

What is CHURCH PLANTING?

The obvious answer would be that church planting is starting new churches. But I think it is important to remember that planting churches is a bit different from just starting them. When we talk of planting, we acknowledge two things:

1. We are responsible for doing our part. We are called to be faithful stewards of all that God has called us to. In terms of church planting, that means establishing the church in *love, suffering, holiness, sound doctrine, genuineness, evangelism, and humility.*¹
2. We are not responsible for that which is God's part. This might seem like an obvious distinction, but it has been a struggle for the church since inception. Keeping God at the center of all aspects of the church, including appealing to His strength for health, appealing to His word for truth, and appealing to the Spirit for guidance. Always remembering that *every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Matthew 15.13*

Church planting is a matter of faithfulness. We plant churches because God told us to plant churches. We strive in every aspect of the church to glorify His name, make more of Him, and if necessary make less of ourselves (John 3.30). To plant a church means we do are part to plant what only God can grow.

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

1 Corinthians 3.5-9

We know nothing of what God can and will do with us. We know only that we are called God's fellow workers, His field, His building. We are honored to be part of His plan to bring His grace to a world that has continually rejected Him. We are just a part of this great plan. We acknowledge the great weight of responsibility that comes with being God's workmen, the brotherhood that comes with being one local church in the broader scope of His Holy Apostolic Church, and the humility that comes with knowing that He alone makes the church fulfill His mission.

So when we speak of church planting, we are talking about no more than following God's established plan to bring His word to the nations. We are continuing a work that has been carried on since the Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost (Acts 2). We rightly preach the Word, rightly administer the sacraments, and practice church discipline.

We make Jesus relevant by recognizing our sinfulness and pointing to the relevance that He has as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the world. We attempt to remove all of the boundaries that sin has put up between depraved man and Holy God, and replace it with the gospel.

¹ Taken from *Men with a Message*, John Stott, as he describes the teaching to the churches in Revelation.

Why PLANT?

The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for 1) the numerical growth of the Body of Christ, and 2) the continual corporate renewal and revival of the existing churches. Nothing else--not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, growing mega-churches, congregational consulting, nor church renewal processes--will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting. This is an eyebrow raising statement. But to those who have done any study at all, it is not even controversial.

The normal response to discussions about church planting is something like this:

A. *We already have plenty of churches that have lots and lots of room for all the new people who have come to the area. Let's get them filled before we go off building any new ones.*

B. *Every church in this community used to be more full than it is now. The churchgoing public is a 'shrinking pie'. A new church here will just take people from churches already hurting and weaken everyone.*

C. *Help the churches that are struggling first. A new church doesn't help the ones we have that are just keeping their nose above water. We need better churches, not more churches.*

These statements appear to be 'common sense' to many people, but they rest on several wrong assumptions. The error of this thinking will become clear if we ask 'Why is church planting so crucially important?' Because—

We want to be true to THE BIBLICAL MANDATE

Jesus' essential call was to plant churches.

Virtually all the great evangelistic challenges of the New Testament are basically calls to plant churches, not simply to share the faith. The 'Great Commission' (Matt.28: 18-20) is not just a call to 'make disciples' but to 'baptize'. In Acts and elsewhere, it is clear that baptism means incorporation into a worshipping community with accountability and boundaries (cf. Acts 2:41-47). The only way to be truly sure you are increasing the number of Christians in a town is to increase the number of churches. Why? Much traditional evangelism aims to get a 'decision' for Christ. Experience, however, shows us that many of these 'decisions' disappear and never result in changed lives. Why? Many, many decisions are not really conversions, but often only the beginning of a journey of seeking God. (Other decisions are very definitely the moment of a 'new birth', but this differs from person to person.) Only a person who is being 'evangelized' in the context of an on-going worshipping and shepherding community can be sure of finally coming home into vital, saving faith. This is why a leading missiologist C.Peter Wagner can say, "*Planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology known under heaven.*"²

² C.Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Growth* (Glendale: Regal, 1987), p. 168.

We want to be true to THE GREAT COMMISSION

New churches best reach new people groups.

Younger adults have always been disproportionately found in newer congregations. Long-established congregations develop traditions (such as time of worship, length of service, emotional responsiveness, sermon topics, leadership-style, emotional atmosphere, and thousands of other tiny customs and mores), which reflect the sensibilities of long-time leaders from the older generations who have the influence and money to control the church life. This does not reach younger generations.

New congregations *empower* new people and new peoples much more quickly and readily than can older churches. Thus they always have and always will reach them with greater facility than long-established bodies. This means, of course, that church planting is not only for 'frontier regions' or 'pagan' countries that we are trying to see *become* Christian. Christian countries will have to maintain vigorous, extensive church planting simply to *stay* Christian!

New churches best reach the unchurched

Dozens of denominational studies have confirmed that the average new church gains most of its new members (60-80%) from the ranks of people who are not attending any worshipping body, while churches over 10- 15 years of age gain 80-90% of new members by transfer from other congregations.³ This means that the average new congregation will bring 6-8 times more new people into the life of the Body of Christ than an older congregation of the same size.

So though established congregations provide many things that newer churches often cannot, older churches in general will never be able to match the effectiveness of new bodies in reaching people for the kingdom. Why would this be? As a congregation ages, powerful internal institutional pressures lead it to allocate most of its resources and energy toward the concerns of its members and constituents, rather than toward those outside its walls. This is natural and to a great degree desirable. Older congregations therefore have a stability and steadiness that many people thrive on and need. This does not mean that established churches cannot win new people. In fact, many non-Christians will only be reached by churches with long roots in the community and the trappings of stability and respectability.

However, new congregations, in general, are forced to focus on the needs of its *non*-members, simply in order to get off the ground. So many of its leaders have come very recently from the ranks of the un-churched, that the congregation is far more sensitive to the concerns of the non-believer. Also, in the first two years of our Christian walk, we have far more close, face-to-face relationships with non-Christians than we do later. Thus a congregation filled with people fresh from the ranks of the un-churched will have the power to invite and attract many more non-believers into the events and life of the church than will the members of the typical established body.

³ Lyle Schaller, quoted in D.McGavran and G.Hunter, *Church Growth: Strategies that Work* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), p. 100. See C.Kirk Hadaway, *New Churches and Church Growth in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987).

We want to RENEW 'THE WHOLE BODY OF CHRIST'

It is a great mistake to think that we have to choose *between* church planting and church renewal. Strange as it may seem, the planting of new churches in a city is one of the very best ways to revitalize many older churches in the vicinity and renew the whole Body of Christ.

The new churches bring new ideas to the whole Body.

There is plenty of resistance to the idea that we need to plant new churches to reach the constant stream of 'new' groups and generations and residents. Many congregations insist that all available resources should be used to find ways of helping existing churches reach them. However, there is no better way to teach older congregations about new skills and methods for reaching new people groups than by planting new churches. It is the new churches that will have freedom to be innovative and they become the 'Research and Development' department for the whole Body in the city. Often the older congregations were too timid to try a particular approach or were absolutely sure it would 'not work here'. But when the new church in town succeeds wildly with some new method, the other churches eventually take notice and get the courage to try it themselves.

New churches are one of the best ways to surface creative, strong leaders for the whole Body.

In older congregations, leaders emphasize tradition, tenure, routine, and kinship ties. New congregations, on the other hand, attract a higher percentage of venturesome people who value creativity, risk, innovation and future orientation. Many of these men and women would never be attracted or compelled into significant ministry apart from the appearance of these new bodies. Often older churches 'box out' many people with strong leadership skills who cannot work in more traditional settings. New churches thus attract and harness many people in the city whose gifts would otherwise not be utilized in the work of the Body. These new leaders benefit the whole city-Body eventually.

New churches challenge other churches to self-examination.

The "success" of new churches often challenges older congregations in general to evaluate themselves in substantial ways. Sometimes it is only in contrast with a new church that older churches can finally define their *own* vision, specialties, and identity. Often the growth of the new congregation gives the older churches hope that 'it can be done', and may even bring about humility and repentance for defeatist and pessimistic attitudes. Sometimes, new congregations can partner with older churches to mount ministries that neither could do by themselves.

The new church may be an 'evangelistic feeder' for a whole community.

The new church often produces many converts who end up in older churches for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the new church is very exciting and outward facing but is also very unstable or immature in its leadership. Thus some converts cannot stand the tumultuous changes that regularly come through the new church and they move to an existing church. Sometimes the new church reaches a person for Christ, but the new convert quickly discovers that he or she does not 'fit' the socio-economic make up of the new congregation, and gravitates to an established congregation where the customs and culture feels more familiar. Ordinarily, the new churches of a city produce new people not only for themselves, but for the older bodies as well.

An exercise in KINGDOM-MINDEDNESS

All in all, church planting helps an existing church the best when the new congregation is voluntarily 'birthed' by an older 'mother' congregation. Often the excitement and new leaders and new ministries and additional members and income 'washes back' into the mother church in various ways and strengthens and renews it. Though there is some pain in seeing good friends and some leaders go away to form a new church, the mother church usually experiences a surge of high self-esteem and an influx of new enthusiastic leaders and members.

However, a new church in the community usually confronts churches with a major issue--the issue of 'kingdom-mindedness'. New churches, as we have seen, draw most of their new members (up to 80%) from the ranks of the unchurched, but they *will* always attract some people out of existing churches. That is inevitable. At this point, the existing churches, in a sense, have a question posed to them: "Are we going to rejoice in the 80%--the new people that the kingdom has gained through this new church, or are we going to bemoan and resent the three families we lost to it?" In other words, our attitude to new church development is a test of whether our mindset is geared to our own institutional turf, or to the overall health and prosperity of the kingdom of God in the city. Any church that is more upset by their own small losses rather than the kingdom's large gains is betraying its narrow interests. Yet, as we have seen, the benefits of new church planting to older congregations is very great, even if that may not be obvious initially.

New church planting is the only way that we can be sure we are going to increase the number of believers in a city and one of the best ways to renew the whole Body of Christ. The evidence for this statement is strong--Biblically, sociologically, and historically. In the end, a lack of kingdom-mindedness may simply blind us to all this evidence. We must beware of that.

* The section *Why Plant* was borrowed for kingdom purposes from Tim Keller's *Why Plant Churches* (even the title was stolen). His writing is more eloquent than I could muster on the benefits of continually planting new Churches.

Why Plant HERE?

The fact is, we are called to plant everywhere; to bring God's glory to all people. So it is not a necessity for me to justify planting, as much as to clarify why I feel called to Mount Vernon, Washington.

I lived in Mount Vernon for 7 years (Junior High and High School), attended the Community College located there, and was part of three churches in the area, being members at 2 of them. The second of the two churches I was a member in was a young church plant. This church went through a split over the right handling of church discipline, the ultimate authority within an autonomous body, and the definitions of forgiveness and church unity. This fracture was of great pain to myself and those close to me. It solidified for me the importance of solid ecclesiology, written statements, and humility in the local church.

After this split six years ago, those who had decided to leave the church met as a Bible Study for six months to a year. Originally the purpose of the group was one of healing, but soon the focus became the possibility of planting a reformed, evangelical church in Mount Vernon. It was soon abandoned because of the lack of leadership, but I have never stopped thinking that a major contributor to this was simply a fear of the unknown.

Soon that group stopped meeting as people got plugged into and began serving in various local congregations. My wife and I were regularly driving 45 minutes north to attend church in Bellingham. I was also working in Bellingham. The next logical step for us would be to move to Bellingham. But we didn't. My wife and I decided that it made more sense for us to stay close to family and a number of friends who had walked away from the faith that we could not walk away from. So I got a job close to our home and we continued to look for churches in North Snohomish County. My last day working in Bellingham, I met with the Bellingham pastor and He gave me the name of a church planter he had just met from Marysville. I contacted him. We joined his house church. Two years later I became a pastor there. And now, after two years as a pastor, having been brought along in my love of God, my love for His bride, and my desire to see people die to themselves to live for Him, I feel called to return to Mount Vernon to plant a church for His glory.

The city of Mount Vernon is the county seat of Skagit County, and contains roughly 30% of the 100,000 people that call Skagit County home. There is a strong agricultural heritage and the portion of the city to the west of the river is almost strictly farmland. The city contains a Skagit Valley College, a two year community college that draws international and local students.

The church situation in Mount Vernon is not desperate, but is in disrepair. There are some men laboring for the infallibility of scripture and sovereignty of God, but there are just as many drawing people into the false gospels of prosperity, morality, and community as an end.

My vision is to create a unity of healthy churches, to bolster a vision for the city, and to share resources so that God's church is seen as a positive witness to the world and a reflection of His glory.

How we PLANT? some strings attached

When a new church is sent out, it cannot fully support or function on its own. Using the analogy of a Mother and baby, as the church grows it becomes more and more sustainable, until eventually it becomes mature and can be more independent (and hopefully skips adolescence). At no time does it fully sever ties, as there is always a family bond that exists. Outlined below are some of the aspects of the church that will be connected for a time, and how the Damascus Road will covenant to support the church through its infant stages. With the general understanding that it is easier to unite things later than it is to separate them, we need to be careful on how we leave strings attached.

Identity – same family, different name

A good portion of what the new church does will be the same as Damascus Road, there is really no reason to change it. There are things that, for whatever reason, should and will change based on the fact that it is different people being called to a different place. Name will most likely be one of these; others will be determined by the core group.

Authority – shared elder board

One of the greatest difficulties for a young church is that of authority and accountability. I have seen firsthand what happens when people are installed quickly, or when there is no existing authority to defer to. To help avoid some of these problems, the elders of the new church will maintain a single elder board with that of Damascus Road. This will remain in place until at least 2 other elders have been tested and confirmed by the elder board. At this point there will be two distinct, BUT NOT DISTANT, elder boards. The boards will covenant together to hold each other accountable as they *reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.* **2 Timothy 4.2**

Finances – pledged unity

Money has always been a touchy issue with churches. To be truly unified in mission would be to have all finances shared. From a practical standpoint, this presents some issues: how to assess priority, keeping a level of transparency and order with more complexity, and the issue of a domino effect with lawsuits. For these reasons the church plant and Damascus Road will maintain separate bank accounts and organizations, while pledging to remain transparent and generous with income. The pastor of the church plant will be supported directly by Damascus Road for the first year, and his compensation will be evaluated after six months of launch. The quarterly reports will be evaluated by a finance team made up of members from both churches to discuss how funds can be best used to further God's work in each individual church and beyond.

Preaching – the pulpit supply

Another benefit of having a mother church is the issue of pulpit supply. For a young church, there is often no one else to step up and deliver God's word to the people. This can lead to burnout. Sharing the sermon study, as well as potential preachers will help to limit the burnout, but more importantly, the polarizing around one person.

Resources – open file sharing

One of the biggest benefits to being unified churches is the sharing of resources. From sermon booklets, to song writing, to children's ministry curriculum, making the work that has already been done more circulated and shared is good stewardship of our collected resources.

When we PLANT? a timeline

October 2010 – Laying the groundwork.

The elders pray about and confirm my call to plant a church in Mount Vernon. This includes approving a preliminary planting plan put forth by Sam and I.

November 2010 - Announce plans to plant.

There are already a lot of rumblings about a Mount Vernon church plant. At this point, this is little more than a twinkle in the eye. In November, we have an all-church meeting that lays out the structure and plan for the church plant. This will include presenting a timeline, defining the continued connection to Damascus Road, and an invitation to step forward and join the core group.

January 2011 - Church plant ROAD group.

A core group will begin meeting at my house to go through the Nine Marks of a Healthy Church. This will be a time to begin making decisions for the church including: name, core group responsibilities, and style (built out of the people that God raises up). It will also allow us to revisit core beliefs and make sure we all know why we do the things we do.

January 2011 – DR starts evening service

In conjunction with the core group, we will begin the evening service. We will use this service to train potential leaders in running an aspect of the church. This will hopefully include both people who are moving on and people who will stay to run this in the future.

April/May 2011 – Core group services.

We will begin to meet for services every other week at my house and as a community group every other. I will use this time to topically teach through the attributes of God and set a framework of who God is as we go to do His work.

September 2011 – Launch first service.

September 2011 is the target for beginning the new church. We will begin with a single 9am service.