemblies in an organic relationship will contract or expand in time depending on similarities of convictions and their capacity to meet each other's needs.

Once there is a conviction that organic networking is the Biblical way to relate between assemblies, some form of action may be required. Once we know who "we" are, it will require some courageous initiative takers to make some contact with other similar congregations, learn who "they" are and consider the possible degree of cooperation. This process involves taking risks, but it is good to remember that an organic relationship means that parties will naturally move closer if the relationship proves to be beneficial and will distance themselves if the relationship is considered useless or harmful. This task clearly calls for a degree of spiritual maturity. The needed vigour, stamina and wisdom will require a close walk with the Lord and familiarity with the Word.

Organic fellowship in action

Let us consider some areas where organic networking can be explored.

Evangelistic ventures: Sometimes joint evangelistic efforts are a very effective way to share the gospel in a particular city or region. Those who come to Christ will normally be encouraged to join a healthy local church close to where they live. Joint prayer meetings and cooperation in evangelism will be easier than in body building projects where important differences may limit or hinder full cooperation.

Body building projects: Events such as conferences, Bible study seminars, one day training workshops can be hosted by one assembly but with various assemblies invited. Better still, if members of various assemblies discuss their common needs and jointly organize the event!

Interchange of speakers and Bible teachers: Some gifts are given by the Lord to benefit more than one assembly. Inviting speakers from other assemblies can be used by the Lord to refresh and encourage His people. This will be relatively easy when the congregations are similar. Wisdom, discernment and respect for local leadership is required if differences between the congregations are significant.

Comradeship between workers: When the leadership of one assembly become friends with the leadership of another assembly, opportunities for interchange and cooperation become a regular reality. It may be very useful to organize one or two times a year events to encourage a healthy and constructive friendships between leaders from various assemblies. In some areas it may be very useful for evangelists, missionaries and other full-time Christian workers to explore ways to encourage and help each other. As trust develops, this organic networking between individual workers will lead to organic networking between congregations.

Cooperation in Mission: We should be happy to encourage, pray for, and support all gospel initiatives throughout the world. But there is an added incentive to encourage, pray for, and support Bible training, social work and church planting initiatives among congregations similar to your own. It could be useful for local leaders to explore such possibilities, financially support such work, invite such missionaries to share their work and vision, and encourage those with mission interest and a mission calling to consider joining such initiatives.

Join assemblies: Joy, fellowship and spiritual nourishment are the expected benefits or organic inter-assembly relationships. Sometimes, especially when assemblies are numerically small, an organic relationship between them may in time help them to take the bold and useful step of joining two local assemblies into one.

Shared literature: It is good to get to know and use material other Christians are producing. The interchange of written and audiovisual material prepared by assemblies with similar identity can also be very useful. This can be done by recommending magazines, books, authors and websites, by creating links between useful websites and by occasionally using helpful “new” authors from outside your usual network.

Conclusion

The New Testament paints the picture of an expanding group of Christian assemblies. These assemblies were not hierarchically organized, they were not mutually accountable for each other's behaviour, neither were they independent-autonomous-isolated congregations. There is generous Biblical evidence to show that these assemblies related to each other in an organic way. This model of inter-assembly connectivity is still possible today. Organic relationships are evident in all the living organisms that God has created. It is “natural.” This organic way of relating is designed to function well in a fallen world, even in a day of ruin. It would benefit assemblies today if they slowed down to consider how they currently relate to other assemblies, explore and encourage new relationships where mutual edification may be possible, and humbly restore some broken relationships. It is a time for those with Godly passion and Biblical convictions to look around them and ask the Lord for His plans for us today. Sometimes obedience means standing firm against a current. Sometimes obedience requires a bold stepping out into something new. Where will obedience to the Lord lead you and me today? Our God still desires to bless us through healthy inter-assembly relationships.

“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.”

- Romans 14:19

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