

# What in the World is an Apostolic Network?



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Vanguard Ministries considers itself to be counted among the genre of newly emerging networks which C. Peter Wagner categorizes as an integral part of the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR). When describing Vanguard Ministries to people, the response is often, “Oh you mean like a denomination.” Well...no—it’s an apostolic network! OK, so what in the world is an apostolic network, anyway?

## Trust

Lyle Schaller, a church consultant and prolific author (with perhaps more books to his credit than even Peter Wagner), and considered by many to be a veritable sage to the church world, begins one of his many fascinating books with the following paragraph:

“For at least three or four decades a huge earthquake has been shaking the foundations of Christianity all across the North American continent. What caused this earthquake? A less than fully adequate explanation can be summarized in one word: competition. If a two-word explanation is acceptable, the second word is denial.

**The ecclesiastical marketplace is being shaken by an unprecedented degree of competition among the churches**

for new members. Relevance is replacing inherited institutional loyalties as a primary motivation when younger generations choose a church home. Quality is replacing geographical proximity. Credibility is replacing the power of kinship ties. A democratic “Made in America” model is replacing the imported European religious traditions. Large is replacing small as the descriptive term for where most people worship. New is replacing old. Trust is replacing distrust as the guiding principle in designing a denominational polity. Horizontal lines are now more powerful than vertical lines in institution building. Nondenominational is replacing denominational. Regional is replacing neighborhood in defining the service area of a parish.”

In this book Schaller goes on to point out that **“Every society chooses**

**between two paths. One is to trust people. The other is to trust those institutions the people have created.”**

From the latter part of the last century to the first half of this one, America chose to trust institutions, e.g., social, political, labor, educational, and yes, even religious institutions. Most churches and groupings of churches were built on the premise that “while sinful human beings cannot be trusted, institutions can and should be trusted.”

The 50s saw the beginning of a major challenge to that basic premise. Starting with the Civil Rights Movement and then moving to the opposition to the Vietnam War, then continuing with Watergate and now to a seemingly never-ending string of public scandals, the American public no longer trusts institutions. Schaller, a minister in the United Methodist church and an unrepentant denominationalist, wrote this book in order to hold a mirror up to denominationalism, so that his colleagues might see that the system is fundamentally dysfunctional. It is dysfunctional because it is organized on the basic assumption that Christian people in general, and congregational leaders in particular, cannot be trusted. He asserts that, “Both the Roman Catholic Church in America and The United Methodist Church have demonstrated that to **build an ecclesiastical system on the medieval feudal culture of distrust, designed with vertical lines of authority, is not the way to reach the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth generations of American-born residents.”**

## Churchquake!

Peter Wagner, also a long time member and advocate of denominationalism, began as early as the first part of this decade to chronicle a major shift in wineskins. Not to be outdone by the word picture created by Schaller’s earthquake analogy, Wagner recently wrote a book entitled, *Churchquake! How the New Apostolic Reformation is Shaking up the Church as We Know It*. The headline on the back of

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the dust jacket reads, **"God is shaking things up!"**

Wagner calls this shaking "the New Apostolic Reformation," and maintains that it is the **"most radical change in church life and structure since the Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century"**—an awesome comparison when one ponders its significance. While this article is about apostolic networks (one of the hallmarks of this New Apostolic Reformation), it cannot be left unsaid that one of the more significant characteristics of those churches considered to be from the NAR mold is that they are built on the premise that the pastor is called of God to do that job, and therefore can be trusted. The congregations trust their pastors, and consequently are willing to give them unprecedented authority in the local church, i.e., treat them as God-anointed leaders rather than as not-to-be-trusted employees. Obviously, this reflects the observation that Schaller made concerning the current shift away from the mind-set that groups are safer than individuals. Wagner calls it "a transition from bureaucratic authority to personal authority, from legal structure to relational structure, from control to coordination and

from rational leadership to charismatic leadership which manifests itself on two levels: the local level and the translocal level." One of the outgrowths of this transition has been the unprecedented growth in the number of autonomous, local churches which have sprung up in this country, as well as around the world, within the last twenty to thirty years.

## Networking

As is so often the case, when the pendulum swings, it swings too far. The pastors and leaders of all these new autonomous churches found that there were a number of benefits of belonging to a group of churches that they sorely missed. This led to another hallmark of the NAR churches, i.e., the banding together in loose associations or networks in order to regain some of those benefits or economies of scale. David Cannistraci writes that **"networking is simply enhancing life by sharing resources through relationships and connections.**" Networking depends on these relationships and connections as the core of its power. The miracle of networking is the unlimited potential it has for bringing previously isolated things together for beneficial exchanges and marvelous accomplishments." Cannistraci sees these emerging networks of apostolic churches as a move "toward a marvelous balance between spiritual structures without organization and those with too much organization."

So with that as a backdrop, what exactly is an apostolic network? Cannistraci defines it as follows: "Essentially, it is a band of autonomous churches and individual ministries that are voluntarily united in an organized structure. This framework of human relationships is sufficient to facilitate interdependency between network members and their apostolic oversight. Network members possess a common vision and demonstrate a tangible expression of New Testament apostolic ministry." The key word in this definition is relationships. He goes on say, **"Love and voluntary cooperation is the essence and spirit of the network."**

In order to be successful, apostolic networks, like any organization, must have

somebody in charge. As the name probably implies, those given the authority within the networks are those who have demonstrated a translocal, apostolic gifting, and who have accumulated a fair number of spiritual and personal relationships with other ministers over time. As these apostolic figures emerge, the authority given them is given voluntarily, and because of the trust that has developed over the tenure of those relationships. It is important to note that the extent of that authority often varies even within a given network, and is itself a function of the depth of the relationship between the apostolic figure and the local minister or church body. Apostle John Kelly of the network known as Antioch Churches and Ministries said it well when he wrote how autonomous churches and corresponding apostolic ministry is supposed to function. "When a father goes to his son's house he does not take charge, he submits. The son is in charge of that home. When the son goes to his father's house, the father is in charge. Within the context of a person's ministry, mission, or church, that person has the ultimate responsibility and authority."

But as with any healthy family, when the son needs the father's help, the father is right there with as much help as he can possibly give, and vice versa. And again, in a healthy family, the father is always in spiritual authority, and as such is much revered and respected for his greater experience level and wisdom. But where the family analogy breaks down is that the father/son relationship is biological and cannot be broken, whereas the apostle/local church relationship is purely relationship-based and can quickly be broken if that root issue of trust is violated.

Wagner lists several characteristics of most apostolic networks. First, they are translocal, i.e., they are a band of churches that choose to affiliate with each other on a voluntary basis. Second, they are based on relationships, an issue sufficiently covered above, although Cannistraci adds that **"The most effective networks are more than mere ministerial fellowships, because the purpose is to accomplish apostolic ministry and not merely to facilitate camaraderie."** Third, apostolic networks have one leader, and in

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some cases the apostle has gathered an inner circle called an “apostolic team.” Fourth, authority flows from the bottom up. Again, the concept of authority based on trust was sufficiently covered in the preceding discussion. Fifth, the network serves; it does not control. Wagner writes, “Because affiliation is voluntary and so loosely structured, the minute the network begins to serve itself and not the churches, it will begin to crumble.” Finally, apostolic networks add value to the local church leadership. The written goal of Antioch Churches and Ministries is to build the pastor and his church, not to create a centralized “Mecca.” Wagner adds, **“Local churches flow in and out of apostolic networks. They remain in them as long as they perceive they are receiving added value.”**



## The Final Question

The final, and perhaps most important question left to be answered, is what will prevent these apostolic networks from becoming just like the denominations they emerged as a reaction to. In an article written a few years back, Charles Arn contrasted the two paradigms as follows: The old (denominational) as resisting change, being centralized in control, being bureaucratic, and seeking to be served by the member churches; whereas the new (apostolic) promotes change, is regionalized in its control, encourages a high level of accountability, and exists to serve its member churches.

What is to prevent a gradual shift from the new back to the old? In fact, one prominent author utilizes a well-known sociological principle to prove that it is

inevitable that apostolic networks will eventually become denominations. That principle speaks of the charisma of the apostolic leaders (i.e., the qualities that set them apart from ordinary men) as being the genesis of the authority enjoyed by them. But as that charismatic leader passes from the scene, in the Western world especially, rational, bureaucratic, and democratic structures are put in place to preserve the vision of the founder. Wagner writes, “When democratic structures are developed, the leaders then gain their positions of power by the will (meaning the votes) of the followers. When this happens, the source of power subtly shifts from God to a group. The group that elected the leader can also presumably fire the leader at will. So the trust is now in a group, no longer in an individual charismatic leader.” Wagner calls this phenomenon the “routinization of charisma.” As

one might suspect, this routinization process generally would require a generation or two after the demise of the founder to take effect.

However, it has happened more quickly. By his own admission, John Wimber, founder of the Association of Vineyard Churches, wrote in 1993 that the association had become a denomination when they choose to formalize the relational structure that the organization had been

formed under. Therefore they incorporated, appointed Regional Overseers, and called a board of directors. This is not to suggest that the Vineyard Association of Churches has returned to all the characteristics of the denominations from which they emerged. Indeed, with due diligence they may never, but it does serve as a vivid and timely example of the routinization phenomenon.

Wagner proposes three mandates which he feels would preserve the vitality of the new apostolic networks. The first is to **limit the number of churches that are a part of any given network.** This is an obvious limitation due to the relational nature of the organization. Wagner admits that the number is a variable dependent upon issues such as the apostle’s personality,

the existence of an apostolic team, the geographic location of the member churches, the level of quality control expected by the apostle, the efficiency of the network’s administrative staff, and the level of accountability inherent within the network.

The second mandate is that the **network leadership must be committed to constantly encourage and raise up new charismatic leaders from within the organization.** In

other words, the apostle must not be so protective of his status that he is afraid to celebrate and promote the giftings of others from within his network.

Finally, Wagner’s third mandate to avoid the routinization of apostolic networks is that the networks be ever looking for opportunities to multiply itself, i.e., as leaders with clear translocal apostolic giftings emerge, the network must be willing to multiply them out as a fresh new network, much as cells in a growing cell church multiply. Wagner feels that this one step alone will help keep the number of churches in any one network at a manageable level, and will provide a steady flow of “first-generation, unroutinized, charismatic leadership for each new network.” Wagner even predicts networks of networks.

## Principles of Relationship

By way of summary then, J. Anthony Miller presented a paper at a Postdenominational Symposium a couple of years ago wherein he identified two principles which are key to an identity based relationship. The first principle is that **“Our identity is born out of relationship.”** Miller cited several scriptures to establish that God’s intention has always been relationship. The second principle is that **“The anointing flows out of relationship.”** Here Miller asserted that relationship was the key to Kingdom effectiveness, and that the New Testament makes it clear that the networking or partnering of the apostles was instrumental in catching men, i.e., the harvest of the earth (Luke 5:5–7, 10). Indeed, as King Solomon so wisely wrote, “A chord of three strands is not quickly broken.” ▽