

THE PROFILE OF A CHURCH PLANTER

Part Two of Three

By Glenn Smith

In the first article of this series I addressed the need for some essential personal qualities. These were qualities that were important for all ministry leaders, especially church planters. In this article I want to look at 4 Starting Skills that are vital in church planting, but may not be as critical in pastoring an existing or established church.

The first skill is **relationship building**. Church planters must be comfortable meeting new people and initiating conversations with strangers. They must enjoy people and regularly engage with them. One of the biggest challenges for planters is to gather their first 50 people. This requires that the planter be initiating with people and be building relational networks. Good conversational skills are extremely helpful here. The ability to listen and make others feel valued and cared for is important too.

One of the challenges for prospective planters is the challenge to build relationships with a diverse array of people. Sometimes Christians have a difficult time relating to non-believers as a friend. Sometimes we have difficulty connecting with people who have different interests and values than us. Too often we have a tendency to judge those outside the household of faith (and for that matter, even within the household of faith.) People usually feel it when we have judgment or prejudice in our hearts. This hampers our ability to build extensive and diverse networks of relationships.

I encourage church planters to establish a large network of friendships with the types of people whom they are trying to reach through their new church. This becomes a pool of prospects from which to build that initial gathering. As new people become a part of the initial core, the church planter must then become a team builder. One of the keys to effective team building is relationship building. This skill is foundational in a new work.

The second starting skill is **personal evangelism**. This is very closely connected to relationship building, for personal evangelism begins with a relationship. Effective church planters either have a spiritual gift for evangelism or they have a deep passion for reaching unsaved people. They are comfortable in settings with people who are far from God. They look for ways to engage with them and they enjoy hanging out with them (e.g. like Jesus in Matthew 9:10-13.) They have huge hearts of compassion for those outside the family of faith (e.g. like Paul's heart for the Israelites in Romans 10:1.) They have good conversations with non-believers on a regular basis and actually see some move toward God.

The best church planters know how to develop rapport with the unsaved while never compromising their own convictions and values. They communicate love and acceptance, and the non-believers experience them as winsome. This creates comfortable

opportunities for conversation about spiritual matters. Good evangelists know how to lead others on a spiritual pilgrimage that is respectful and appealing.¹

This skill is vitally important for the believers to observe in their planting pastor. Strong planters not only model an evangelistic lifestyle, but they appropriately challenge believers around them to do the same. They know how to both motivate and train others in personal evangelism.

The third starting skill is the ability to **contextualize**. Contextualization skills come from practice. People who know how to contextualize study the behaviors and attitudes of the people whom they are trying to reach. They are able to analyze and interpret the culture around them, and they are able to identify ways to become an “insider” (if they are not already) within culture.² By doing this they can discover new methodologies for communicating, leading, evangelizing, etc.

To contextualize is simply to study one’s culture and to adopt methods and strategies so that unnecessary offenses (barriers) can be avoided, and maximum communication and impact can be achieved. The tension comes when we fear that we might be crossing the line of syncretism. Syncretism is the blending of biblical views with non-biblical views, thus compromising the truth of Scripture. Paul warned the Colossians of this danger in Colossians 2. Throughout history the church has struggled to find its way between the two dangers of irrelevance and syncretism. The aim is to be culturally relevant while never compromising the integrity of God’s Word.³

One other thought here. If you live in a very monolithic culture and you are a part of that culture group, this may sound like an unnecessary skill. However, be careful that you don’t assume too much. Even within similar cultures, there is often a large cultural chasm between Christians and non-Christians. Make sure you know how to contextualize in a non-Christian context.

The fourth starting skill is **entrepreneurial leadership**. Don’t let the “business” word turn you off. Entrepreneurial is the best word I know to communicate the concept of taking the responsibility and risk of starting something new.⁴ There are several different types of leaders in society. There are managerial leaders, there are change (or transformational) leaders, and then there are entrepreneurial leaders. Managerial leaders make good things better. Change (or transformational) leaders enable organizations and groups to change direction or culture. Entrepreneurial leaders start things and create things that do not yet exist.

¹ My favorite book today on evangelism is Brian McLaren’s *More Ready Than You Realize*.

² For some interesting reading on “insidership” see *The Insider* by Jim Petersen and Mike Shamy.

³ For further study I recommend the following books: Bosch, David J., *Transforming Mission*; Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*; Van Gelder, Craig, *Confident Witness – Changing World*; and chapter 2 “Redeveloping a Missional Mind-Set For North America” in Stetzer, Ed, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*.

⁴ Many believers prefer the biblical word “apostle” or “apostolic.” However, due to our various theological traditions, this word can be one of the most confusing of all. With that said, I normally prefer to use the biblical terminology.

Church planting requires entrepreneurial leadership, and not everyone has it! In fact, I have come to believe that it is unusual for a pastor to have this skill. My experience has been that most pastors are managerial leaders, some are change leaders, but few are entrepreneurial leaders. Now this takes us to the age old question, are leaders made or born? In other words, can non-entrepreneurial leaders become entrepreneurial leaders? Honestly, I don't know. All I know is that you should demonstrate this skill or a strong propensity to this skill before tackling the challenge of planting a new church.⁵

Ask yourself these questions: Have I successfully started any new ministries, businesses, programs, or ventures from scratch? Do I enjoy discovering new opportunities and do I project energy and enthusiasm for new things? Have I demonstrated the skills of planning, organizing, and creating something from nothing? Have I ever gathered and mobilized resources for a dream? These are the traits of an entrepreneurial leader.

To summarize, there are 4 starting skills that church planters need to possess. They are relationship building, personal evangelism, contextualization, and entrepreneurial leadership. As you reflect on your own abilities and experiences, try to identify your strengths and weaknesses in light of these 4 skills. Create a personal development plan to help you grow in the weak areas. Read. Enlist a mentor. Make sure this is you! And by all means, complete a high quality church planter assessment process before embarking on this important mission.⁶

⁵ One other option is to team up with someone who is an entrepreneurial leader and work closely together as leaders.

⁶ For more information on church planter assessment see www.nciglobal.org or contact us at info@nciglobal.org.