

Planting Churches: Is it really as hard as it looks?

I have been around church planting just about all of my adult life. And, I have to admit that it has become quite whimsical to see how complicated we Americans can make something that is in essence so simple. You who know me also know that I believe that this is because most of us in the United States Church grow up never ever really seeing a church plant. At best we see a programmatic regathering of people from one place of worship to another. This is hardly the kind of thing that is referred to when all over the rest of the world leaders talk about planting churches. At worst, we read about church planting in books written by scholars writing on the subject.

But, recently, as I was listening to a non-Western colleague talk about church planting in their context, I was struck once again with its simplicity. In essence, it is fair to say that church planting is a decision! All over the world, I have been privileged to meet people who have planted churches. Some of them have been at the center of movements that have planted thousands of them. These leaders come in all sizes. Some are highly educated, others can barely read. Some have money behind them, others nothing but the few personal resources that they or their family possess. The natural talents that they possess are so widely varied as to be impossible to systematize.

But, all of them share one common characteristic, they believe that the Church of Jesus was created to grow and multiply. Their methods, though sharing common strategy to the trained eye, are as varied as they are. The secret to their effectiveness begins in their convictions. Those convictions can be simply stated. One, whatever God is going to do in the world, He is going to do through ALL of Christ's people. No other entity on Earth bears the particular diversity found in the body of Christ. And, with its full release, the complete story of Grace is also released.

Two, whatever God is going to do in the world through Christ's people, He is going to do primarily through a decentralized structure. Many of these leaders may not be able to verbalize this conviction, but they live it. The power of God's people, released into every conceivable relationship that Christians have: in their families, in their neighborhoods, and in their market places, is galvanized by these leaders for action. No matter how big their

particular church, in terms of people attending and building, they are always more concerned about those not yet reached.

As I listened to my colleague that day, I was caught once again with just how simple the above is to practice, if one wants to. In the pursuit of the above convictions, my colleague leads hundreds of others in the understanding and practice of seven principles for planting new churches.

First, all church planting begins with **prayer**. He sees three things about prayer that make it both the foundation to and the energy behind the church planting process. I believe that it is these three things that actually makes prayer practiced in this ministry so powerful.

One, their praying is visionary. By this I mean, they not only ask of God where He would want them to plant a new church, they expect Him to answer. In prayer they expect from God, but also anticipate what God is going to do long before He actually does it through their obedience.

Two, their praying is targeted. They have places in mind that need the testimony of the Gospel. They do not have to be convinced that they and the church are God's tools. So, prayer focuses on the village or neighborhood where they believe God wants them to be obedient and plant a new church. All kinds of ways are found to practice this reality. Prayer walks, door-to-door visits asking for specific things to pray for, etc. But, always they are targeting their expectations from God in prayer.

Three, their prayer is expectant. God, through their obedience, will bring people to Himself. God will plant the church of Jesus in that place, and every place there is no Gospel witness. He will provide the money, leadership, opportunities, etc.

I want you to notice that this kind of praying does some very important things. It gets their eyes off of themselves. Further, it gets their eyes on obeying God with their lives and their witness. Finally, it gets their eyes on eternity. They have learned that time is defined by eternity, not vice a versa. This kind of praying brings the power of God to bear on their lives and their context. Given such conviction and obedience, what should we expect to happen? Exactly what does happen? People are won to Christ and churches are planted!

Second, all church planting must be based upon **good research**. Research focuses their praying. It gives them real people with real needs to pray for. Putting a face to the target through research gives God the Holy Spirit the opportunity to bring those people and their needs to our consciousness on a regular basis. And, not only does God act as we pray, but we act. There is something very powerful about seeing faces of real people in pursuing the visions and goals that God has given to us.

Research also works to expand the pre-evangelistic ministry. One, of the weaknesses of the much of modern day evangelism is the simple recognition of the parable of the seed and the sower. Every good farmer knows that if you don't plant any seed, you won't have a harvest. The farmer also knows that the harvest is not to be expected the day after the seed is planted. It takes time for the seed to germinate and grow. Water, sun and weeding cooperate together to prepare and anticipate the harvest. So it is with evangelism. Seed must be planted, and planted widely. That seed must be planted with no immediate expectation of harvest. But, along the way, the church must continue to water and weed, while the Spirit of God provides the unseen force. Then, and only then will there be true harvest.

Good research provides a great opportunity for the church planting church to work in this way. Door-to-door contact, focused prayer, early projection of evangelistic films, plus so much more, all cooperate to tell us something very important about the target, and to prepare the field for the serious work of planting a new church.

Finally, research is mandatory if we are to build the correct Spirit energized, evangelistic strategies that will bring in the harvest and plant the church. Every good fisherman understands this principle. One kind of bait works for one kind of fish, while another very different bait works for another fish. So, it is with evangelism. The odyssey of every person in the world is known and understood by the Spirit of God. He has given to us the privilege of working with Him in this new birth ministry. But, we are not all knowing as He is. We must find other ways to determine what people are thinking, what questions they are asking, and what particular aspect of the provision of God to begin with in the presentation of the Gospel.

Unless good and thorough research is effected, we cannot expect to harvest all that God the Spirit is preparing in the hearts of the people in our God given target. I think that this is the primary reason you see two different

Christian groups working in the same context, and with the same people, but with vastly different results. One, whether innately or through good research understands the people they are attempting to reach. The other assumes that they know what they are doing, even without a good idea of the people they are committed to reaching. One is proactive in touching people where they are, and as they are. The other expects all people to respond the same. Good research is the precursor to good strategy.

Third, church planting demands a proactive, aggressive and broadly spread ministry of **evangelism**. Methods to do evangelism abound and who can say what will work until it is actually tried. Further, since the needs of people are diverse so too are the ways in which they will be reached with the Gospel. Effective evangelism will be diverse in its methodology, cyclical in its application and yet ongoing in giving people the repeated and personal opportunity to decide for or against the Gospel of Jesus.

I saw this powerfully demonstrated in my colleague's church planting training and actions. One, their evangelism is research based. Once they have discovered where people are and what they think, they move in a multiple of ways to access those people with the Gospel. In the first several months, the church planting team is expected to make at least 350 contacts with the Gospel. They are so committed to this, that no further training can be received unless this is done.

Two, all evangelism is incorporation focused. They are not doing evangelism to simply win people to Christ. They are sowing the seed of the Gospel, harvesting those whom the Spirit is calling, and incorporating them into the body of Christ in that place. Where there is little to no incorporation into the grace life and Gospel ministry of the church, one must wonder if biblical evangelism has resulted.

Three, as was mentioned above, the story of the Gospel must be given in a repeated fashion. They are not dropping Gospel bombs on people. Nor do they expect people to make decisions totally outside of their network of relationships. So, people in the target place need time to hear, see, feel and relate to the Gospel. They need to hear the true call of Scripture. That God is calling them to be reconciled to Him!

Four, their approach to evangelism is extremely pragmatic. If it works, we continue using it. If it does not work, we discard or adapt it. They have

learned early on that the message is inspired, but the mode of transmission is not. And, since they are compelled by God to fulfill His loving mandate, they are equally compelled to continually assess how they do it.

Fourth, good church planting organizes people into some form of **small groups** as soon as possible. Notice that I have used the words small groups. I do so because this is a generic description of a highly effective function that is universally needed. Whatever we call it, people need to be organized into groups of 10-12 for their own good, and for the powerful living and declaration of the Gospel. Of the many positive things that could be said about small groups, I saw four things in their particular practice.

One, these groups were the initial stages of their harvesting. These forums were the natural place to gather new believers and people positively predisposed to keep hearing the Gospel. They are safe havens for people to open themselves and their needs to people who care, will pray and can maybe do something about it. They are the safest and sanest place for interested people to continue asking questions about the Gospel. They are the clearest place to see the Gospel dressed in lives of real people living out the distinctive relationships that God is giving to them.

Two, these groups are the best forum for discipleship. This is the place where people can unmask some of their deepest needs. It is also the place where the ministry of the Word and the Spirit can be directed at meeting those needs. It is the best place to find out how people are doing in the Bible's most important thresholds. Are we growing in intimacy with God? Are we living out the distinctiveness of our personal grace testimony and experience? And, are we discovering and using our gifts?

Three, these groups are the best place to keep all of Christ's people focused upon sharing the good news into all of their relationships. As uncomfortable as it may be, these intimate meetings are the best place for each of us to be asked for names of people who God has placed on our hearts. And, then, as the group prays together each week for these people to see, and report back, how God the Spirit wonderfully provides opportunity for us to bear witness. Of all of the things that believers do, this is the most powerful. To daily bear witness through both word and deed to the transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus.

Four, these groups are the best place to initiate leadership development. It is ground level zero as it were. As new leaders are identified and begin their odyssey of responsibility, this is the best venue to grow them in the purpose, vision and values of the church body. It is the best place to see how to mobilize people. It is the best place to measure the gifts and roles of every burgeoning leader. It is the first place that every new leader ought to start their growth in the responsibilities of leadership. It is the place where the existent leadership should spend the majority of its time and energy in training.

Fifth, the church planting team must begin almost immediately to spread the load of responsibility by **training new leaders**. It is an inviolable rule, you can expand and extend the Gospel only as far as you prepare others to take the responsibility with you. The place of the greatest emphasis needs to be the local church. It is without refute that Christ gave gifted people to the Church. He gave them, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, to empower others to do the work of the ministry. Their effectiveness is measured more by what others do in obedience, than by their own particular activities. Their effectiveness will be seen by history to be directly related to the time they spent preparing others in and for leadership in the local church and its Gospel ministry.

I saw three things that day that remind me of the ongoing importance of training others to share the load. One, training leaders is the first step toward the full mobilization of the church. I have been greatly influenced in my life to believe that preaching was the primary way to mobilize people. I no longer believe that. Yes, I still believe in the importance of preaching and teaching, but not out of relationship to the importance of other actions as well. If I were to start over again, I would spend as much time in training leaders as I would in preparing to and engaging in preaching and teaching.

There is something about the relational transmission of purpose, vision, values and life that happens one-on-one, or in small groups that does not happen in communicating Biblical truth to congregations. The latter is necessary to assist in motivating people to practice their own priesthood. But, the former is mandatory to spread the load of responsibility, unite the many gifts necessary to perform the leadership function, to personally touch more of the believers, and thus, to see them actually empowered, not simply motivated, to action.

Two, training leaders is the first step towards multiplying the church into cells, congregations and new churches. It seems to go without saying that in order to multiply anything more leaders are needed. So it is with effective people that I have met from all over the world. They extend the Church, and thus the Gospel, far beyond others of their generation, not because they are smarter. But, because they raise up so many others to join them!

Three, training leaders is the primary task of what I call the core leadership of the church. Without belaboring the fact, I believe that leadership is a word to describe a function. And, that function is best carried out by a diverse group of people united around a vision that God has given to them, and founded on firm convictions about the mission of the Church in the world. Only this kind of leadership can truly train others of like kind. We can thank God for the training that goes on in and through organizations outside of local churches. But, that training only serves to supplement what must be going on as a part of the life way of local churches. Growing movements understand and practice this!

Sixth, the effective church planting team takes steps as soon as possible to **organize the church**. This is a point that has less significance in some places in comparison to others. In nations coming out of despotic forms of government, finding legal status that can sometimes mean freedom to survive, this need is greater. Where freedom is assumed, this need may be felt less urgently.

But, the need to structure the church in such a way as to maximize the purpose, vision and values, is imperative. Moreover, that structure needs to give rise to a yearly review and plan building in whatever way is consistent with the particular culture. As I listened to my colleague, I was reminded that this need has great diversity, but also some great similarities.

The diversity of how churches structure and organize themselves will be dependent upon many factors. It will depend upon any denominational affiliation that the church plant possesses. It will depend upon the doctrinal convictions of the planting team. And, it will depend upon the culture and history of the nation in which it is situated.

But, there are some important similarities that such organizational/structural demands share. One, the point of organization is an important juncture in the life of the new body when multiple congregations can be anticipated. I think

of another colleague who pastors a large, growing, cell based, church planting church. In just nine short years they have grown a church of over 2,000 people, planted over 50 others, and developed just about every evangelistic strategy one could think of. There are many reasons that this body has grown, but none more important than that they have structured themselves to be friendly to growth and the opportunities that growth brings. Though they meet in three services in the center of town on Sundays, they meet in multiples of congregations throughout the week, and thousands of cells all over the city. Their design of structure facilitates this life.

Two, how one structures and organizes the church gives birth to the opportunity to nurture life in its people, and thus multiply. The average western church is organized to survive. A few are organized to get big. But, I know of few churches in America that are organized to nurture life in such a way that they multiply. This is the beauty of the small group structure. It can work more closely with and in people to see the fruit of the Spirit and the life of Jesus growing in them. It can work more closely to assist people in living and telling their grace testimony. It can work more closely in identifying and releasing new leadership. And, it can work more effectively in releasing vision in a majority of people.

Such a structure is not just an add on to an already over burdened programmatic church. It is the very life of its existence. Nothing that threatens it is allowed to live in its midst. Everything must yield to the priority of mobilization and multiplication!

Seventh, every new church must be impregnated with a **vision to multiply** itself. Given the human tendency to self-preoccupation and self-preservation, this is something that must be constantly worked at. If it is not implanted into the very DNA of the church plant at the beginning, it will be hard to protect and much harder to effect.

One can see this clearly demonstrated in the words and life of all movements. In these movements, churches do not see themselves as an end in themselves. They believe and practice almost without struggle the quest to multiply. I think that it is not impossible that every church in the world can plant at least three other churches in its lifetime. By its lifetime, I mean a span of ten to fifteen years. Most churches in growing movements would see this number of a joke. It is at least a place to begin.

In order to begin, the cycle of churches that exist only for themselves must be broken. Breaking this cycle where it already exists, though necessary, is admittedly much more difficult than planting new churches that think no other way. It is almost always true: you get what you plant!

As I listened to my colleague, I was inspired once again. Inspired to believe God for the evangelization of the world in my lifetime. Inspired once again to ask of Him for the nations. Inspired once again to redouble my own efforts to find where God the Spirit has begun a fire of men and women committed to these means and ends, and to assist in pouring gasoline on their efforts.

This one exposure has reminded me once again that planting a new church is more of a decision than an art form! May we find many more decision makers within the body of Christ.

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