

Successful Church Planting Requires Both Passion and Planning

My wife, Joyce, and I planted our local church 29 years ago, Jan. 29, 1984, in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn, N.Y. We were not sent out with any money and had only a handful of people who volunteered to serve with us. The following is based on all the mistakes I have made as a church planter, and the lessons I wish someone had coached me through.

1. Be sent from your local church.

Unfortunately, many send themselves and just “went” instead of being “sent.” The Bible teaches us that we should not preach unless we are “sent” (see Romans 10:15).

I was sent out as an evangelist in 1980 by my pastor, and was paid a small stipend for three full years before I was sent to start our church. I had to prove myself by being faithful to our mother church and serve our mother church as a licensed minister.

Many ministers act more like Robert Duvall’s character in the movie “The Apostle,” than like the apostolic structure found in the book of Acts and the epistles of the New Testament, because they “anoint,” “appoint,” and “send” themselves out without any biblical or ecclesial authority behind them!

I realize there are sometimes extenuating circumstances that may mitigate against a person receiving the blessing of a local church in order to start a work (e.g. Martin Luther and the Reformation, John Calvin, those saved and called by God in nations where the gospel is not yet established with strong local churches, or those who sit under pastors who are control freaks who will not send anyone out).

I know of many people who just “went” and were never sent from their mother church—many even causing church splits—but I have yet to see any of these works have long-term success, since the foundation of these works started in such a way that they could not set precedent for loyalty and submission to spiritual authority in their new churches. Those who have started the wrong way have to go back to their former pastor and/or local church and repent, asking them for forgiveness and to release them and pray for them so that the curse of disobedience can be broken.

2. Have a strong church-planting team.

Jesus sent people out two-by-two, never alone. There was a reason for this. We need the prayers and support of fellow laborers when planting a church, which some believe is perhaps the single most difficult and stressful job in the world! The best thing is to strategically plan to have your church planting team—at the very least—include:

- An administrator;
- A bookkeeper working with a CPA;
- A worship leader;
- Adequate legal counsel to help set up your corporate papers, board and minutes;
- The senior leader who will lead the work.

Many are the church planters who go out by themselves, with only enthusiasm and passion as their resources for success, often resulting in unnecessary strains on their marriages and families because they have to be all things to all people, while doing all the administrative work necessary to sustain organizational flow.

3. Have a financial base of support.

Many church planters go out without raising support and without a financial plan. Although God has called many into the mission field without any money up front, that is the exception, not the general rule. I believe a church planter

should spend at least one year raising financial support from their friends, family, local church, and even perhaps extracting and saving offerings for one year prior to the church launch from those called to be part of the church planting team. (This financial commitment will also help the team have more ownership and commitment to the process.) New senior pastors depending week-to-week on tithes and offerings with less than 30 committed tithing families will have a very difficult time focusing on the new church because of the concerns they will have providing for their families. Marriages and families can split apart because of pressures such as these.

4. Search out and know the community.

A church planter should do a demographic search of the community, know its history, key locations and personally meet senior leaders who run organizations that provide neighborhood support systems, like hospitals, police stations, youth empowerment programs, job training centers, community boards, the Chamber of Commerce, etc. They should also have a target audience (specific age group, culture, religious and ethnic background) that will thus frame their methodological approach to ministry.

For example, when Jesus sent His leaders out to preach, He expressly told them not to preach to any but those of the lost sheep of the house of Israel; He had his demographic target and did not operate by happenstance (see Matt. 10:5-6). My theological mentor, Ray Bakke, always tells his students that they need to exegete their communities, not just Scripture.

5. Get to know the pastors and key leaders in the community.

In the same way we need ministry teams to effectively shepherd a congregation, we also need to have meaningful collegial relationships with other pastors in the community. Church planters should attend monthly ministerial fellowships and get to know the “lay of the land,” ask the right questions, and

learn from the mistakes of those leaders who have gone before them.

Church planters especially need the support of other likeminded pastors called to the region so they can be part of a support group. This is especially true if their mother church is in another state. But even if it is nearby, connecting with other pastors ensures that you do not have a sectarian spirit, but a spirit of unity that enhances the kingdom of God instead of only your own empire.

6. Strike a balance between discipleship and outreach.

The philosophy I employed when I started our local church was based on 2 Timothy 2:2, which teaches that senior leaders are to pour into faithful people who are able to teach others.

I have seen many church planters get so caught up with numbers that their church became more of a center for events and big-name personalities that could draw people into a building, than in focusing on building people. A church must be more than a “gathering of loose bricks.”

We are called to build a spiritual temple that can truly offer praises unto God. Church planters have to remember that the method they employ to establish a new church will be needed to sustain the long-term interest of the church attendees. Those who attempt to build a church by bringing in Christian celebrities will have to keep putting out an enormous amount of money in advertising and offerings to these guests, which will become a monster that has to be constantly fed. They will soon realize that building a church like this does not produce much fruit.

I believe successful church planters also have to know the balance between pushing their attendees to help in evangelistic outreaches, and in nurturing those who are already in the church. Some have made the mistake of only utilizing a strong mindset of outreach, without also employing

in-reach to people who are established in the faith and have new families they have to raise.

When you have a young church, full of a lot of single adults who have a lot of time on their hands, you can push them hard to do a lot of ministry-related neighborhood outreaches. But there comes a time when those same people are going to get married and have children and need to have more family time and biblical counseling to aid them in their journey to maturity as fathers, mothers, husbands and wives.

Unfortunately, I have observed numerous young churches experience continual church splits because their pastors never distinguished between single young people with more time on their hands and those with growing families. Consequently, these leaders demanded that those with new and growing families serve in the church 4-6 nights per week without any letup, which causes burnout, divorce, adultery and bitterness toward ministry.

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