

What is the Kingdom of God like? How can I illustrate it? It is like a tiny mustard seed that a man planted in a garden; it grows and becomes a tree, and the birds make nests in its branches. -- Luke 13:18-19

It is easy miss the impact of how these words would have been heard by Jesus' original listeners. To our modern ears, the point seems to be fairly straight-forward. The kingdom of God might start very small, but over time it will grow to grand proportions. It makes perfect sense when seen through the lens of progress that modernity has placed before our eyes.

However, the parable, as Jesus told it, did not make sense. At least not if taken literally. Because mustard was so aggressive, it was considered to be unclean. One mustard plant could corrupt an entire garden. There were many restrictions on when and where mustard could be planted, if at all. Simply put, there is a good chance this man was doing something illegal. The mustard plant, both now and then, was often considered to be nothing more than a pesky weed.

What might Jesus' intent be in comparing the kingdom of God to an unclean weed? Speaking from a North American context, this renewed image of the kingdom of God as a weed can be helpful for us to think of what it means to be the church. It would be helpful to point out that the church should not be perceived as the equal of the kingdom of God, but as a prime agent of it. The church is the most tangible expression of the kingdom of God.

The Weed Church

For centuries, the church has stood at the center of North American culture, but that is rapidly changing as we move toward a post-Christian society. No longer is the church the master gardener who controls the landscape. The church is being shifted to the edge of this proverbial garden -- and that would be precisely where the imagery of the church operating as a mustard plant would make the most sense.

Short of diving into the biology of a mustard plant, there are a few qualities of a weed that can help us think about what a church on the edge of culture might look like:

- **Thriving.** The metaphor of a weed causes us to rethink some of our assumptions of the church. It is commonly expected that the Kingdom will be met with great resistance, and therefore it's expansion is easily slowed. But when a few simple conditions are met, a weed will thrive -- that is what makes it a weed after all. What might this mean for the church? What does it look like for the church to be a community that invites and welcomes the kingdom of God that is poised to thrive, rather than an organization that attempts to force or cultivate it?
- **Multiplying.** Closely tied to the thriving nature of a weed is it's ability to multiply and spread quickly. Around the world today, the church is multiplying rapidly through the simple structures of church planting movements. What kind of forms can the North American church assume to also experience this kind of rapid reproduction?

It should be noted that both of these characteristics of weeds are only true of a weed that is in the right context for it to thrive. In the Pacific Northwest, thorny blackberry plants can consume a space, though they don't fare so well in an arid climate. Much like a weed, a church must be a local, contextual expression of the kingdom in order to thrive.

It is helpful to think of the church, like a weed or any other plant, as a living system. What might a church look like that is patterned after the structures of life itself? In 2006, Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom published *The Starfish and the Spider*. Based on many of the principles of the new science of the structures of living systems, their work offers a practical and helpful look at how organizations can thrive when operating as decentralized networks.

The title of the book comes from the contrast between a centralized and a decentralized organization. A spider would represent a centralized organization. Eight legs extend from the central body, but the life force is found at the center. If you remove the head, you kill the spider. This is the typical model for most organizations, as a top-down hierarchy leads and directs the organization through the chain of command. As the head goes, so goes the organization.

A starfish would represent a decentralized organization. Brafman and Beckstrom write: "But starfish are very different. The starfish doesn't have a head. Its central body isn't even in charge. In fact, the major organs are replicated throughout each and every arm." The difficulty of the starfish is that even science doesn't fully understand how it operates. If one leg decides that the starfish needs to move, somehow it has to convince the other four legs that the move is a good idea. The starfish is not led by the singular head, but by the greater whole.

Brafman and Beckstrom spend a great deal of space in describing how a starfish organization operates. Their ultimate suggestion, however, is how an organization might exist as a hybrid of both a spider and a starfish. These organizations "combine the best of both worlds -- the bottom up approach of decentralization and the structure, control, and resulting profit potential of centralization." As they describe, eBay is an excellent example of such an organization. eBay is in the business of connecting others. Rather than a physical product, eBay offers a trusted network (centralized) where buyers and sellers can come together in shared transactions (decentralized).

With this summary to build from, let us return to our discussion of a mustard seed church. How can the types of organizations described in *The Starfish and the Spider* help us form new church structures?

Much of what I will call a traditional church model has been developed as a centralized organization. (This is, of course, far too generalized, but I hope providing even a basic description can be helpful in working with Brafman and Beckstrom's insights.) This church model is centralized both in leadership and locale. A central leadership team, usually consisting of paid pastoral staff and lay eldership, can be found at the top of the organization chart. Decisions and direction for the congregation are made at that level.

The primary expression of a traditional church in the community is found in a weekly Sunday gathering. This gathering is designed to bring together as many people from the church congregation and the local community as possible -- usually in the church's own building. It is here that the church's mission and values are expressed, with hopes that the congregation will grab hold of them and live them out until the next time the body gathers.

Many of the challenges that face a centralized organization apply to the traditional church model as well. A breakdown at the leadership level can cause a great deal of fragmenting in the organization. On a more important level, such a structure provides a continual tension with the mission of the church, which is to be sent into the world. In spite of even the best intentions of leadership to develop it otherwise, as a centralized organization develops, it becomes more cumbersome, and therefore less agile in mission. More resources are used to sustain the structure than to be sent into mission. The supporting structure becomes the mission.

A decentralized church structure can take many forms, and again, it would be easy to over generalize. We will consider the growing movement of house churches in the United States and elsewhere as representative of a decentralized church model. Networks of house churches exist in most larger cities in the United States, as well as thousands of independent house churches. A growing distrust in centralized authority in general, coupled with a number of scandals in prominent church leadership, has caused house churches to grow in both visibility and numbers in recent years.

While a house church model does require less resource, it is prone to its own set of problems. Many house churches likewise struggle with mission, as the emphasis becomes more on the relationships and building of community than on the sharing of mission. Because house churches have little or no visibility in a community, those that best stay on mission are those that place on ongoing emphasis to serve in their community.

A Network of Networks

But what might a hybrid model of church structure look like? How can the kingdom of God be tangibly expressed through a church community with a centralized structure that empowers and connects individuals while maintaining shared mission as the uniting principle?

A central theory of living systems, with an emphasis on networks, is valuable in helping to describe what a hybrid church model might look like. In *The Web of Life*, Fritjof Capra describes a network of networks of networks:

“The view of living systems as networks provides a novel perspective on the so-called hierarchies of nature. Since living systems at all levels are networks, we must visualize the web of life as living systems (networks) interacting in network fashion with other systems (networks). For example, we can picture an ecosystem schematically as a network with a few nodes. Each node represents an organism, which means that each node, when magnified, appears itself as a network. Each node in the net network may represent an organ, which in turn will appear as a network when magnified, and so on.” (pg. 35)

I would suggest that this network of networks gives us a helpful image for what a hybrid church model might look like -- smaller networks of relationship connect what larger networks, and so on. How might this look? Here are how the networks might play out at each level:

Mini Network. The mini network can best be described as a house church, or a simple church. It is a network of individuals with shared commitment to each other and the mission of the kingdom of God. An emphasis at this level is placed not only on intimate interpersonal relationships, but also on multiplication. As this is the simplest level in the network, it is therefore the easiest to reproduce. In a mustard plant, or any other plant, reproduction and growth happens from the edges. Likewise, in a multiplying church, reproduction happens at the edges, the simple church level, as mission expands the community outward.

Reproduction at this level is an important theme in what have become known as *church planting movements*. Documented in a book by David Garrison, these movements have seen the rapid multiplication of smaller, simple churches around the globe. A hybrid model of church, developed with the pattern of living systems in mind, must always be focused on multiplication, much like life itself. This rapid reproduction at the edges reflects the decentralized nature of this mustard seed model of church.

Medium Network. At this level, a number of house churches join in a gathering on a regular basis. This reminds each house church that they are part of a greater whole. There is not an ideal size for this gathering -- it is primarily determined through the cultural context of the network and what space resources are available for

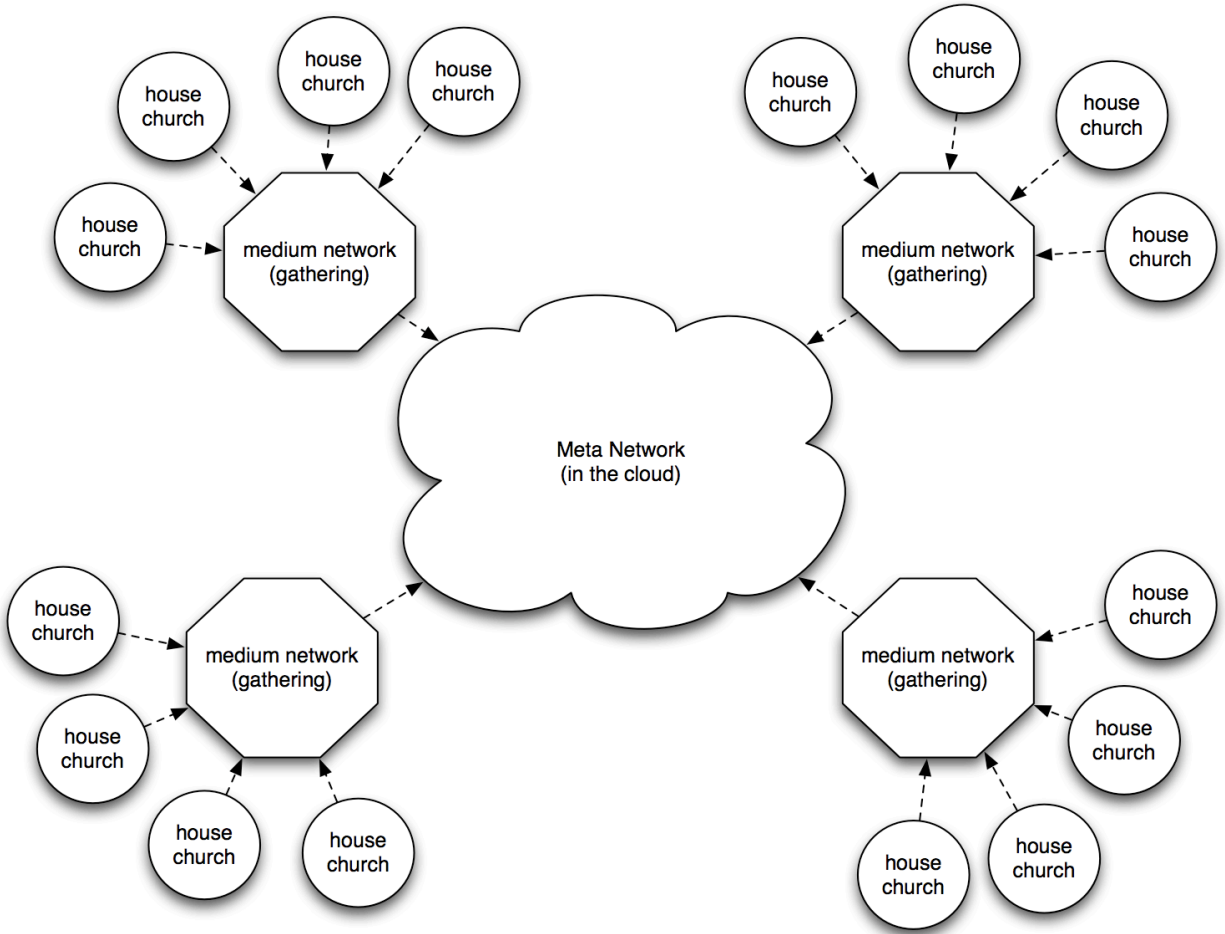
gathering. But it is important to note that this network is also reproducible. As the mini networks multiply, so will the medium networks grow. This growth should lead to multiple medium sized gatherings in different physical contexts.

The emphasis of this gathering is on a celebration of God and how mission is happening in the community. Individuals are invited to share how they have seen the Kingdom present even in the mundane moments of life. As individuals hear how others are working out what it means to be sent, they too are stirred toward a mission-centered life.

Meta Network. A meta network is a shared relationship between gatherings and those who are part of them. Just like it is good for the mini network to have a sense of connection with a larger whole, so it is for the gatherings. The rise of online social networks in recent years offers an excellent glimpse of how this might look. (Data and connections that happen online are often referred to as being “in the cloud”, which is the language used in the chart below.)

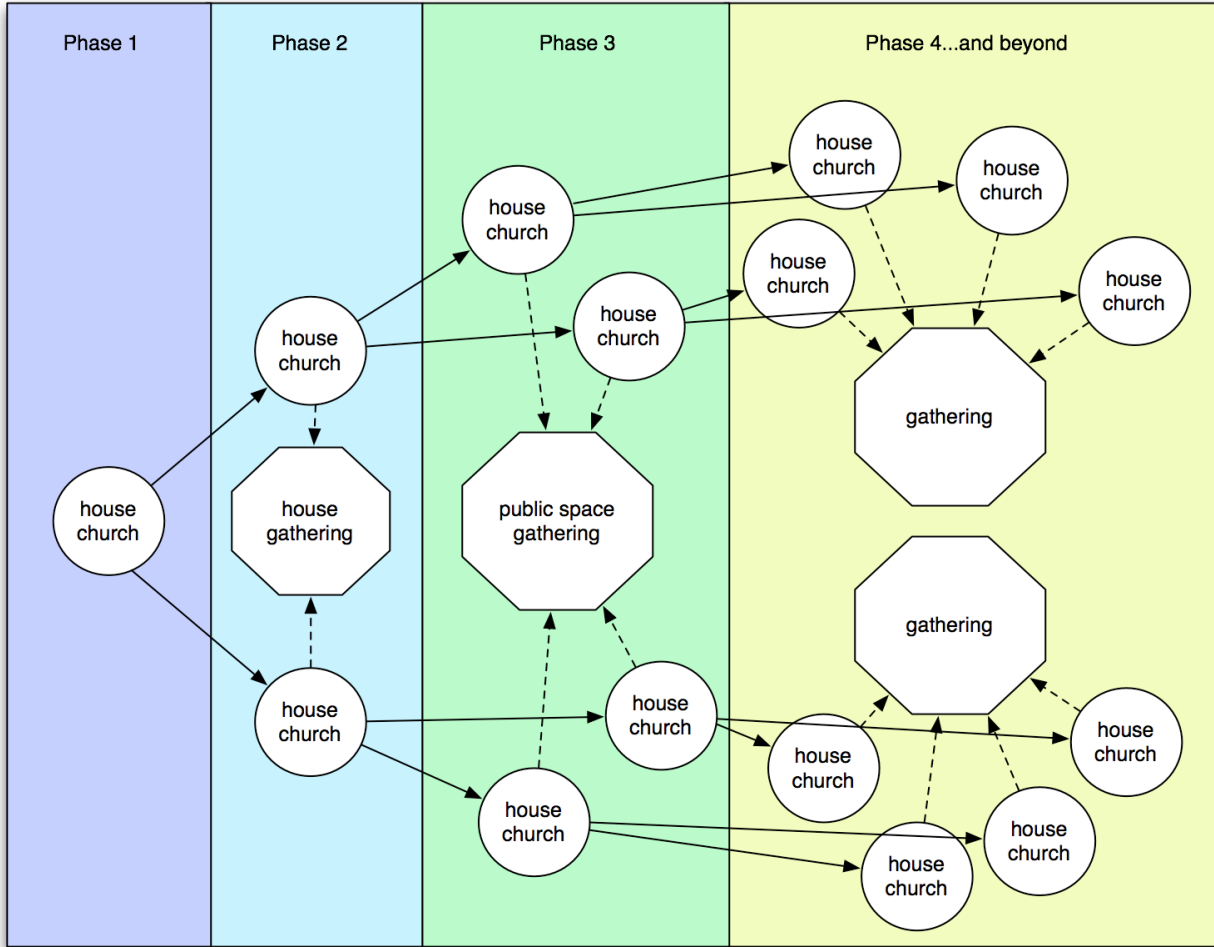
The internet is often decried as a loss of intimacy as relationships lose touch and face to face contact. This analysis is right on, but we should not lose sight of the value of the internet for creating and extending loose connections between networks and individuals. These loose connections serve to strengthen the network as the breadth and diversity of how the mission of the kingdom of God is revealed.

The chart below offers a rough glimpse of how this might look. These networks should not be limited. At a level smaller than the house church networks, smaller clusters of relationships will emerge. Likewise, beyond the metanetwork, a mustard seed church will recognize larger networks of churches in their local and global community. While a mustard seed church structure might emphasize these three levels, it should always be aware of both smaller and larger networks, and how it can facilitate connections for both.



“A Tiny Mustard Seed”

Much as the parable begins with a tiny mustard seed, the structure of a mustard seed church begins small. Many contemporary church planting methods try to launch a church as large as possible. The intent of this is to create a church which can quickly become self sustaining. However, I would suggest it also works against the development of a rapidly reproducing model, where the DNA of multiplication can be embedded from the beginning. The development of a reproducing mustard seed church community looks something like this:



Phase 1. This stage begins with a simple church, or a home gathering. The community begins meeting and inviting both personal and communal growth. However, from the very beginning, a shared heart of replication must be established as mission above all is what has connected this new community. To create an anticipation of phase 2, this group only gathers every other Sunday. The nature of this gathering is built around a reflection on the Christian story found in Scriptures and an integration of this narrative with our own.

Phase 2. Two things happen which mark stage two. The initial group replicates to form a second group, which will also meet every other week. The first time a group multiplies can be the hardest. There is a great sense of loss as developing relationships are separated into distinct groups.

This sense of loss leads to the timing of the birth of a medium network gathering. This meets on the alternate Sunday, beginning the week after the last meeting of the initial house church. This allows the relationships from that group to continue to be engaged with each other, but in a growing setting. This medium network gathering represents a celebration of God's working in the world through sharing of stories and communal disciplines. It can continue to meet in a home to allow or another more intimate setting as a way to preserve financial resources for this young community.

During phase 2, the house churches should continue to multiply. The alternating pattern of house church and medium gathering continues each week.

Phase 3. The representation of this phase on the chart above is more general than the previous stages, as the chart is not meant to define the numbers of groups that exist. The primary marker for this stage is the movement of the medium gathering into a public space to reflect the growth and multiplication of the house churches. The movement into a more public stance reflects the growing sense of mission to the community. While the intent is of the first phases is not to keep the church a secret, it is in phase 3 that the church becomes more of a public presence.

At this stage, the metanetwork grows in importance. While the metanetwork would be in place from the start, this movement into phase 3 should bring a renewed emphasis on developing these looser connections "in the cloud".

Phase 4. As with each stage, continued multiplication marks the beginning of phase 4. In order to enhance the local connections of this growing community, new medium sized gatherings are launched in proximity to the expanding house churches. Each gathering would have a pastor to shepherd and facilitate the life of that particular community.

The chart above only serves as a general image. The numbers of house churches and gatherings do not define this multiplication as much as the need and readiness of the community to support them. The movement into each phase is not defined by a timeframe as much as it is by some general benchmarks. The following table suggest when each transition might happen, along with a potential timeframe:

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
# People	5 - 25	15-75	60-200	150+
# House Churches	1	2 - 3	3 - 8	6+
# of Gatherings	0	1 (in a home)	1 (public space)	2+
Projected Timeframe	0-12 mos	6-24 mos	18-36 mos	24-48 mos

The ultimate dream for all of this is what might happen as we continue past stage four. With the DNA of multiplication that has been embedded from the start, this network of house churches and gatherings meeting throughout Austin. A central leadership team works closely with empowered pastoral leaders for each area gathering to continually push the life of the community out toward the edges. But it is also looking to initiate new mustard seed churches in other cities to be formed with a similar multiplying structure.

As a means of conclusion, a return to the parable of the mustard seed is in order. Modern science has a solid grasp on the processes involved in how a mustard plant grows and spreads so quickly. That was not the case in Jesus' day. While there was some understanding of what helped plants to grow, ultimately the growth and fruit-bearing of a mustard plant was considered to be a divine process. It was God that made a plant grow. Even as we apply scientific principles to understanding the structures of how a church community might grow and thrive, may we never think we own this process. The church is to exist and find life within the Spirit. It is an expression of God's work in an upside down kingdom. And the moment we think we have the methods and structure of being the church rightly figured is the moment where the Spirit is no longer able to engage with us.

Resources

There are countless voices that have helped shape the strategy described above, but the following books have had direct influence:

Brafman, Ori and Rod Beckstrom. *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*. New York: Portfolio [Amazon Kindle Edition], 2006.

Capra, Fritjof. *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems*. New York: Anchor Books, 1996.

Garrison, David. *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World*. Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2004.

Hirsch, Alan. *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006.

Keating, Thomas. *The Kingdom of God is Like....* New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993.

Scott, Bernard Brandon. *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989.