

WHY PLANT CHURCHES?

By Timothy Keller

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 a city and (2) the continual corporate renewal and revival of the existing churches in a city. Nothing else—not crusades, outreach programs, parachurch ministries, growing megachurches, congregational consulting, nor 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.

- “We already have plenty of churches that have lots and lots of room for all the new people who have come to the area. Let’s get *them* filled before we start building any new ones.”
- “Every church in this community used to be more full than it is now. The churchgoing public is a shrinking pie. A new church here will just take people from churches that are already hurting and will weaken everyone.”
- “Help the churches that are struggling first. A new church doesn’t help the existing ones that are just keeping their noses 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?”

WE PLANT CHURCHES BECAUSE WE WANT TO BE TRUE TO THE BIBLICAL MANDATE

1. Jesus’ essential call was to plant churches. Virtually all of the great evangelistic challenges of the New Testament are basically calls to plant churches, not simply to share the faith. The Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20) is a call not just to “make disciples” but to baptize. In Acts and elsewhere, it is clear that baptism means incorporation into a worshiping community with accountability and boundaries (cf. Acts 2:41–47). The only way to be truly sure you are increasing the number of Christians in a town is to increase the number of churches.

Why would this be? Much 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. Many decisions are not really conversions but are 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 ongoing worshiping and shepherding community can be sure of finally coming home 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.”¹

2. Paul’s whole strategy was to plant urban churches. The greatest missionary in history, Saint Paul, had a rather simple twofold strategy. First, he went into the largest city of a region (cf. Acts 16:9, 12), and second, he planted churches in each city (cf. Titus 1:5—“appoint elders in every town”). Once Paul had done that, he could say that he had “fully preached” the gospel in a region and that he had “no more place . . . to work in these regions” (cf. Rom. 15:19, 23). This means Paul had two controlling assumptions: (a) that the way to most permanently influence a country was through its chief cities, and (b) 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.

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*?”

¹ C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Growth* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1987), 168.

**WE ALSO
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THE GREAT
COMMISSION**

Consider these facts:

1. New churches best reach new generations, new residents, and new people groups. First, younger adults have always been disproportionately found in newer congregations. Long-established congregations develop traditions (such as time of worship, length of service, level of emotional responsiveness, sermon topics, leadership style, emotional atmosphere, and thousands of other tiny customs and mores) that reflect the sensibilities of longtime leaders from the older generations who have the influence and money to control church life. The automatic maintenance of such habits does not reach younger generations effectively.

Second, new residents are almost always reached better by new congregations. Older congregations may require a tenure of ten years before someone is allowed into places of leadership and influence, but in a new church, new residents tend to have equal power with longtime area residents.

Third, new sociocultural 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 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 multiethnic from the start. For example, if an all-Anglo neighborhood becomes 33 percent Hispanic, a new, deliberately biracial church will be far more likely to create “cultural space” for newcomers than will an older church in town.

Finally, brand-new immigrant groups nearly always can be reached only by churches ministering in their own language. If we wait for a new group to become assimilated into the local culture, we will wait for years without reaching out to its members. 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. Although it may not technically be a new independent congregation, it serves the same function.

In summary, new congregations *empower* new people and new peoples much more quickly and readily than can older churches. Thus they always have and always will reach them with greater facility than long-established bodies can. This means not only that we need church planting so that frontier regions or unevangelized countries can become Christian, but also that Christian countries will have to maintain vigorous, extensive church planting simply to *stay* Christian!

2. 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 worshiping body, while churches over ten to fifteen years of age gain 80–90 percent of new members by transfer from other congregations.² This means the average new congregation will bring six to eight times more new people into the life of the body of Christ than an older congregation of the same size.

Although 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 have a stability and steadiness that many people thrive on and need. This does not mean that established churches cannot win new people. In fact, many non-Christians will be reached *only* by churches with long roots in the community and the marks of stability and respectability.

On the other hand, new congregations, in general, are forced to focus on the needs of its *nonmembers*, simply to get off the ground. Because so many of a new church’s leaders came very recently from the ranks of the unchurched, the congregation is far more sensitive to the nonbeliever’s concerns. Also, in the first two years of our Christian life, we have far more close, face-to-face relationships with non-Christians than we do later. A congregation filled with people fresh from the ranks of the unchurched will thus have

² Lyle Schaller, quoted in D. McGavran and G. Hunter, *Church Growth: Strategies That Work* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 100. See also C. Kirk Hadaway, *New Churches and Church Growth in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987).

the power to invite and attract many more nonbelievers into the church's life and events 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? That question is surely a false either-or dichotomy. We should do both! Nevertheless, the above shows that, despite the occasional exceptions, the only broad-scale way to bring many new Christians into the body of Christ in a permanent way is to plant new churches.

To throw this into relief, imagine that Town A, Town B, and Town C are the same size, and they each have a hundred churches of one hundred persons each. In Town A, all the churches are more than fifteen years old. The overall number of active Christian churchgoers in that town is shrinking, even if four or five of the churches get very "hot" and double in attendance. In Town B, five of the churches are fewer than fifteen years old. They, along with several older congregations, are winning new people to Christ, but this only offsets the normal declines of the older churches. Thus the overall number of active Christian churchgoers in that town is staying the same. Finally, in Town C, thirty of the churches are under fifteen years old. In this town, the overall number of active Christian churchgoers is on a path to grow 50 percent in a generation.³

Response: "But," many people say, "what about all the existing churches that need help? You seem to be ignoring them." Not at all.

**WE ALSO
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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 older churches in the vicinity and renew the whole body of Christ. Why?

1. 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 to find ways of helping existing churches reach them. There is, however, 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 have freedom to be innovative, so they become the Research and Development Department for the whole body in the city. Often the older congregations have been too timid to try a particular approach or absolutely sure it would "not work here," but when the new church in town succeeds wildly with that new method, the other churches eventually take notice and gain the courage to try it themselves.

2. Second, new churches are one of the best places to identify 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" people who have strong leadership skills but who cannot work in more traditional settings. New churches in a city thus attract and harness people whose gifts would otherwise not be utilized in the work of the body. These new leaders eventually benefit the whole body in the city.

3. Third, the new churches challenge other churches to self-examination. In general, the success of new churches often challenges older congregations 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 it may even bring about humility and repentance for defeatist and pessimistic attitudes. Sometimes a new congregation can partner with an older church to mount ministries that neither could do by itself.

4. Fourth, the new church may be an "evangelistic feeder" for a whole 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. Some converts cannot stand the tumultuous changes that regularly come through this new church, and they

³ See Lyle Schaller, *44 Questions for Church Planters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 12. Schaller talks about "the 1% Rule." Each year any association of churches should plant new congregations at the rate of 1 percent of their existing total; otherwise, that association will be in decline. That is just "maintenance." If an association wants to grow 50 percent plus, it must plant 2-3 percent per year.

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 socioeconomic makeup of the new congregation and gravitates to an established congregation where the customs and culture feel more familiar. Ordinarily, the new churches of a city produce new people not only for themselves but for the older bodies as well.

In summary, vigorous church planting is one of the best ways to *renew* the body of Christ in 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 a region to initiate or at least support the planting of churches nearby.

**WE PLANT
CHURCHES
AS AN
EXERCISE IN
KINGDOM-
MINDEDNESS**

All in all, church planting helps an existing church best when the new congregation is voluntarily birthed by an older “mother” congregation. Often the excitement and new leaders and new ministries and additional members and income wash back into the mother church in various ways and strengthen and renew it. Although there is some pain in seeing good friends and valued leaders go away to form a new church, the mother church usually soon 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 percent—the new people the kingdom has gained through this new church—or are we going to bemoan the situation and resent the three families we lost to it?” 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 its own small losses than grateful for the kingdom’s large gains is betraying its narrow interests. Even so, as we have seen, the benefits that new church planting offers to older congregations is very great, even if not initially obvious.

SUMMARY

If we briefly glance again at the objections to church planting in the introduction, we can now see the false premises underlying the statements. *Objection 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. *Objection B* assumes that new congregations will reach only currently active churchgoers, but new churches do far better at reaching the unchurched, and thus they are the only way to *increase* the “churchgoing pie.” *Objection C* assumes that new church planting will only discourage older churches. There is a possibility of some initial discouragement, but for many reasons new churches are one of the best ways to renew and revitalize older churches. And a final objection assumes that new churches work only where the population is growing. In actuality, 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 it is 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. We must beware of that.

**FINAL NOTE:
HISTORICAL
LESSONS**

If all this is true, there should be lots of evidence for these principles in church history—and there is!

In 1820, there was one Christian church for every 875 U.S. residents. From 1860 to 1906, U.S. Protestant churches planted one new church for every increase of 350 in the population, bringing the ratio by the start of World War I to just one church for every 430 persons. In 1906 over a third of all the congregations in the country were less than twenty-five years old.⁴ As a result, the percentage of the U.S. population involved in the life of the church rose steadily. For example, in 1776, just 17 percent of persons in the United States were categorized as “religious adherents,” but by 1916 that figure had risen to 53 percent.⁵

⁴ Ibid., 14–26.

⁵ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1992), 16.

After World War I, however, especially among mainline Protestants, church planting plummeted for a variety of reasons. One of the main reasons was the issue of turf. Once the continental United States was covered by towns and settlements, with churches and church buildings in each one, there was strong resistance from older churches to any new churches being planted in “our neighborhood.” As we have seen above, new churches are commonly very effective at reaching new people and growing during their first couple of decades. The vast majority of U.S. congregations peak in size during the first two or three decades of their existence and then remain on a plateau or slowly shrink.⁶ This is due to the factors mentioned above: they cannot assimilate new people, or groups of people, as well as new churches can. However, older churches have feared the competition from new churches. Mainline church congregations, with their centralized government, were the most effective in blocking new church development in their towns. As a result, the mainline churches have shrunk remarkably in the last twenty to thirty years.⁷

What are the historical lessons? Church attendance and adherence overall in the United States are in decline. This cannot be reversed in any other way but the way it originally had been so remarkably *increasing*. We must plant churches at such a rate that the number of churches per 1,000 in the population begins to grow again, rather than decline as it has since World War I.

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⁶ Schaller, *44 Questions*, 23.

⁷ Schaller argues that a lack of church planting is one major cause of the decline of mainline Protestantism (*44 Questions*, 24–26). Finke and Stark show how independent churches, such as the Baptists, that have had freedom to plant churches without interference, have proliferated their numbers (*Churching*, 248).