



WHY PLANT CHURCHES?

Introduction

The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for ...

- 1) The Numerical Growth of the Body of Christ in any City, and
- 2) The Continual Corporate Renewal and Revival of the Existing Churches in a City.

Nothing else--not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, growing mega-churches, congregational consulting, or 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 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 church going 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 heads 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--

I. We want to be true to THE BIBLICAL MANDATE

A. *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. 28:8-20) 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 (Acts 2:41-47). The only way to be truly sure that you are increasing the number of Christians in a town is to increase the number of churches. Why? Because most 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 into vital, saving faith. This is why a leading missiologist like C. Peter Wagner can say,

"Planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology known under heaven."

Wagner continues... "Once Paul had done that, he could say that he had '*fully preached*' the gospel in a region and that he had '*no more work*' to do there (Romans 15:19,23). This means Paul had two controlling assumptions: 1) that the way to most permanently influence a country was through its chief cities, and 2) the way to most permanently influence a city was to plant churches in it. Once he had accomplished this in a city, he moved on. He knew that the rest that needed to happen would follow."

B. Paul's whole strategy was to plant urban churches. The greatest missionary in history, The Apostle Paul, had a rather simple, two-fold strategy. First, he went into the largest city of the region (Acts 16:9,12), and second, he planted churches in each city (Titus 1:5)

Response: *'But,'* many people say, *'that was in the beginning. Now the country (at least our country) is filled with churches. Why is church planting important now?'* We also plant churches because--

II. We want to be true to THE GREAT COMMISSION. Some facts--

A. New churches best reach 1) new generations, 2) new residents, and 3) new people groups. First of all, (a) 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 many other tiny customs), 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. Secondly, (b) new residents are almost always reached better by new congregations. In older congregations, it may require tenure of 10 years before you are allowed into places of leadership and influence, but in a new church, new residents tend to have equal power with long-time area residents.

Thirdly, (c) new socio-cultural groups in a community are always reached better by new congregations. For example, if new white-collar commuters move into an area where the older residents were farmers, it is likely that a new church will be more receptive to the myriad of needs of the new residents, while the older churches will continue to be oriented to the original social group. Also, new racial groups in a community are best reached by a new church that is intentionally multi-ethnic from the start. For example: if an all-Anglo neighborhood becomes 33% Hispanic, a new, deliberately bi-racial church will be far more likely to create 'cultural space' for newcomers than will an older church in town. Finally, brand new immigrant groups can nearly always and only be reached by churches ministering in their own language. If we wait until a new group is assimilated into American culture enough to come to our church, we will wait for years without reaching out to them.

[Note: Often, a new congregation for a new people-group can be planted *within* the overall structure of an existing church. It may be a new Sunday service at another time, or a new network of house churches that are connected to a larger, already existing congregation. Nevertheless, though it may technically not be a new independent congregation, it serves the same function.]

In summary, new congregations *empower* new people and new groups of people much more quickly and readily than can older churches. Thus, they always have and always will reach them with greater aptitude 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!

B. *New churches best reach the unchurched - period.* 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 their new members by transfer from other congregations. 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 on which many people thrive 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 accompaniment 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.

What does this mean practically? If we want to reach our city, should we try to renew older congregations to make them more evangelistic, or should we plant lots of new churches? Obviously, we should do both! Nevertheless, all the facts remind us that, despite the occasional exceptions, the only wide scale way to bring new Christians to the Body of Christ in a permanent way is to plant new churches.

Response: Some people say, "What about all the existing churches that need help? You seem to be ignoring them." That's not completely true. We also plant churches because--

III. We want to continually 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. Why?

A. First, 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 in order to find ways of helping existing churches reach people. 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 in turn, become the 'Research and Development' department for the whole Body in the city. Often the older congregations are too timid to try a particular approach or are absolutely sure that it will '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 as well.

B. Second, 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 eventually.

C. *Third, the 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.

D. *Fourth, the new church may be an 'evangelistic feeder' for an entire 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.

Summary: Vigorous church planting is one of the best ways to *renew* the existing churches of a city, as well as the best single way to *grow* the whole Body of Christ in a city. There is one more reason why it is good for the existing churches of the region to initiate or at least support the planting of churches in a given area. We plant churches--

IV. As 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, new leaders and ministries as well as additional members and income 'washes back' into the mother church in various ways to strengthen and renew 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 reveals 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.

SUMMARY

If we briefly glance at the objections to church planting in the introduction, we can now see the false premises beneath the statements. **A.** Assumes that older congregations can reach newcomers as well as new congregations. But to reach new generations and people groups will require *both* renewed older churches and lots of new churches. **B.** Assumes that new congregations will only reach current active churchgoers. But new churches do far better at reaching the unchurched, and thus they are the only way to *increase* the 'churchgoing pie'. **C.** Assumes that new church planting will only discourage older churches. There is a possibility of this, but new churches for a variety of ways, are one of the best ways to renew and revitalize older churches. **D.** Assumes that new churches only work where the population is growing. Actually, they reach people wherever the population is *changing*. If new people are coming in to replace former residents, or new groups of people are coming in--even though the net population figure is stagnant--new churches are needed.

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.

Overview of Older Churches and New Church Plants

Older Churches	New Church Plants
The older churches will continue to be oriented to the original social group.	Best to reach New Generations, New Residents, New People Groups. A new church will be more receptive to the myriad of needs of the new residents.
Deep in traditions which reflect the sensibilities of long-time leaders from the older generations who have the influence and money to control the church life.	In a new church, new people tend to have equal power with long-time members.

<p>In older congregations, it may require tenure of 10 years before you are allowed into places of leadership and influence.</p>	<p>New congregations <i>empower</i> new people and new groups of people much more quickly and readily than can older churches.</p>
<p>Churches over 10-15 years of age gain 80-90% of their new members by transfer from other congregations.</p>	<p>The average new church gains most of its new members (60-80%) from the ranks of people who are not attending any worshipping body.</p>
<p>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.</p>	<p>Are forced to focus on the needs of its <i>non</i>-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.</p>
<p>Have a stability and steadiness on which many people thrive and need.</p>	<p>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.</p>

Often the older congregations are too timid to try a particular approach or are absolutely sure that it will 'not work here'.	Have freedom to be innovative and in turn, become the 'Research and Development' department for the whole Body.
Leaders emphasize tradition, tenure, routine, and kinship ties.	Attract a higher percentage of venturesome people who value creativity, risk, innovation and future orientation.
Often older churches 'box out' many people with strong leadership skills who cannot work in more traditional settings.	New churches attract and harness many people whose gifts would otherwise not be utilized.
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 is very exciting and outward facing but is also very unstable or immature in its leadership.

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.