GLOBAL CHURCH PLANTING

Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication

Craig Ott and Gene Wilson
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The church is the most brilliant concept ever created. It has outlasted cultures, governments, skeptics, and enemies from within and without, and it will continue to do so until Jesus returns. We must love the church as Christ does, and that love is at the core of *Global Church Planting* by Craig Ott and Gene Wilson.

These authors and experienced church planters remind us that our churches are growing, living organisms and therefore will naturally reproduce. If we’re not reproducing, it’s a sign something is unhealthy in our congregations. Ultimately, a church’s health is measured by its sending capacity, not its seating capacity.

In light of the Great Commission Jesus gave to the church, any definition of fruitfulness for a local congregation must include growth by the conversion of unbelievers, including the planting of new congregations. Saddleback began as a church plant, and then we planted another church during our first year. We’ve continued to plant new congregations every year since then.

*Global Church Planting* offers a comprehensive, biblical foundation for starting new churches, but it also gets down to the nitty-gritty of finding funding, developing a sense of the local culture, and pulling together the team that best meets the specific needs of the community where the church is being planted.

Ott and Wilson rightly insist that any church plant must be based on the centrality of Jesus Christ and his Great Commission. We grew Saddleback by reminding people that “a great commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission will grow a great church.” Ott and Wilson teach that church plants should seek help and support from other churches and/or their denomination. This allows the church to grow within a Great Commission community of cooperation.
Jesus doesn’t expect us to produce *more* than we can, but he does expect us to produce *all* that we can by his power within us. This book will help you to do that. It should be read by anyone thinking about planting a church, but it should also be read by anyone in church leadership—because even if you are not part of a church plant, your congregation should be involved in initiating and then supporting church plants. And that’s another thing I like about this book; it teaches that church planting is not consigned to some subgroup, for those with a pioneering spirit. Instead, all believers are called to plant churches as we reproduce the life of Christ in others and follow the Great Commission.

Jesus has given the church a job to do, and we must obey the Great Commission or, regardless of what else we do, we will fail at fulfilling our purpose for existing, which is helping Jesus bring others into the kingdom of God. May this book inspire you toward Great Commission thinking, even as it shows you what steps to take as you establish new congregations in the body of Christ.

Rick Warren
Senior Pastor
Saddleback Church
Preface

The growth of global Christianity at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries is nothing short of astonishing. Hundreds of millions of persons, especially from Africa, Asia, and Latin America have been welcomed into tens of thousands of new congregations, some in the most unexpected places (such as China) and in the most unlikely shapes and forms (such as Christian ashrams). The subject of church planting has also received much attention in recent years, with a growing awareness that evangelism apart from church planting is an incomplete approach to fulfilling the Great Commission. Disciples are made in communities of believers that are best able to reach others of their ethnic or social group. Such communities become God’s instrument for kingdom impact on individuals, families, neighborhoods, and society.

Yet roughly one-third of the residents of Planet Earth are still without a local church that can share with them the gospel of Jesus Christ in an understandable and meaningful manner. The need for church planting, especially pioneer church planting among unreached people groups, remains an urgent task and a formidable challenge. In many places, such as urban centers, there are too few churches able to evangelize all the communities and various segments of the population. In other places churches with long membership rolls exist, but their members understand little about the Christian faith, do not attend church, or exercise a syncretistic mix of Christianity with other religious beliefs and practices. Well-prepared church planters, both local and expatriate, are still greatly needed.

In North America the cause of church planting has gained new momentum. Denominations have promoted it, church-planting networks and training institutions have emerged, resources abound, church-planting conferences flourish, and numerous books have been published. This is a welcome development. However, with few exceptions most of the energy and resources are geared
to the needs and context of church planting in North America. The appearance of David Garrison’s widely read study *Church Planting Movements* (2000) not only sparked renewed interest in church planting but also raised awareness that the most effective methods are likely to be very different from those practiced in the past by most missionaries and church planters. Church planters and missionaries working outside North America are left without much guidance. In most settings more than simple adaptation or tweaking of Western methods will be necessary to be effective, especially if the church planter is working cross-culturally.

Our primary goal is to combine sound biblical principles with the best practices from around the world to provide a practical guide for church planters working in a wide variety of cultural contexts. The teachings and example of the New Testament church provide the foundation for our approach. Whereas the biblical goals and principles never change, the world does, and therefore so do the specific methods. Thus we seek to also learn from careful research that will contribute to fulfilling those biblical purposes in a variety of settings. We have chosen not to focus on one particular model of the church (such as the house church) or a single methodology of church planting (such as incarnational versus attractional). Instead we have sought to examine church-planting efforts and movements, great and small, from diverse contexts and avoid the temptation to derive a single formula for success. The reader will need to thoughtfully and prayerfully evaluate the various methods, models, and examples that we present in these pages to discern which ones are best suited to his or her particular situation.

Having said that, we must add that we have devoted much of our discussion to what we call apostolic church planting, following closely the example of the apostle Paul. Such planters work more as itinerant or catalytic agents and less as pastors of the churches they plant. They seek to reproduce themselves in the local believers and plant churches that can reproduce and multiply on the basis of local leadership and resources.

The task of planting and reproducing churches, especially in cross-cultural settings, involves a comprehensive array of topics, skills, and challenges that deal with virtually every aspect of Christian ministry and mission. It is impossible in one volume to cover every aspect adequately. We have attempted to provide an overview of the key issues and include numerous references to further literature and resources that will help the reader to explore topics of interest in greater detail. (Citations from non-English original sources were translated by us, the authors.)

The book has been structured in four parts: Part I, “Biblical Foundations,” examines the task, importance, and New Testament beginnings of church planting. Part II, “Strategic Considerations,” takes up decisions that must be made early in the planning process, including the nature of church multiplication and indigeneity, the role of the church planter, contextualizing
the shape of the church, and the models and approaches to church planting. Part III, “Developmental Phases,” describes the phases that most church plants undergo, with very practical guidelines for leading a church plant from inception to reproduction. Finally, part IV, “Critical Factors,” considers factors that undergird effective church planting: the personal life of church planters, teams, development of leaders, wise use of resources and partnerships, and developing churches with kingdom impact.

We write not as armchair theoreticians but as those who have experienced firsthand the challenges of cross-cultural church planting. Gene served eighteen years as a church planter in Quebec, Canada, and ten years as a church-planting coach in Latin America; he now works with church planters and their coaches globally. Craig served twenty-one years in Germany as a church planter, trainer, and church-planting consultant throughout Central Europe. We have both continued to teach, consult, and coach church planters in over forty countries. Most examples in this book that are not attributed to another source come from our own personal experience, observation, or interviews with church planters. Furthermore we have both taught church planting in formal academic settings and been involved in research of church planting. Our hope is to combine the best of these practical and biblical insights into a helpful volume for church planter practitioners, trainers, coaches, and teachers as well as mission leaders and leaders of local churches who partner with global church-planting efforts. We have also written with the hope of providing a resource for the many grassroots church planters and trainers of church planters who work in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Such a work would not have been possible without the help and encouragement of many others. ReachGlobal, the mission agency with which we have served, has generously supported and encouraged us in this endeavor. Ben Sawatsky, a passionate church planter, keen strategist, and missionary statesman, has been an inspiring and encouraging mentor to us both. The research and experience of many of our students, particularly those at the Akademie für Weltmission (Korntal, Germany) and at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, Illinois), have directly or indirectly contributed many of the insights shared on these pages. We are particularly grateful to Jim Kinney and his colleagues at Baker Academic for their competent assistance, and to our research assistant Ben Stevens for his efforts behind the scenes tracking sources, gathering data, and editing the manuscript. Last but not least, we thank our life partners, Linda and Alice, for their support, patience, and encouragement, which played no small part in bringing this work to completion.

For more information and resources to help apply the principles and practices found in this book, visit www.globalchurchplanting.net.
Prologue

The Parable of the Apple Trees

Once upon a time there was a land where many people were starving. It was a terrible time of suffering, and no one seemed to know what to do. The apple trees of the town were moved with compassion, especially as they saw the many hungry children with gaunt faces. They decided that they could be part of the solution. Each tree would try to increase its harvest to provide more food.

One particular tree had an especially great vision to become the largest and most productive tree that could feed hundreds of people. He determined to extend his branches wider and sink his roots deeper. And he did. He grew greater and stronger, with broad and graceful branches. His trunk was stately as a Corinthian column, his roots sinuous and muscular. He became very productive, the envy of all other apple trees, doubling, even tripling, the number of apples that he could grow, feeding more and more people. And the apples that he bore were the tastiest and largest apples to be found. He was also very concerned that no fruit go to waste. So he developed a way to hold on to his fruit until the harvesters arrived, not letting a single apple drop to the ground. It was a brilliant plan. Many children were nourished and survived the winter thanks to him.

This tree became quite a sensation among apple growers and was admired by everyone in town for his commitment to feeding the hungry. Soon apple growers were coming from far and wide to discover how this tree could produce so much and such wonderful fruit. He became known as “Mega-tree.”

But Mega-tree gradually became frustrated. His branches grew so wide and heavy that each year when the fall winds would blow large branches would crack. Some would come crashing down, wasting precious fruit and slowing production. These would have to be regrown if the same number of apples were
One year the winds were so strong, and Mega-tree had grown so large, that he was nearly uprooted altogether. That gave him a pretty big scare. But what disturbed Mega-tree most was his realization that he had reached his productive capacity. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t increase production any more. And worst of all, he realized that there were many hungry people he still could not feed.

Mega-tree remained faithful to his task and continued to produce many good apples, but the once-grand vision faded and his joy began to wane. Over time his trunk became gnarled, and his fruit wasn’t quite as sweet as in the early years. Apple growers stopped visiting him and looked for other large, productive trees from whom they could learn.

Meanwhile there was another apple tree in town. This tree was also moved with compassion and wanted to feed as many hungry people as possible, but he was rather small and unseemly. His fruit was not very sweet, and sometimes it was even a bit wormy. And he didn’t produce a tenth of the harvest that Mega-tree produced. He was embarrassed by the fact that his fruit often fell to the ground and rotted before it could be harvested, so of the little fruit that he did bear, less still went to feed the hungry. Apple growers of course took no notice of him and would walk right past him on the way to visit Mega-tree. So unbeautiful was this tree that he received the nickname “Twiggy.”

Twiggy began to feel sorry for himself. “You’re a poor excuse for a tree,” he would woefully say to himself over and over, shaking his boughs sadly. “You’ll never be able to feed many of the hungry.” Looking over at the elegant and expansive branches of Mega-tree, he’d see the many crates of large, beautiful apples being harvested, and that made him feel even more like a failure. It also made him a bit jealous, which he didn’t like to admit to himself. Sometimes he’d make excuses for himself: “It’s the soil. If I had the soil that Mega-tree has, I could do what he does.” But he knew in his heart it wasn’t really true.

One day as Twiggy’s eyes were cast toward the ground in a sulk, he noticed something quite odd. There not far from his roots grew a little plant. Upon closer inspection, it proved in fact to be a little baby apple tree. At first he thought, “Oh no! That’s just what I need now—someone with whom I have to share this lousy, unfertile soil! I’ll probably bear even less fruit once he grows up. His roots will probably get tangled with mine. He might even block my sunlight.”

Twiggy’s resentment grew toward both Mega-tree and Baby-tree until suddenly he was struck by a thought, as if struck by lightning (and for a tree that’s a pretty shocking experience). He realized that Baby-tree was a result of one of Twiggy’s apples falling to the ground. As if that thought wasn’t earth-shaking enough, another followed quickly: “If I just keep letting some of my apples fall so that their seeds grow into trees, there could be lots of new apple trees bearing fruit and feeding many more people.” Though Twiggy was not very good at math, he knew enough to reason, “In fact, the sum of all those
apples on trees growing from my seeds will be more, yes, much more, than even Mega-tree is producing. We could feed many more people.”

“But wait!” Twiggy mused further. “What if my baby trees also let some of their apples fall to the ground? Then they would grow into even more new trees bearing even more fruit and feeding even more people. And then those trees could also drop some fruit, and then . . . by golly, we could feed the whole world at that rate!” And so it was that Twiggy gladly began letting some of his apples fall to the ground. Some passersby sneered, “How wasteful! You’ll never amount to anything.” Or they jeered, “Why don’t you take a lesson from Mega-tree?” But Twiggy just kept on quietly, faithfully letting some apples fall, and as he had hoped, some of his offspring followed his example. Soon enough there were apple trees growing throughout the whole land. And though none of the new trees ever was as impressive as Mega-tree, no children or grownups ever needed to go hungry in that town.

The moral of the story: If you want to feed more people, don’t merely grow more apples, bigger apples, and sweeter apples; rather, plant more apple trees that in turn can reproduce yet more apple trees to grow exponentially more fruit. And if we want to feed a spiritually hungry world, we must seek to not merely grow bigger and better churches that reach more people (though that is certainly a good thing to do) but to plant churches that in turn reproduce more churches, that reach exponentially more people.
Part I

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS
Many church planters are enthusiastic about their calling and the challenge of launching into such an exciting endeavor. Because church planters often have pioneering and entrepreneurial personalities, they sometimes have little patience for defining goals or answering fundamental questions about the nature of the task. But not doing so is like setting out to build a house without blueprints. Even allowing for unexpected developments and creative freedom, it’s essential to have a good idea of the nature and goal of the task if it is to be fulfilled.

Years ago a cartoon frequently shown on German television depicted a character shooting an arrow rather randomly at a wall, then walking to the wall and drawing the bull’s-eye around the point where the arrow struck. Such a method ensures that you’re always on target! Oddly enough, some church planters do seem to shoot first and draw the target later. Given the growing number of church planters who have had little formal biblical or theological training, the need is all the greater to begin by defining terms and becoming clear about the nature of the church and what it thus means to plant a church. This is particularly important when one is planting a church in another culture. Of course entire books have been written on the nature of the church. This chapter maps in summary fashion a theological blueprint for the practical work of church planting.
What Is a Church?

Defining the church is the first obvious step in understanding church planting. Our natural tendency is to envision planting congregations that look and act something like our home church, even though the church may be planted in another culture or under very different circumstances. One tacitly assumes that this is the best or only biblical form of the church.

However, a careful look at the New Testament reveals that the first-century churches took a number of forms, meeting in various places and with differing emphases and structures. The church in Jerusalem, for example, which included members who were “zealous for the law,” continued to observe many Jewish practices such as participation in certain temple rites (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 21:20, 26). The predominantly Gentile churches had no such practices and met primarily in homes. Yet all were legitimate New Testament churches suited to their contexts.

Many elements of church life with which we are familiar at home may be neither biblically necessary nor culturally appropriate in a different setting. Does a congregation have to have a paid pastor, own a building, celebrate weekly Sunday morning services, or have legal status including a formal constitution and bylaws to be a “real” church? These may be desirable, but by New Testament standards they are hardly essential. Many of the churches planted by Paul would not meet what many today might consider a minimal standard for being an established church. Nevertheless, he addressed even the most problematical congregations as “the church.” This forces us to consider more carefully what genuinely constitutes a local church in the biblical sense.

Every leader in a church-planting team should judiciously study the Scriptures and seek to answer these and many other questions about the life and nature of the church. One must distinguish between that which is biblically mandated and essential and that which is nonessential. The Scriptures allow great freedom in the details of church life and polity. Cross-cultural church planters must take extra care not to impose foreign expressions of church life, but to creatively develop the new church in ways that fulfill biblical purposes in a culturally appropriate manner. At the same time the church should demonstrate the countercultural values of the kingdom of God.

Church planters must clarify their ecclesiology in their own minds prior to launching a plant. A biblical study on the nature of the church should be included in the early teaching of any church plant, allowing local believers to help determine what forms the church should take to fulfill biblical purposes in the local context. While there is no substitute for turning directly to the

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1. Consider studying for example the book of Acts on evangelism and church life, Ephesians on nature of the church and biblical metaphors of the church, the Pastoral Epistles on church order and leadership, or 1 Peter 2 on the continuity of the people of God in Old and New Testaments.
Scriptures for our understanding of the church, there is also much value in becoming familiar with historical teachings on the church and learning how the church has taken shape in other contexts (see chapter 6 on the shape of the church and contextualization).  

We must begin by understanding the essential nature of the church. A summary of various understandings of the essence of the church is found in table 1.1. First and foremost, the church is a spiritual entity, conceived by the Father (Eph. 1:3–6), built by Christ (Matt. 16:18), and indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:19–22). The church is God’s primary vehicle for manifesting the nature of the kingdom of God in this age and among all people. This biblical vision of the church should capture our imagination and stir our hearts. What a glorious and holy privilege to be God’s servants in the planting and establishing of local churches!  

The early church fathers often spoke of the church as the fellowship of the saints. Emphasis was rightly placed on the church as a people rather than as an institution. Essential attributes of the church were summarized in the Nicene Creed (AD 381) as one (unity), holy (sanctified life), catholic (universal, for all people), and apostolic (based upon teaching of the apostles). These attributes have been variously interpreted through the history of the church, but they are confessed by nearly all Christians. The Reformers focused more on essential marks of the church, in an attempt to discern what constitutes the true church in contrast to false expressions of the church. Luther spoke of the right preaching of the Word (doctrine) and faithful administration of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper) as the two essential marks. Reformed churches added the exercise of church discipline. Free churches emphasized the personal regeneration and piety of their members.

2. People of other cultures often appreciate the importance of past wisdom and are rightly skeptical of innovations that have little continuity with history. Craig Van Gelder writes, “All thinking about the church, all ecclesiologies, reflect to some extent the historical circumstances of the eras in which they were developed. . . . All ecclesiologies must be seen as functioning relative to their context. There is no other way to be the church except within a concrete, historical setting. . . . New contexts require new expressions for understanding the church” (2000, 40–41).  

3. For example apostolic has been taken by Roman Catholics to refer to apostolic succession, whereas some Protestants interpret it in terms of the apostolic-missionary sending of the church. Van Gelder writes, “For the church to be holy, it must seek to appropriate the redemptive power of God in its midst. For the church to be catholic, it must organize itself to be flexible and adaptive to new contexts. For the church to be apostolic, it must organize itself to be missional within all its ministry functions and through all its functions. For the church to be a communion of the saints, it must promote the building and strengthening of relationships through the exercise of both the fruit and the gifts of the Spirit” (2000, 52).  

4. The term “free church” is used here generally for non–state churches—that is, churches such as Baptists or Pentecostals in contrast to churches such as the Catholic, Episcopal, Orthodox, or Lutheran churches. See discussion in Van Gelder 2000.
Table 1.1
The Essence of the Church

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Marks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Right doctrine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy</td>
<td>Faithful administration of the sacraments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic (universal)</td>
<td>Church discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apostolic</td>
<td>Personal faith</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Metaphors</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Witness, <em>martyria</em></td>
<td>People of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellowship, <em>koinonia</em></td>
<td>Body of Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service, <em>diakonia</em></td>
<td>Flock of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proclamation, <em>kerygma</em></td>
<td>Bride of Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship, <em>leiturgia</em></td>
<td>Temple of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Royal priesthood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A more practical approach is to define the church in terms of its *purpose* and *work*. Acts 2:42 describes the basic activities of the church in terms of apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking bread (and baptism), and prayer, to which are added worship and evangelism (v. 47) and then later the intentional sending of missionaries (Acts 13). Theologians have also spoken of the church’s witness (*martyria*), fellowship (*koinonia*), service (*diakonia*), proclamation (*kerygma*), and worship (*leiturgia*). Rick Warren’s popular book *The Purpose-Driven Church* lists outreach (to evangelize), worship (to exalt), fellowship (to encourage), discipleship (to edify), and service (to equip) as biblical purposes that should be kept in balance and give the church direction. Yet another way to view the church is in terms of its relationship to Christ. Highly relational cultures, especially in Majority World settings, may find such an understanding more helpful than other approaches:

- confession of Christ as Lord (baptism)
- witnesses to Christ (evangelism)
- remembrance and fellowship of Christ (Lord’s Supper)
- Spirit of Christ (filling, fruit, gifts)
- love of Christ (worship, devotion)
- Word of Christ (preaching, teaching)
- family of Christ (fellowship, community)
- sacrifice of Christ (stewardship, service)
- suffering of Christ (faithfulness, perseverance)

Note how the key biblical metaphors of the church also place the church in relationship to Christ—for example:

5. See, for example, Bate 1994.
The Task of Church Planting

- Christ as head of the body
- Christ as the good shepherd of his flock
- Christ as foundation, cornerstone, and builder of his church
- Christ as the door to the sheepfold

Based on this discussion we offer the following practical definition of a local church as we will be using the term in this book. *A local church is a fellowship of believers in Jesus Christ committed to gathering regularly for biblical purposes under a recognized spiritual leadership.* This very basic definition includes several key elements:

- **Believers.** The church is composed of persons who have experienced salvation through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ according to the gospel and confessed in baptism. They desire to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, regenerated and enabled by the Holy Spirit. They are the new people of God.
- **Gathering.** These believers are committed to meeting together regularly to serve God and one another.* They are the family of God. As a missionary people, they gather in preparation to be sent as agents of God’s mission in the world.
- **Purpose.** Their fellowship gathers to fulfill biblical purposes that include prayer, worship, evangelism, instruction, edification, service, celebration of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, exercise of church discipline, and the sending of missionaries. They embody values of the kingdom of God.
- **Leadership.** They submit to recognized spiritual leaders. Leaders provide a minimal form of structure under Christ’s headship. In a spirit of servanthood they give direction, spiritual oversight, and care, teaching and equipping the body of believers.

This might be considered a minimal list of practical characteristics defining a church for the church planter. Isolated believers, special interest meetings, or unstructured gatherings alone do not constitute a church.

This definition leaves much room for flexibility. A paid pastor is not essential, but recognized leaders are. Church buildings are not necessary, but regular meetings are. Adherence to a particular creed or denominational distinctive is not required, but faithfulness to biblical truth and purposes is. Deep spiritual

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6. See Robert Banks’s (1994) discussion of the Greek term for the church, ecclesia, which in its profane usage primarily means an assembly. He argues that in Paul’s early usage “the term is applied only to an *actual gathering of people* or the group that gathers as a *regularly constituted meeting* and not, as in today’s usage, to a number of local assemblies conceived as part of a larger unit” (1994, 29–30).
maturity is a goal, but more essential is the believers’ fundamental commitment to obedience in following Christ.

What Do We Mean by “Church Planting”? 

Having defined what we mean by church, we can simply define church planting as that ministry which seeks to establish new churches. Normally this will be through evangelism, discipleship, and gathering of these persons into a functioning congregation. Most church planting will also have the longer-term goal of multiplication. We thus offer this definition: Church planting is that ministry which through evangelism and discipleship establishes reproducing kingdom communities of believers in Jesus Christ who are committed to fulfilling biblical purposes under local spiritual leaders.

Planting is a term used by the apostle Paul to describe his ministry of establishing new churches in 1 Corinthians 3:6: “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.” Though Paul had a variety of gifts and ministries, here “planting” refers to his pioneering apostolic ministry of establishing new churches in locations and among people where there was no preexisting church. He makes this clear in Romans 15:20: “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation.”

Complementary to planting or pioneering ministries are “watering” ministries such as that of Apollos noted in 1 Corinthians 3:6. Paul had sent him to Corinth to further instruct the church there (1 Cor. 16:12). Whereas the ministry of planting involves primarily evangelism, discipleship, and congregating, the ministry of watering involves further teaching and strengthening churches that have already been gathered. Both planters and waterers are essential to the long-term goal of establishing healthy, reproducing churches.

When we speak of “church planting” in this book we are broadly referring to the entire process of planting (in the sense of pioneering) and early watering leading to the establishing of healthy new churches.

Church Planting as a Spiritual Undertaking

Most of this book will discuss the process and practical methods of church planting. But we must keep foremost in our minds that church planting is essentially a spiritual undertaking, done primarily by spiritual means. Jesus is the real church planter, as he promised, “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). The Great Commission as recorded in Matthew 28:19–20, to go and make disciples of all nations, is sandwiched between the affirmation that all authority in heaven and on earth is given to Jesus (v. 18) and the promise of Jesus’s presence with the disciples until the end of the age (v. 20). Only through
“remaining in Christ” can our ministry bear fruit; indeed, apart from Jesus we can do nothing (John 15:5). John’s Gospel furthermore recalls Jesus’s promise that the Holy Spirit would convince unbelievers of sin, righteousness, and judgment and thus of their need for salvation in Christ (John 16:8).

Luke’s Gospel ends with Jesus’s command to wait in carrying out the Great Commission until they have been “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). Nothing could be clearer from Luke’s second volume, the book of Acts, than the centrality of the enabling and empowering work of the Holy Spirit in the spread of the gospel and establishment of churches. For example:

- power for witness and preaching (Acts 1:8; 4:8)
- granting boldness in the midst of persecution (Acts 4:31)
- strengthening and comforting the churches (Acts 9:31)
- guidance in decision making (Acts 16:6–10)
- calling and sending missionaries (Acts 13:2–4)
- confirming the apostolic preaching through signs and wonders (Acts 2:43; 4:16; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6; 13; 14:3; 15:12; 19:11)


The same emphasis can be found in letters of the apostle Paul. God’s power to save is in the gospel itself, not in the messenger (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18). The message must be proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:18–19; 1 Cor. 2:4–5; 1 Thess. 1:5). The church in Corinth had become divided by concentrating on various workers and particular spiritual gifts. To correct this Paul redirects their attention in 1 Corinthians 3:5–10 to the more central truth that ultimately it is God who is at work through the people and their gifts (accented via italics below):

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it.

The advance of the gospel will face spiritual opposition. The expansion of the church in Acts encountered persecution, demonic opposition, and human failure.
Paul writes of the spiritual nature of much opposition (e.g., 2 Cor. 10:2–4; Eph. 6:12). Yet Scripture makes equally clear that Christ has overcome all spiritual principalities and powers (e.g., Rom. 8:35–39; Col. 1:16). Though we have no assurance that every individual attempt to plant a church will succeed, we do have the promise that ultimately the cause of Christ will prevail with his words: “I will build my church; and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt. 16:18).

These truths should give church planters great confidence that the fruitfulness of their efforts is ultimately dependent on God’s working. This does not excuse us from preparing well, working hard, and evaluating carefully. But it frees us from unnecessary pressure to produce results and from a needless sense of failure when, after giving our best, we see little visible fruit of our labors. It equally guards us against pride and boasting when we experience great blessing in our ministry. Walking and working by faith should characterize our attitude in ministry. Full dependency on God should be the “method behind the methods.” Finally, these truths should move the church planter to greater prayer. Prayer or praying is mentioned twenty-six times in the book of Acts. Paul’s letters to his churches abound with examples of how he prayed for them and their spiritual growth (e.g., Eph. 1:15–23; 3:14–19; Phil. 1:3–6, 9–11; 2 Thess. 1:11–12). These serve as wonderful examples of how church planters can pray for their church plants and people.

Church planting is a thoroughly spiritual endeavor. We may employ the most proven methods—and methods are important—but they are no substitute for prayer and deep dependence on divine guidance and working. It is possible by human means to establish an institution that has all the outward appearance of a church. But a true church is the creation of the Holy Spirit.

Church Planting—An Undertaking Demanding Wisdom and Insight

Church planting is not only a spiritual undertaking; it is also a complex human undertaking. Many a church planter has been passionately committed but practically unprepared and naive, leading to unnecessary frustration and often failure. Proverbs 19:2 reads, “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way.” God has given us the capacity for insight and understanding so that we might better understand his ways and exercise greater wisdom in his service. There are several ways we can seek to be better informed, discern God’s wisdom, and be better stewards of our energy in the ministry of church planting.

• **Biblical teaching.** Though the world of the New Testament was very different than the world today, we can still glean many important principles from the example of the first Christians as they spread the gospel and planted churches.
The Task of Church Planting

• **Prayer.** James 1:5 gives us the promise: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”

• **History.** We can learn lessons from the history of missions and church planting, discovering some means God has blessed and some pitfalls to avoid. The adage is all too true: if we fail to learn from history we are condemned to repeat it.

• **Social sciences.** The social sciences help us understand human behavior and societies. If we want to serve people well, we must understand them deeply. Social sciences help us overcome blind spots and discover in a disciplined manner factors that will lead us toward effective ministry, addressing people’s deepest needs in both biblical and culturally appropriate ways.

• **Best practices.** Some of the most helpful insights are gained as church planters share with one another and seek to discern together best practices for church planting. One caution here is that effective methods in one setting may have little application to another.

There is a difference between sound wisdom and crass pragmatism in which the end justifies the means. Further, the best methods are no guarantee of success—only Christ can build his church. But God works through human means, and he generally chooses to work through well-prepared and informed servants who are humble and teachable and who make use of every available means to advance his cause.

**When Might a Church Be Considered “Planted”?**

How does the church planter know when his or her job is done? When should the church be considered “planted”? At what point does the church planter and/or the church planting team move on and entrust the church fully to local leaders? The Bible does not give us a checklist to use in answering these questions. Missionary church planters have been notorious for staying too long, dominating the church, and having the attitude that local believers are never quite far enough along to survive without the missionary. The opposite extreme occasionally occurs as well: the church planter, having failed to develop local leaders disengages abruptly and the church withers and dies.

Some writers looking to the example of the apostle Paul suggest that a church should be considered planted very shortly after the first believers have been congregated (e.g., Allen 1962a, 3). Indeed, in most cases Paul left the churches within only a few weeks or months after their initial establishment. In Asia Minor he and Barnabas even installed elders in the churches shortly after the initial evangelization and then considered the work “completed”
Thus a qualified and recognized local leadership seems to be essential. However, concluding that missionary involvement should be curtailed quickly after the gathering of the first converts overlooks the larger biblical picture. Paul’s quick departure was often prompted by persecution, not by plan. Paul remained over two years in Ephesus, where God had opened up to him a “great door for effective work” (1 Cor. 16:9), thereby postponing other pioneering work. The biblical report also makes clear that continued assistance was given to these fledging congregations through follow-up visits, letters, and sending of additional coworkers. Thus more careful analysis of the Bible reveals that planting healthy churches involves much more than short-term campaigns that leave new congregations to fend for themselves. Paul’s church-planting method installed local leaders and entrusted responsibilities to them quickly, but various forms of longer-term assistance were also provided to the young churches.

From the example of Paul and his coworkers, we discover that disengagement from a church plant can be viewed as a process of shifting emphases and responsibilities as the church matures. Rather than an abrupt withdrawal, missionary phase-out can be a gradual process with various team members serving in differing capacities and with diminishing levels of contact and assistance. The biblical examples also demonstrate that various gifts and talents are needed during the progressing phases of planting and establishing churches.

In keeping with our definition of a church, we suggest the following short-term goals as a measure for phasing out the church planter’s or church-planting team’s involvement:

- Persons from the locality or focus people have been led to faith in Christ, discipled, and congregated into a fellowship of mutually committed believers meeting regularly.
- A qualified local spiritual leadership team (ideally from the focus people) has been called and recognized by the congregation. They guide, teach, and appropriately apply the Scriptures in their lives and society.
- Culturally appropriate structures for fellowship, worship, evangelism, service, and governance are functioning.
- Local believers have internalized biblical values and goals. Kingdom purposes for the church are being progressively lived out.

The church might be considered “planted” when the above short-term goals are achieved. However, the longer-term development of the church must be

7. Paul considered the work in Crete “unfinished” because qualified elders had not yet been appointed (Titus 1:5), but we are not sure how long the church in Crete had existed when this was written.
kept in view if genuine kingdom communities are to be established. After his
or her departure, the church planter may continue to encourage the church
toward the attainment of longer-term goals. Such goals would include the
following, among others:

- church multiplication by planting daughter churches, sending church
  planters, and sending or supporting missionaries
- the establishment of local ministries that demonstrate kingdom values
  of compassion and justice
- initiation of specialized ministries to ethnic groups, subcultures, or
  special-needs persons
- creation of contextualized practices relating to local customs, traditions,
  and ceremonies
- being linked to or helping to form a national or regional fellowship of
  churches (see “interdependent fellowships” below)
- participation in local or regional initiatives with other churches

Attaining such goals is rarely possible during the pioneering phase. But
the values and vision for such longer-term goals must be instilled early in the
planting of the church.

What Kind of Church Is to Be Planted?

Unfortunately many books on church planting and growth give little attention
to the kind of church that is to be planted. However, if churches are to be
planted as we have attempted to biblically define them, they must adhere to
more than some minimal definition or denominational standard. They must
be kingdom communities, healthy congregations, reproducing organisms,
indigenous churches, and interdependent fellowships.

Kingdom Communities

A biblical understanding of the church will lead us to plant churches that
are kingdom communities. New Testament scholars and evangelical missiolo-
gists alike recognize the centrality of Jesus’s teaching on the kingdom of God
for our understanding of the church and mission. Kingdom communities are
congregations of Christians who embody and live out kingdom values as Jesus
taught them. Their essence is found first in their relationship to the King, Jesus

8. Stuart Murray goes so far as to claim, “Self-propagation, or reproduction, is not just an
admirable quality of some churches, but integral to the definition of the church” (1998, 60).
Christ, and second in their obedience to the will of the King explicitly stated in the Scriptures. Simply stated: they are Christ centered and Bible based.

Kingdom communities are formed of people who are born of the Spirit, who enter God’s kingdom with childlike faith, and who are poor in spirit. They are characterized by the values of the Sermon on the Mount. They strive for personal holiness. They know that they may experience suffering and tribulation in this world, but they live in the hope that the fullness of the kingdom will appear when Christ returns. Kingdom communities become a transforming, countercultural witness and movement having an impact on persons, families, communities, cities, and nations. The power of the gospel becomes active in them, and they become the salt of the earth and light of the world. No church is perfect or without sin, but every church should be a sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God. David Shenk and Erwin Stutzman write,

Church planting is thus the most urgent business of humankind. It is through the creation (or planting) of churches that God’s kingdom is extended into communities which have not yet been touched by the precious surprise of the presence of the kingdom of God in their midst. . . . The transforming grace of God recreates the visible presence of the kingdom of God in that cluster of people who are committed to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. (1988, 23)

In chapter 19 we will discuss further the nature of churches that have kingdom impact.

It will not do to merely plant churches focused narrowly on their own private concerns or confined to routine Christian programs. Church history is replete with tragic lessons of what happens when churches fail to live out their kingdom calling. In light of the hundreds of thousands of Rwandans killed in tribal warfare in a country supposed to be predominantly Christian, one observer wrote:

One of the “facts” we loudly proclaimed was that 20,000 or so Africans were becoming Christians every day. Of course, no one denies the phenomenal turning to Christ in recent decades all across sub-Saharan Africa. But in the midst of this ingathering of souls, apparently we have not stopped to consider our long-term biblical mandate, which is not simply to gather converts but to assimilate them into churches where their character will be shaped by biblical values and standards. We have not paid sufficient attention to serious warnings about the high risks of a truncated understanding of our mission. (Reapsome 1995, 4)

Other historical examples might include the Crusades of the Middle Ages, racism in churches of North America, uncritical acceptance of Hitler’s National Socialism in German churches, and apartheid in many churches of South Africa.

**Healthy Congregations**

In recent years considerable attention has been given to the topic of church health. In Revelation 2–3 Jesus himself examines the seven churches of Asia Minor, gives his assessment of their health—their strengths and weaknesses—and declares what corrective measures are to be taken. As churches are being planted, it is important to keep in view indicators of church health that not only serve to identify symptoms of unhealthy developments but can also give positive direction for church life. Various lists of church health indicators have been formulated (see table 13.1 for examples).

Unhealthy churches rarely reproduce, unless they reproduce through conflicts that result in church splits. Church health is normally a reflection of the spiritual health of the leaders. However, sometimes churches develop in unhealthy ways simply because of blind spots, ignorance, or circumstances that are beyond the control of the leaders. Healthy congregations are congregations with a healthy relationship to Jesus, a healthy understanding of the gospel, a healthy commitment to their calling, and a healthy (and honest) assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. Such churches will have kingdom impact and are in the best position to reproduce.

**Reproducing Organisms**

One of the consistent themes throughout this book is the importance of planting churches that reproduce. Reproduction is a part of life: all healthy living organisms reproduce. The church is not an institution but a living organism, the body of Christ. As we shall see, reproduction was a characteristic of New Testament churches and central to the apostle Paul’s missionary strategy. Only as churches reproduce can the world be reached with the gospel. In chapter 7 we will discover many different ways that churches can reproduce. Church planters must seek to plant churches that have in their very DNA the vision and commitment to reproduce and ultimately multiply. Having this as a goal has far-reaching implications for the methods church planters use. Thus the methodologies that we recommend in these pages seek to keep this longer-range goal in view.

**Indigenous Churches**

Churches that we plant are to be indigenous. In chapter 4 we will discuss in greater detail the nature of an indigenous reproducing church.
church is one that is primarily composed of and led by local believers. It has become rooted in the local culture in such a way that under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit it develops its life and ministry in culturally appropriate ways. A palm tree will not thrive and reproduce in Alaska, and a fir tree will wither and die in the desert. They are not indigenous to the local climate and environment and are unable to adapt. Similarly, an indigenous church must be suited to and rooted in its cultural environment in such a way that it can thrive in the local setting while at the same time living out countercultural kingdom purposes. A church that is foreign dominated or foreign in nature will generally have difficulty thriving and reproducing.

The history of missions is replete with examples of missionaries who disregarded local culture, planted foreign-looking churches, established ministries that were not locally sustainable, and became closely associated with foreign powers. The churches planted were sometimes like David in Saul’s armor: encumbered with structures, forms, and ministries that fit another time and place but were inappropriate in theirs. Local believers were sometimes viewed as cultural traitors, or worse, as instruments of subversive foreign influence. Furthermore, missionaries have often had condescending, paternalistic attitudes toward local believers, denying ordination to them for decades, underestimating the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, and exercising power over them through control of finances or by retaining positions of authority. The stated goal of self-governing churches remained something for the distant future because the local leaders never seemed to be quite ready.

Like the goal of reproduction, this basic goal of planting indigenous churches has far-reaching implications for both the methods of church planting and the attitudes of the church planter. The cross-cultural church planter must spare no effort to understand the local people and culture, plant the church in a culturally relevant way, with locally sustainable structures, and empower local leaders for ministry.

**Interdependent Fellowships**

In many situations the question arises whether the new church should become affiliated with a preexisting association of churches or denomination. Missionary church planters often partner with an existing national church. To what extent should the church cooperate with local ecumenical associations, ministerial fellowships, or an evangelical alliance? These are important questions that need to be addressed at the outset of a church-planting ministry. Sometimes they will be answered by the sponsoring agency. Other times they must be answered by the church planter or local believers.

All too often church planters have worked in a spirit of independence or even competition. Sometimes other Christians and churches in the locality or region are simply ignored. Cross-cultural church planters might assume that they have
little to learn from the local believers and do not need their assistance. They may think they have all the answers that they learned in seminary, in the home church, by having read the latest book, or by attending the latest seminar. The churches they plant are, not surprisingly, also independently-minded, having little connection with others either locally or internationally.

Jesus, however, prayed for his disciples and those who were to follow, “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). Evangelicals are often quick to note that in this prayer organizational unity is not primarily in view. Yet some form of visible spiritual unity is to be evident if the world (i.e., unbelievers) is to notice and recognize that Jesus was sent by the Father. In other words, demonstration of Christian unity and fellowship has implications for evangelism!

The churches of the New Testament were not independent but interdependent in various ways. Though they did not have denominational structures in the modern sense, neither were they fully autonomous. The predominantly Gentile church in Antioch submitted to the leadership and decision of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:30–31). The predominantly Gentile churches planted by Paul were expected to assist the Jerusalem church in famine relief (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8). Paul recruited coworkers from the various churches that he planted, and they ministered, at times exercising authority, in other churches. No church should exist entirely in isolation from other churches. A spirit of unity and cooperation with other believers locally, nationally, and internationally should be instilled. Such relationships may be very informal or may be quite binding. This will depend on local circumstances and theological convictions.

Missionary church planters have often sought to create a new denomination or movement reflecting particular doctrinal positions or methods of ministry from the sending church. This has resulted in an unfortunate proliferation of denominations and independent churches throughout the world. One of the positive developments in recent decades is a greater spirit of partnership between foreign mission efforts and national church bodies in host countries. Mission agencies and cross-cultural church planters are increasingly seeking like-minded partners in the host country who share compatible doctrine, lifestyle, and vision. There are many advantages to such partnerships in church planting:

- Unity in the body of Christ is demonstrated.
- Better stewardship of resources and gifts is achieved.
- Missionaries and nationals can form joint church-planting teams.
- Expatriate church planters can do internships under national pastors or church planters and thus better adapt and understand ministry in the culture.
• Identification with a national association or fellowship of churches can give the church plant identity, credibility, and legal status.
• Local believers have a greater sense of being a part of the larger church of Christ and not merely an isolated or foreign religious sect.
• The national church may receive new impetus for evangelism and church planting through its relationship with the foreign missionary.

We shall return to effective methods for forming international congregation-to-congregation partnerships and the use of short-term mission teams in chapter 18. Such partnerships require time, patience, and commitment, but they can result in great rewards and true synergy in mission.