

The Essential Tasks of Missions - Planting New Churches

The theological and strategic foundations upon which churches are planted greatly affect their ability to grow and mature. Paul encourages the church planter to "be careful how he builds." Sooner or later the builder's work will be tested with fire. Those who build with incombustible materials (gold, silver, and costly stones) will receive a reward, but those who build with combustible materials (wood, hay, and straw) will experience loss (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

Definition of Church Planting

Church planting may be defined as *initiating reproductive fellowships who reflect the kingdom of God in the world*. A number of characteristics of church planting are reflected in this definition.

First, church planting is aimed at the creation of *fellowships*. The church is the *family* of God, the *body* of Christ (Eph. 1:23), a *people* "belonging to God" (1 Pet. 2:9). These biblical metaphors indicate that the church must become a cohesive body reflecting the qualities of God in an alien world (vv. 11-12). Evangelistic methodologies should not scatter contacts who cannot be molded into bodies of believers; they must focus evangelism in one area for the purpose of creating a community of God. Converts must not be treated merely as individuals but incorporated in the body of Christ. Matayo Lang'at, a Kipsigis evangelist of Kenya, used a farming metaphor to explain why new Christians must work together to become part of a functioning fellowship:

Here in Africa one person cannot cultivate with oxen by himself. There must be people in the field to guide the oxen on each side as well as one who holds the plow. Likewise, one cannot be the church by himself. He must call others who are in Christ to work together with him.

(Translation from Kipsigis Sermon, 1976)

McGavran concurs: "Would-be disciples must be joyfully built into his body--they must not wander alone in the wilderness" (1990, 7). Too frequently a few new Christians are left to fend for themselves after a short campaign. New converts are led to the Lord and then left before a fellowship of believers has come into existence. These few Christians will likely fall away from God because they have not been incorporated into a fellowship which can mold and guide them in their spiritual journey.

Second, effective church planting focuses on cultivating *reproductive* fellowships. Many times churches are established without expecting the new converts to teach others. They soon become like mules who cannot germinally reproduce but must return to the original sources, the horse and the donkey, in order to procreate. They are like seedless grapes, delightful to taste but without reproductive power, or the fig tree which Jesus withered because it did not bear fruit (Matt. 21:18-19).

Professor Wendell Broom has graphically described such churches as *terminal* (Broom 1976, 88-89). Terminal churches may have spiritual vitality but can reproduce only arithmetically (2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, etc.). Missionaries are teaching others but not training their converts to become reproductive; they are initiating churches but not preparing leaders of these churches to plant other churches.

Ten missionaries can each plant one church each year. If the churches they plant have *terminal* life, after ten years their field will have 100 churches. If the missionaries die or return home, the number of churches remains static, for they do not plant other churches. The same ten missionaries, by planting churches that have *germinal* life, will in ten years have 5,110 churches in their field. If the missionaries die or return home, the churches will continue to multiply, because they have germinal life.

(Broom 1976, 88)

The author of Hebrews described terminal churches when he wrote, "Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!" (Heb. 5:12).

Germinal churches grow geometrically (2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, etc.). They reproduce like rabbits in Australia, bananas in Bermuda, and papayas in fertile areas of tropical Africa. They are like starfish which multiply when cut into pieces. It is within the nature of each part to reproduce. Geometric church growth can be illustrated by strawberry plants or Bermuda grass, which send out runners in every direction; these runners develop their own root systems and send out still new runners until the field is covered. The roots each represent a new church or cell group planted in a new village or new area of the city. Once the Christian community develops sufficient roots it is able to plant still other fellowships. Paul urged Timothy to encourage his converts to become germinal: "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses (germination 1) entrust to reliable men (germination 2) who will also be qualified to teach others (germination 3)" (2 Tim. 2:2).

Greg Newton describes such germinal growth among the Sukuma of Tanzania. The first churches established among the Sukuma were *missionary plants*. The missionaries planned where they would preach and did all the teaching. The next six churches were *co-plants*. Sukuma Christians worked with missionaries in selecting the locations for establishing new churches, went with them each week to the meetings, and did some of the teaching, depending on their level of maturity. In March 1994, after three years of work among the Sukuma, two *independent plantings* occurred. The location of the plantings, plans for the evangelistic meetings, and the teaching in the area were all done without missionary participation (Newton 1994, 1). Germinal church growth had begun!

Certain Christian beliefs provide special impetus to germinal growth. Anticipation of and preparation for the second coming of Christ is one such belief. When Christians perceive of themselves as standing between the first and second comings of Christ, they are

motivated to teach those around them to prepare for his return. The reality that this world is temporary--that their real identity is in heaven--helps disciples of Christ to understand their place in the world and propels them to speak of eternal realities. The understanding that God is active and is convicting the world of sin through the Holy Spirit (John 16:7-11) is another germinal belief. Christians who believe in God's mighty acts will be ready when the Holy Spirit touches them to teach a Cornelius or an Ethiopian. Their lives are tuned in to God's reality rather than secular "realities" which deny the active working of God. Greg Newton reflects upon the great church growth among the Sukuma with this comment: "We praise God for the Spirit which is moving to inspire Christians to evangelize" (Newton 1994, 1). Belief in the temporary nature of this world and the working of the Holy Spirit are thus two beliefs foundational to germinal growth.

Third, church planting is more than the mere creation of fellowships. These fellowships must have accepted God as their sovereign and struggle to reflect his nature. Thus church planting is the *developing of reproductive fellowships which reflect the kingdom of God in the world*. The term *fellowship* expresses the horizontal relationships between Christians within the body; the phrase *which reflect the kingdom of God in the world* expresses the vertical relationship between God and the fellowship over which he reigns. This distinction is vital because a church fellowship can divorce itself from the divine and become largely a social fraternity, much like the local Kiwanis or Rotary club. This type of fellowship has no divine impetus to germinate.

Fourth, this definition assumes that nurturing must follow the initial planting of the church. Bodies of believers are not superficially planted and then left but cared for until they "reflect the kingdom of God in the world." The term *initiating* implies that something must follow the planting of the church.

Guidelines for Effective Planting of New Churches

Specifics of church planting vary from context to context. However, four general guidelines are fundamental in every context.

First, church planters must look at their work as a spiritual activity. They must pray and fast both for the city or ethnic group in which God has placed them and for God's empowerment for the task of evangelizing. They must realize that the people of this particular area have not previously become followers of God because they are still under the dominion of Satan. Christ, however, has come "to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8). Church planters, therefore, must pray for wisdom and empowerment from God realizing that evangelization is ultimately taking territory that once belonged to Satan and claiming it for the kingdom of God. Prayer is an admission of God's role, an acknowledgement that only God in Jesus Christ can deliver the people from the grip of sin and clutches of the evil one. Evangelizing unbelievers and nurturing them to grow in Christ is not primarily a human endeavor but God's working through his people.

Second, church planters must visualize what God's church should look like within their target culture and seek to implement this vision. In every culture the church must reflect

the presence of God because it is *the distinctive people of God called by him through his mission and set aside for his mission*. However, the forms of church vary from culture to culture. These forms include such items as language, worship, and decision-making. Should a Russian church speak English in worship services and be reliant upon American models of church? Should the songs reflect the rhythms and harmonies of Western music? Are decisions made by foreigners or nationals, by voting or consensus? Christian meanings must be communicated in indigenous forms. The people of the land should not perceive the church as a foreign religion but as a part of indigenous society. This does not mean that Christianity will be compromised or that syncretism with non-Christian religious elements will take place. It means that Christian beliefs will be communicated in terms acceptable and meaningful to the culture in which the church is planted. Like a banana plant in the Bahamas, the church thrives within the culture because it allows God to use the resources of the culture rather than superficially borrowing cultural forms from a foreign source.

Third, church planters must learn to communicate God's eternal message within the plausibility structures of the people in the culture. The thought that Christ has defeated the principalities and powers (Col. 1:15) has little impact on secular Americans who have little understanding of spiritual powers. This concept of Christ, the triumphal One who has defeated the spirits, however, is the metaphor which stirs the heart of the animist and brings him to the foot of the cross (Van Rheezen 1991, 141-42). Only in Christ is there deliverance from the fear and control of the satanic realm. Church-planting missionaries thus enter a new culture as *learners* seeking to glean understandings concerning how to communicate God's message and to initiate a church which reflects the kingdom of God within this cultural context.

Fourth, church planters must learn what web relationships tie people of the culture together. Kinship, although more dominant in rural societies than in urban cultures, is the dominant web relationship. In African, Asia, and Latin America,

The web counts tremendously. Every man has, knows and is intimate with not merely brothers, sisters, and grandparents, but also with cousins, uncles, aunts, great-uncles, sisters-in-law, mothers-in-law . . . and many others. . . . Members of other clans or families can become Christian and he remains unmoved; but let "one of us" become Christian and he is deeply stirred.

(McGavran 1970, 321)

The Kipsigis of Kenya live in patriarchal extended families. According to the research of Fielden Allison 87 percent of all churches in Kipsigis were initiated through kinship contacts, and the strongest churches were those with many interwoven kinship relationships. The most effective teaching relationship was older brother teaching younger brother or sister (Allison 1983, 56-67).

Relationships in urban contexts become increasingly complex. Occupational and associational ties vie with kinship relationships for the time and allegiance of the people.

Mr. Chun is a Christian banker who leads a cell group of financial leaders in Seoul, Korea. This group meets each week in the non-threatening atmosphere of a restaurant. Their goal is to bring two monetary consultants to Christ each year and nurture them to maturity within their small group. Evangelization in this context is following occupational networkings.

The church-planting missionary must map out the web relationships which serve to connect people to people. The gospel travels down these relational pathways.

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