FIVE REASONS WHY CHURCH PLANTING IS THE BEST METHODOLOGY OF EVANGELISM

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Why do we need to plant more churches? Is not strengthening existing churches the best way to reach America?” Many American Christians share these common ideas. In spite of evidence to the contrary, many church members believe the number of existing churches is adequate for the work of evangelism. But research shows that even if every church in America were healthy and growing, the present number of churches could not adequately evangelize America. In fact, the current increase in churches is only a quarter of what we need to keep up with population growth.¹

Far from being over churched, America is drastically under churched. The church-to-population ratio has been steadily declining for the past century. In 1900, there were 28 churches for every 10,000 Americans. By 1950, that number had dropped to 17 for every 10,000. In 2000, there were only 12 churches per 10,000; and in 2004, the ratio was down to 11/10,000.²

Church researcher David Olson shares the startling reality that since 1990 the percentage of Americans attending church each week has plummeted from 20.4 percent in 1990 to 17.5 percent in 2005. The state with the highest level of church attendance (Louisiana) has only 28 percent of its citizens in a house of worship during any given week.³ Depending on who is counting, America is either the third⁴ or the 14th⁵ largest mission field in the world. If America were a nation on the other side of the world, we would be tireless in our efforts to send missionaries.

**Church to Population Ratio — 1900–2004**

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<td>1900</td>
<td>28/10,000</td>
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<td>1950</td>
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In a spiritual sense, America has become the dark continent. When we come face to face with our present reality, it would seem that only the coldest heart could remain complacent about the need to reach Americans.

We may profess to have warm hearts, but our behavior has been tepid at best. Since 1990, American church leaders have been bombarded with an axiom that originated in a C. Peter Wagner book: “Church planting is the best methodology of evangelism under the sun.”⁶ Most leaders are aware of this phrase, but our collective behavior indicates that we do not believe it is true. The church that intentionally gives people time and finances to plant new churches is the rare exception, not the rule. The prevailing and most celebrated model of church growth and evangelism is the growing megachurch. Little or no recognition is given to churches that reach the lost by planting churches.

While megachurches are not wrong, evaluating the evangelistic effectiveness of a church by the size of its budget and the number of people in the pews is misleading. Bigger is better is an American value, not a Kingdom value. Jesus gives us the Kingdom standard of success when He tells the story of the lost sheep (Luke 15:4). The priority of the Kingdom is the lost. The shepherd leaves the found
crowd to look for the one who is lost. Jesus clearly proclaimed that He “came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). He was a friend of sinners, and He was unpopular with those considered righteous by society’s standards.

If we are to pattern our definition of ministry success after the priorities of Christ, we may need to change our measuring stick from bigger is better to asking, Are lost people being led to know the Savior? This approach to evaluating ministry effectiveness aligns us with Kingdom values and takes the focus off the size of our organization. It helps us ask questions that matter to God, such as: Who are the lost people we are influencing to follow Jesus? How does our church make God’s presence and peace known in our community?

Following Jesus on His mission leads us to renew our focus on leading lost people to know Christ. In fact, since seeking and saving the lost was the primary mission of Jesus, it is also the primary mission of His church. This brings us back to the quote: “Church planting is the best methodology of evangelism.” If this statement is true, we must conclude that planting churches is an essential activity of every healthy church.

**Why Church Planting Is the Best Methodology of Evangelism**

Why is planting churches the best methodology of evangelism? First and most important, it is the biblical pattern for the evangelistic expansion of the Church. When Jesus gave the Great Commission to His disciples, the world population was approximately 100 million people. The Great Commission is a potent mandate. A few years after Jesus gave this command, the Jews in Thessalonica described the disciples as those who “caused trouble all over the world” (Acts 17:6).

This story from the Book of Acts begs us to discover how a group of disorganized fishermen and a tax collector with no mass media technology and no rapid modes of transportation could spread the gospel so effectively. How could they enter a town they had never visited and find that their reputation as influential world changers had preceded them? The answer is that they planted churches. Everywhere they went they made disciples and formed new communities of faith. Read Acts again and look for evidence of church-planting activity. It is throughout the book. In fact, a careful study reveals chains of church-planting activity that can serve as models from which we can learn.

One such chain is the sequence of church planting that eventually led to sending Paul on his first missionary journey. Jerusalem was the birthplace of the first church. Then persecution scattered believers throughout the Roman Empire. Some of these disciples traveled to the island of Cyprus because in Acts 11 we discover that disciples went from Cyprus and Cyrene to Antioch and planted a church. Later, in Acts 13, the church in Antioch obeyed the Holy Spirit and sent out Paul and Barnabas for ministry.

Paul started churches everywhere he went. Some scholars postulate that Ephesus was the parent church of the other churches referenced in the first few chapters of Revelation. Planting churches appears to be the biblical norm for a healthy movement of churches.

The second reason church planting is the best methodology of evangelism is the evangelistic productivity of young churches. Numerous studies show that younger churches consistently demonstrate a higher level of evangelistic proficiency than older, established churches. For example, a study conducted among Southern Baptist churches indicated that SBC churches 10 years or older average 2.5 baptisms for every 100 active members, while SBC churches 10 years or younger average 10.8 baptisms per 100 active members.  

Church leadership authority Aubrey Malphurs reported on a study conducted in 1992 that found the average number of converts produced by churches each year per 100 members is: churches 0 to 3 years old, 10; churches 3 to 15 years old, 5; and churches older than 15 years, 3. The Church Multiplication Training Center reported similar numbers from a study conducted in 1998.  

A recent study conducted by author and researcher Ed Stetzer clearly demonstrates the tendency for younger churches to be more evangelistic. He specifically looked at Assemblies of God churches and found the typical Assemblies of God church plant baptized an average of 31 people annually by its fourth year. In contrast, established Assemblies of God churches baptized an average of only 9 people per year. It is a fact: Planting new churches results in more people coming to Christ.
The third reason church planting is the best evangelistic methodology is sociological. It is easier for new people to join a new organization than to join an existing one. The longer a church exists, the more likely it will become a closed relational system. Aging churches have significant momentum toward taking care of their members rather than reaching the lost (new people).

Every pastor has experienced the pressure from long-time church members to provide pastoral care for their loved ones who are in the hospital or for benevolence. Without intervention, a sense of entitlement forms in the minds of members who have faithfully paid their tithes over many years. The building becomes their building. They worry about whether the youth pastor is providing good ministry for their kids. The collective heart of the church easily turns toward meeting the needs of regular attendees and away from the lost. When the lost do venture into a church whose primary focus are the needs of its members, they quickly experience the sensation of being an outsider. But in a new church, everyone is new; there are no insiders or outsiders. New churches have fewer relational barriers to evangelism. When lost people begin to follow Christ, it is easier for them to find a place in a new church.

A fourth reason church planting is the best evangelistic methodology is desperation. Many existing churches have achieved a level of income and attendance that produces congregational satisfaction. This sense of satisfaction minimizes their desire to do anything that might rock the boat. Congregants on Sunday mornings see a decent crowd and feel good about their church. After all, the treasurer pays the bills, the worship leader selects good music, the pastor preaches respectable sermons, and, occasionally, someone responds to the weekly call for salvation and baptism. The resulting ministry routine provides little motivation to reach the lost.

If Present Trends Continue...

Projected Percentage of the Population Attending Christian Churches on Any Given Weekend

A recent study found that churches 25 years of age and older usually decline in attendance year after year. Churches older than 25 years that are growing by reaching the lost are exceptions to the norm. This is not the case in new churches. This same research revealed that new churches started in the decade of the 00s are growing by an average of 9 percent annually. The reason: they are highly motivated to get out and connect with people. They know the church will never become a reality unless they launch out, trust God, and take faith risks. God honors their faith and lost people become disciples. When members of the new church see their faith risks becoming realities, they are encouraged to take more faith risks, and the young church surges forward again.

A fifth reason church planting is the best evangelistic methodology is because new churches are focusing on the lost. As recently as 20 years ago, the dominant reason to plant a church was to provide a specific denominational presence in a community. For example, a typical church-planting project would begin with a call from a member of an Assemblies of God church who had moved to a new community that did not have an Assemblies of God church. After indicating his
desire to see an Assemblies of God church established in his town, a planter, along with a core group of Assemblies of God people, would come to the town and establish a new work.

The reason to start a church is to provide worship that is familiar to people with an Assemblies of God background. While this kind of planting still occurs, it is no longer the most common. The potential harvest is the motivating factor behind most church plants started in the last 10 years. A planter does demographic research on a community and discovers a large percentage of lost people. The planter says, “We need to plant an Assemblies of God church in this town because 10,000 lost people live there.” When the harvest motivates the plant, God honors the faith of the new church and blesses the congregation with an evangelistic anointing.

If New Churches Are Better at Reaching the Lost, Should We Shut Down All Existing Churches and Start Over?

No. Existing churches do reach people for Christ. The solution is not either/or. It is both/and. Healthy existing churches do have some ministry advantages over start-up churches. Healthy existing churches have:

- established track records in their communities that create a platform of trust from which they can launch effective ministry efforts to reach the lost.
- acquired significant people and financial resources that allow them to meet community needs with strong solutions.
- often been able to provide a diversity of small-group ministries and programs that equip them to connect to a greater cross section of the population than a start-up church can typically serve.
- benefited from years of building their technical infrastructure and are often able to host significant ministry events that bring together large numbers of seekers and saints.
- the potential to make great parent churches.

Planting Churches — The Best Methodology

Planting churches is the best methodology of evangelism, and planting new churches out of existing churches is the best methodology of church planting. Here are some reasons why planting churches out of existing churches is the best method.

First, when an existing church plants a new church it slows down the aging process for the existing church. Planting a new church creates opportunity for the existing church to take new risks and exercise faith. The planting process also creates changes in church leadership as some leaders leave to assist with the plant and new leaders take their places. This activity increases the productive missional years of the existing church.

Second, new churches planted by existing churches have a higher survival rate than churches with no partnership. Several factors contribute to their success: closer supervision, a higher probability of a coaching/mentoring relationship, higher level of financial stability, and a more reliable source of leadership resources.

Third, churches that choose to regularly plant churches usually have a higher capacity for leadership development. In fact, leadership development becomes a necessity because of the continual need for leaders for the new plants. This produces a culture where leaders are regularly developed and deployed in the existing church and in the new plants.
Fourth, churches that choose to plant churches usually have a Kingdom heart. Scanning the harvest field protects them from becoming ingrown and self-absorbed. Just as it is difficult to be a self-centered parent, it is difficult for a parent church to turn in on itself. As a result, churches that give birth to new churches tend to be healthier in the long term than churches that are consumed with self-preservation. The goal of every healthy church is to reproduce itself.

For more information, visit www.churchmultiplicationnetwork.org.

Notes


6. C. Peter Wagner, Church Planting for a Greater Harvest (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1990), 11.


10. Ed Stetzer and Phil Connor, Church Plant Survivability and Health Study 2007 (Springfield, Mo.: Assemblies of God, Center for Missional Research), 3.


13. Ibid