

Why Plant a Church? - The Strategic Necessity of Church Planting

(by Tim Keller and Fred Harrell)

"Don't you think there are enough churches in San Francisco?" This was often said to me, and still is as I network around The City. People are often offended (What's wrong with the churches that are here?), or shocked, (What idiot would try to plant a church in San Francisco?), or just dismayed (Oh great, more churches taking up space and causing problems, I thought we were about rid of them).

If you want to understand City Church you must understand church planting. Not only that, I want you to see not only the extraordinary and strategic opportunity that it is to be part of a church plant, but also to be convinced that there is no better investment in the Kingdom than in the planting of new churches. New churches are not like established churches in many ways. The better you know the differences and can conceptualize them in your own mind, the better off you will be in three categories:

- your own zeal for ministry will increase. A church plant can be both thrilling and exhausting. If you are pushed to a goal that you have not internalized and perceived, you will burn out.
- your ability to speak about City Church to others will increase.
- your ability to spread the vision of the joy and strategic nature of funding church planting will increase.

Why Plant a New Church?

The Biblical Mandate

Jesus' call. Jesus' Great Commission was not simply a call to "teach" and "make disciples" but also "baptize". In the New Testament we see that baptism meant incorporation into a worshipping community with

- theological boundaries,
- administration of the sacraments {i.e. baptism and the Lord's Supper}, and
- life accountability or discipline. (Cf. Acts 2:41-47). So although many types of ministries and institutions have been formed in the name of Christ, the foundational structure Jesus told us to spread is the church.

Paul's strategy. The greatest missionary in history had a simple, twofold strategy:

- the way to most permanently influence a country is through its chief cities (Acts 16:9, 12), and
- the way to most permanently influence a city is to plant churches in it (cf. Titus 1:5 "appoint elders in every town").

Sociological Reasons

New congregations for the first decades of their life are oriented toward outreach and, on the average, 1/3 of its members were not previously involved in the life of a church.

The vast majority of all the new people ever won to Christ by a church are won in the first 10-20 years. Why?

New churches best reach the unchurched.

- Dozens of denominational studies have confirmed that the average new church gains most of its members (60-80%) from among people outside any worshipping body, while churches over 20 years old gain most of their new members (0-20%) from people moving from other congregations. Thus new churches are 5-10 times better at drawing new people into the Body of Christ. Why would this be?
- As a congregation ages, powerful internal institutional pressures lead it to allocate most of their resources to please the tastes and address the interests of insiders much more than those outside. New churches are by necessity and design oriented toward those outside. They look and listen carefully to the concerns of non-members and are careful to address the gospel to them directly. Established churches don't listen well. This does not mean that many older congregations cannot win new people or that many newer congregations cannot be stagnant. But it does mean that, overall, unless at least 20-30% of all the churches in a city are new, the total number of Christians in that city will be declining, even if there is "a church on every corner." The only way to change a city (just as in Paul's time) is through new church planting.

New churches best reach new residents, new generations, and new people groups.

- New residents are disproportionately found in new congregations. Why? Because in new churches, newcomers do not need years of tenure before their voices are heard or before they can gain real leadership and influence in the congregation. Additionally, these more open leadership circles attract newer Christians bringing a greater wisdom and savvy on how to win outsiders.
New and younger generations are also found in larger numbers in new congregations. Why? Older congregations strongly reflect the tastes and sensibilities of older generations.
- Newly arrived groups of people (e.g. new ethnics, new vocational or class groups, etc.) are always disproportionately found in new congregations. It is very difficult for older congregations to create the "cultural room" and share power with people from new classes or cultures. Intentionally multi-cultural new congregations are best to reach an entire neighborhood when it moves from being mono-cultural to multi. (For example, if an all-black neighborhood becomes 30% Hispanic, a new congregation is far more likely to create a multi-ethnic church that mirrors the community than an older church.)
- Brand new immigrants to the U.S. almost always need congregations that minister to them in their own language if they are to be served and welcomed into the church. If we wait until their language and cultural practices are more assimilated to the American dominant culture, we will find that many of them are lost to Christian influence.

New congregations best attract creative leaders.

- Venturesome personalities who value creativity, risk, innovation and future-orientation are found in higher percentages in new churches over established congregations which put much more stock in tradition, tenure, routine, and kinship ties. It is important to add that tradition, tenure, and kinship ties are good things-so why shouldn't churches honor them? But unavoidably, older churches box out many people with strong leadership skills that are harnessed better by new churches.

New congregations best renew older congregations.

- Strangely enough, it is often seen that starting new churches in a community is one of the best ways to revitalize the older churches nearby. The new church often has the freedom to begin new ministries and approaches that end up spreading to the established ones. Sometimes the "success" of new churches force older congregations to evaluate themselves in fresh ways. Often the converts from new churches end up in many of the older congregations (though initially some key leaders from the older churches gravitate to the newer!) Though there can be some unfortunate minor tension and "competition" in the short run, every one profits long term if the newer church(es) are not sectarian and territorial.

Thus, there is no greater evangelism method under heaven than the planting of new churches.

Kingdom Reasons

Churches are microcosms of the Kingdom of God . The church is called to be a sign, foretaste and herald of God's kingdom - the establishment of God's reign over all the earth. The church is not the kingdom itself, but it is an agent of the Kingdom. As the church lives out the gospel in all areas of life it points to God's kingdom - the just, joyful, peaceable order that is present now as a result of Jesus' initial coming and one day will be fully realized when he comes again. Knowing that God calls his people to be the sign, foretaste and herald of the kingdom we must regularly be asking ourselves as a congregation: How are we doing at living out the gospel of the kingdom? How are we doing at manifesting the reign of God in our midst? As the proper expression of the gospel are we regularly addressing our world's woundedness and striving to bring healing to it?

Because the church is the primary agent of God's kingdom, planting churches that are gospel-driven and kingdom-centered is a high priority. By proliferating such churches, we can play a significant role in mending the world and testifying to our hope of Jesus' return when he will set all things right. Each church, of course, will flesh out its gospel commitments in different ways, depending on its context. They will develop different priorities and expertise. But by living out the gospel in their unique communities they will bring about kingdom healing and point people to the true king. All church plants are actually church based community development efforts seeking the welfare and prosperity of the community with the unique healing power of the Kingdom of God.

Historic Reasons

In the first 300 years of America, the number of Protestant churches grew at a much faster rate than the population.

- 1820 - 1 church for every 875 residents
- 1860 - 1 church for every 600 residents (pop. increased 300%, number of churches 500%)
- 1906 - 1 church for every 400 residents (pop. increased 275%, number of churches 400%)

Summary: 1 new church planted for every 300 new residents in the 19th century.

By 1906, over a third of the congregations of this country were less than 25 years old, and the percentage of the American population that was involved in local churches steadily increased. For example, in 1860, 37% of Americans were church members, but by 1926, 58% were.

Since 1906, and particularly after WWI, new church planting slowed drastically, for a complex variety of reasons. Since 1906 the population has grown roughly 300%, but the number of Protestant churches has grown no more than 35%. This is no more than one new church planted for every 1,000 new residents now. As a result, mainline Protestant churches have had huge declines in membership since the 1960's, and Catholic church attendance has also fallen. *If we want to renew our country spiritually, we will have to plant thousands and thousands of new churches annually.*

In light of this research, it is clear why America has become decreasingly influenced by a Christian world and life view. *It takes new churches to reach new generations, new ethnic groups-and there are far, far fewer churches being planted.* Established churches are like "full sponges". The main reason the mainline churches are declining is not bad theology (directly), but the lack of church planting. (The Mormons are not orthodox, but they plant churches like crazy, and thus they are growing.) It should be noted however, that you plant churches because you believe something crucial for others to have...and therefore the culprit is still bad theology in that it produces apathy, and apathy is not exactly great fuel for church planting

Application to San Francisco

By an approximate count, San Francisco has 300 churches of any potentially Christian stripe. With a population of 760,000, this means there is approximately 1 church for every 2500 residents. (The national average is 12 churches per 10,000 people. San Francisco is at approximately 4 churches per 10,000.) If we wanted to see the number of active Christians in San Francisco double, there is only one way-to get that ratio down to 1 to 1200 or less. That would take at least another 300 churches, this with the assumption that the original 300 were healthy!

City Church wants to plant a number of churches over the next 20 years. But will that change San Francisco? No. It will happen only if we have such a heart and spirit that attracts and reaches out to other churches and associations who also catch a vision for church planting. The question for our future is "How are we going to foster church planting among churches in

our city at large?" Potential answers: Our own church planting center that can assess, train, and supervise urban church planters. Training centers that reach beyond our own denomination. Equipping other churches in San Francisco to begin their own movements of planting church planting churches. That could spark the beginning of a process that would bring widespread revival among already established churches. Exciting questions. For now? We must continue to develop a church planting movement of our own that is an attractive model that really works.