

THE CHURCH PLANTING CHALLENGE - John Sweetman

Everyone agrees that church planting is a good thing, but few churches plant other churches or want church plants near them. This article explores why this is the case and provides suggestions on how to develop a stronger church planting ministry.

I have both avoided and supported church planting. I have pastored a large church for 14 years that always believed in church planting but never did plant for what seemed to be good reasons at the time. More recently, I have been part of the pastoral team of a church that has planted three small churches in six years.

Church planting is not an easy issue to talk about honestly, but I want to have a go at putting all the cards on the table. I may well be the only person that thinks in the way I describe in these articles, but I suspect that such thinking is reasonably widespread, at least among church leaders. See what you think.

1. Why we believe in church planting

You have to be very inward looking and self-centred to oppose church planting. Every church in which we are serving was once a church plant. So we are all benefitting from someone's vision to plant a church. In a way, church planting is in every church's genetic makeup.

Then we have the model of the early church as a church planting movement. The book of Acts describes the growth of the New Testament church through vigorous church planting. Paul, arguably the most influential leader in the early church, was an extraordinary church planter.

We recognise the need for church planting. There is no way that our present churches will ever reach everyone who doesn't follow Jesus. We are aware of a tremendous mission field that requires more labourers in more churches.

We have read the research which shows that church plants are often more effective evangelistically than more established churches. Because church plants are dependent on converts to build the church, they heavily target evangelism and are more likely to turn their members into missionaries.

So it's hard to find a Christian leader who doesn't believe in church planting. We recognise that the future growth of the church is dependent on the planting of new churches. We are all 100% behind church planting. We want more churches. We know we need a generation of effective church planters.

2. Why we don't church plant

Yet few churches are actively involved in planting new churches. Not many churches appear to be promoting the vision of church planting. I say this partly because I'm finding that very few students turn up at College with a passion to church plant. Why is it that church leaders who believe so strongly in church planting seem to be doing so little about it?

I suspect it is because there is no good time for a church to plant another church. You are probably aware of the bell curve that describes the life cycle of a church. On this simplistic model, churches are growing (moving up the curve), plateauing (on the top of the curve), or diminishing (moving

down the other side of the curve). Let me explain why none of these stages are right for planting a church.

When a church is growing, it is constantly looking for more resources. It may seem to others that the church has resources to burn, but from the inside it doesn't feel like this. You're constantly looking for new people to start and staff ministries, improved facilities to house these ministries, more staff to coordinate and support these ministries, and more money to do all this. With such a high need for increased resources, it's not a good time to be investing your best resources in church planting. It seems like the growing work of God in the church would suffer.

When a church reaches a plateau, it gradually becomes obvious that while everything is going well, new vision and passion need to emerge to kick start the church again. A church plant could do this, but it feels like planting a church at a distance will divide the church family into planters and stayers at a time when there is a need to come together and work hard for a new thrust. If some really good people leave, it may actually push the church over the edge into decline.

When a church is declining, it is losing energy. People are not so keen to volunteer. People become more anxious about the future. This feels like a time for conserving energy, for promoting unity and community. The last thing you need is a church planting vision that will further sap the diminishing resources of the church and divide the church with seemingly little benefit for the mother church.

Now I realise that all the church planting advocates are tearing their hair out by now at the lack of vision displayed in such an inward-looking approach. But leaders care about their churches and they are reticent to put at risk the work of God in their own church. In particular, shepherd leaders (pastors) love their sheep. They will only send them out to plant at a safe time. There just never seems to be a safe time.

So we don't plant. Not because we lack commitment to church planting, but because there just never seems to be a good time for the church to do it. Other churches may be in a better position to plant, but because we're growing, plateaued or declining, it's not the right time for us.

3. Why we don't want church plants near us

Those who coordinate church planting often say: "All churches support church planting as long as it is not in their area." Of course, if we avoid planting in all areas from where present churches draw, the only options are places that have no Christians at all (do any exist in Australia?) or isolated places with small populations that can't get to any other church.

So why do we not want churches to plant in our drawing area? Let me give some reasons.

1. *It diminishes our potential for growth.* No matter how much church plants may say that they're targeting another demographic, inevitably they will draw people that could have come to our church. It will hamper our impact for God's kingdom.
2. *It may draw good people from our church.* Some people are attracted to new opportunities and challenges. Often these people are the most energetic and enthusiastic in our church. Their loss would make things more difficult for us.
3. *It may impact the effectiveness of our ministries.* For example, if the new church runs a stronger youth ministry, then young people will go there. Not only will our youth ministry suffer, but the future of our church is threatened if young people are not coming through our ministries.
4. *It may increase the disillusionment in our church.* If there is another local church doing things better and growing, this may reflect badly on us and dampen the spirit of our people.

5. *It will only further dissipate our resources.* There is only a limited amount of resources available to the church. If these resources are shared between two churches rather than one, everyone gets less. Rather than one strong church, you get two weaker churches.

I'm not saying that all these sentiments are valid (it will depend on the situation), but they all have the potential to be true and therefore become a major blocking force to us welcoming a church plant in the area from which we draw our present congregation.

So we believe in church planting, but generally we find it difficult to plant and don't particularly want other churches planting near us. So what do we do with this stalemate? In the next article, I want to explore where we can go from here in planting churches.

4. The consequences

Despite our commitment to church planting, it's no wonder that very few churches are actually being planted. If it's not right for our church to plant at this stage and we don't want any other churches planted in our area, then who will plant and where will these church plants be?

I realise that there are some areas of residential development that are probably far enough away from all other churches to make a church plant less of a threat. But there are far fewer of these areas than most churches think and they're often lightly populated.

We all know that there are hundreds of thousands of people who are not being reached and will never really be reached by the churches we have. Maybe they don't have contact with any Christians or churches. Maybe they don't identify with the types of churches around them. Maybe they haven't felt welcome in a church. Maybe no Christian has ever asked them to church. Maybe they have never thought of church as an option for them.

They need a church that will reach them. Many churches are doing a great job, but they will never effectively reach all the people in their area no matter how big or gospel-centred they are. One church just can't do it. We need lots of churches and people working together with a heart for lost people and a willingness to risk for God's kingdom.

But how will this happen if churches don't feel ready to send people to plant themselves and resist other church plants in their area? The fact is - it won't. Our churches might be healthy and well-resourced, but many lost people will remain unreached and ignorant of the gospel.

5. The call

As a pastor, I want to confess that I have tended to be defensive of my church and have deeply felt the need to protect and preserve her. Church planting often appeared to be a drain on the health of the church. I publicly supported it, but didn't really practically encourage it in my church.

Slowly I'm grasping in my heart what my head has always known: that our church is actually God's church and that he has a far bigger picture and plan than I have. This may actually mean some loss for me and even my church, as it did for John the Baptist (John 3:30), but God's kingdom is on the move and nothing can stop it. God is determined to reach lost people. I do want to be a part of that.

We have to plant churches whatever the cost. It is the most effective way to reach lost people.

Tim Keller (a well-respected American pastor, author and Christian leader) says: "The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for the numerical growth of the Body of Christ in any place. Nothing else - not crusades, outreach programs, parachurch

ministries, growing megachurches, 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 research at all, it is not even controversial."

Jesus said: "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matt. 9:37-38). While Jesus was talking about more than church planters, he certainly included them in this request for prayer. I'm sure he had people like Paul in mind. The harvest is waiting, but we need more church planters and church plants to do the harvesting work.

6. What can my church do?

Here are a few suggestions to start the ball rolling.

1. *Pray for the lost and for harvesters.* When our eyes are on the needs of lost people, we become less defensive and more faith-filled. Reaching the lost calls for every possible effort and approach.
2. *Be honest about your commitment to church planting.* Make the call. Do you believe in church planting or not? Be honest. If you are committed, there will inevitably be sacrifices involved and some may impact your church. Church planting is costly. I know that it's tough to think about more sacrifices when you're already feeling significant pain in your church, but lost people matter deeply to Jesus (Matt. 18:10-14). Jesus talks about leaving the flock to seek the lost. Lost people are of immense importance.
3. *Ask God whether your church could be planting.* The plant could be a separate church, another congregation targeting a different group whether in a different place or in your own building, or a house church trying to reach their friends in a particular place or community. This may not be God's time for any form of planting, but at least check it out. Remember that there will never be a "right" time for your church.
4. *Encourage those you know who are trying to plant.* Church planting is a tough job. It sounds attractive and there are some exciting times, but most of it is plain hard work. Planters are often working with limited resources, a diverse congregation, a lack of reliable, long-term committed people, few programs to offer newcomers, and no real security for the future. Many are disappointed. Many fail. Show your support for these pioneers. They do need encouragement. Adopt and pray for someone who is doing it.
5. *Engage with church plants in your area.* You may have some questions about their intentions or approach, but please don't ignore them or oppose them. Do what you can to work with them. Express any misgivings you have, but don't see them as the competition or even the enemy. We're all trying to reach lost people. I know that church planters are not always easy to work with, but make the effort. Take the initiative and see what you can do to stand with them. Be generous.
6. *Help raise up church planters.* Keep looking for leaders and potential leaders that have a heart for evangelism and the strength to persevere under significant challenges. Mentor them and encourage them to get some biblical training. Give them opportunities. In time, talk to them about planting a church.

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