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Go and Plant New Churches

By David Dunlap

Sixty years ago, if you said *evangelism* in a word association game, you would probably get back *Billy Graham*. Crusade evangelism dominated the American church's ideas about reaching their community with the gospel. When Christians in a local church in any town in America decided to share the gospel with their neighbors, they looked to see which evangelist could come to town.

About forty years ago, the effectiveness of evangelistic crusades began to wane, and personal evangelism came to dominate our thoughts. If a church wanted to reach out with the gospel, it would typically offer a class on how to use the "Four Spiritual Laws" or *Evangelism Explosion* to witness to friends and strangers.

Gospel crusades haven't disappeared, and churches still teach personal evangelism. But today, church planting has become one of the most effective means of evangelism. Go to any evangelical denomination and ask them what they are doing to grow and reach the lost, and they will refer you to the church planting office. Ask any church leader, Christian worker, or evangelist about where God is working most effectively today in North America and they will say, "God is using church planting in an amazing way."

Frustration With Evangelistic Methods

Many evangelistic organizations are pouring their energy into church planting because they are frustrated with methods that do not seem to work any longer. Despite stories of triumph and spiritual success in evangelistic efforts, the sad reality is that there are very few that are actually being saved.

To illustrate let us go back a few years to 1976, when Campus Crusade for Christ, now *Cru*, poured in thousands of man-hours and financial resources into "Here's Life America" gospel campaign. Afterwards, when the dust settled Christian observers and researchers determined that there was very little lasting fruit as a result of this national gospel effort. Today, frustrated evangelistic leaders lament the failures in evangelism by often stating, "North America is the only continent in the world where the church is not growing."

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Church Planting in North America

The growing success of church planting has led many to think that this method of evangelism is an ideal way to fulfill the great commission in North America and throughout the world. Some point to the apostle Paul’s commitment to church planting in the book of Acts as a pattern for their own labors. For example the *Acts 29 Network*, a church planting organization, upholds Paul’s work in planting local churches as their example to follow. Others point to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

Many large evangelical churches are investing 10% of their weekly offerings into church planting ministries. These churches point to studies that show a glaring contrast between old and new churches. Recent studies indicate that after 15 years churches typically plateau in evangelistic growth. After 35 years, they typically can’t even replace those members they lose. New congregations reach many more people who are open to Christianity. Those who study church trends say established congregations tend to turn inward, no matter how hard they try to resist the trend. But new churches must look outward to survive. In 2008, Richard Harris, the vice-president of NAMB’s (North American Mission Board) church planting group stated that established Southern Baptist churches reported that they saw 3.4 baptisms annually per 100 church members, whereas new churches averaged 11.7 per 100 church members.¹ It is not hard to see that newly planted churches will lead more people to Christ.

Church Planting is Not Easy

No denomination invests more resources into church planting than the Southern Baptist Convention. The SBC, America’s largest Protestant denomination, wants to double its number of congregations from 50,000 to 100,000 in the next twenty years.² But church planting is not easy. Many new church plants close their doors after five years. Ten years ago *The Francis Schaeffer Institute* estimated that there are about 4,000 new church plants that occur every year, yet roughly 40% of those churches fail. The latest research suggests that 68% percent of the roughly 4,000 churches planted each year are still functioning four years later.³ One church research website goes even a step further in its grim statistics:

*Every year (in North America) there are 4,000 church plants but every year 3,700 (old and new) churches close their doors. Currently, we are only adding about 300 churches per year. This is not enough to keep up with population growth, much less the growing needs of the unaffiliated (those not attending a church). We need to triple church planting within the next five years. It’s that urgent.*⁴

However, there are numerous church plants that are successful. Many of these promising new churches are ethnic minority churches or multi-cultural churches. Even in traditional white Anglo-Saxon communities, the ethnic make-up is changing. Fifty years ago, in neighborhoods where only English

was spoken, today there may be 15-20 languages spoken. It is a challenge to reach our neighbors when there are language and cultural barriers. One church leader estimated that over 60% of those successful newly-planted churches were ethnic or multi-cultural churches.

Chinese newcomers from mainland China and Taiwan in San Francisco and Vancouver, British Columbia, are coming to Christ in great numbers and starting new churches. There are many Spanish-speaking congregations in metropolitan areas composed of immigrants from Honduras and Central America. In Texas and New York there are many Malayalam-speaking East Indian churches composed of believers from Kerala, India. Sixty thousand Afghan and Somali immigrants in Minneapolis, MN, are being reached with the gospel through ESL (English As a Second Language) gospel outreaches.

The biggest hindrance to the establishment of new churches is money. It is expensive to live in the larger cities where the standard of living may be very high. It is expensive and difficult to find meeting places for even small congregations of 50-60 believers. People with a heart to reach minorities in metropolitan areas soon realize the cost of living is extremely high. Nevertheless, with the determination that God has called them to reach souls for Christ, they persevere in their work for Christ despite the cost.

Assembly Planting

Consider the extraordinary church planting work of work of John and Melissa Martin. The book *Saved to Serve* describes how, in southwestern Ontario, Canada John Martin has seen over twenty New Testament churches established by sending forth offshoots to new areas. Martin emphasized strong evangelistic work, which would lead to the establishment of one church. As soon as that church began to grow and mature, it became instrumental in the establishment other new church works. In time, church buildings were either purchased or built, and these new churches began to have an impact on their communities. Sometimes, there is one person primarily responsible for the establishment of a local church; at other times there is a team of workers. In the early days, John Martin worked with Sidney Hoffman; in later years he primarily ministered alone.⁵ Starting a new church involves much work; it is no easy task. It requires much prayer, visitation, counseling, and evangelistic work; there may be many setbacks before a work gets established.

How Is a New Testament Church Planted?

How is a new assembly born? It should start with a God-directed vision placed on the heart of one or more believers. Ideally, at least four or five committed families should share the desire before a work is started. There should be a burden that will not go away, a persistent consciousness that God is leading. The Holy Spirit plants the idea and creates an answering desire in the hearts of His people. The vision of planting a new work must be bathed in prayer. In this way, we acknowledge our inability to make correct judgments and our absolute dependence on His wisdom. Christ, after all, is

“A hive-off occurs when a number of believers from a larger established church break off and start a new church in a nearby area. Many new churches are started in this way. This may be an ideal method of starting a new church, because you are able to begin with a small nucleus of committed believers.”



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the Head of the assembly, and only the Head has the right to decide. As we pray, the vision comes more and more into focus. What was a general burden at first gradually becomes specific as to location, agenda, and godly leadership. There must be strong, spiritual leadership, without which the work is liable to fall apart at an early stage. There are a number of keys ingredients for any new church plant to prosper spiritually.

1. Leadership
2. Proceed Slowly
3. Core Values and Key Doctrinal Positions
4. Relationships with Nearby Assemblies and Local Churches
5. Meeting Location

Conclusion

Just as there is joy when a baby is born, so there is a deep-seated delight in connection with the planting of a new assembly. Believers experience a new warmth of fellowship, an enthusiasm in striving together to see the assembly grow, and a satisfaction in exercising gifts that are stifled in a larger church. Just as human families rejoice when sons and daughters marry and start families of their own, so assemblies should rejoice when they are privileged to "birth" new works and to see them functioning as autonomous churches. Assembly planting is the will of God. Blessed are those who work with Him in accomplishing His will!

Endnotes

1. Tim Stafford, "Go and Plant Churches of All Peoples", *Christianity Today*, September 2007, p. 67
2. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2017/august/southern-baptists-emergence-in-church-planting.html>
3. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/study-reveals-state-of-u-s-church-planting.html>
4. <https://www.greatopportunity.org/starting-more-churches>
5. John Martin, *Saved to Serve: The Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, (Port Colbourne, Ontario: Gospel Folio Press, 1990), p. 34-38