

## Some Reflections on Church Planting

by Rev. Tom Aicken

Planting a church is an awesome responsibility for any minister of the gospel – thrilling for some, frightening for others – but not to be taken lightly by anyone. This is a work that sometimes begins by a large church splitting up into two groups, with the smaller group then moving to a nearby community to start afresh. The advantages of this approach are that the new church begins with a greater number of people; it may be perceived by the wider community positively as a successful expansion of the original church; and it can draw, whenever necessary, on the resources of the nearby parent church.

More often, though, a new church begins with a very small number of people in a remote part of the country and with very few resources. It can leave the surrounding community, if they know anything about it, wondering how long this new church can survive. This is the type of church planting I will address in this paper. I want to make it clear that I am not opposed to this approach – indeed, there are several examples of this in the New Testament, and it may be the only way to move into new territory – but it requires a rather different mind-set to take up and carry on. Sadly, too many of these churches close their doors after just a few years. One needs to explore why that is and what it is, if anything, that can be done to prevent that from happening. I am writing this with the desire to help would-be church planters over some of the bumps which they might encounter in their ministry.

Point #1: We must not project how any church-plant will develop beforehand, nor presume that any two will ever be alike. Such presumptions have a blinding effect and can too easily become over time the seeds of deep-rooted discouragement and ultimate despair if progress is not made as expected. Each church will proceed on its own unique course, carve out its own history, and encounter its own providential mercies and challenges as the Lord Himself is pleased to provide them along the way. Too often what we suppose will happen does not coincide with what our sovereign God has purposed, and, as a result, we can too easily take off in a wrong direction, forgetting that He is working all things together for the good of His people whether they see it at the time or not. One may plant, another may water, but it is the Lord, remember, who gives the increase if there is ever to be any, and He will often do so in His own mysterious manner.

Point #2: Before any church-plant is ever started, let the church planter investigate what people are promoting such a project and why. He should get to know something, too, of the people he will be working with, whether they are committed Christians and are found to be responsible in their history of decision-making. He should research as well and learn as much as he possibly can about the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed plant. Reported strengths may be superficial or even non-existent, what one ill-informed person with grandiose ideas of his own imagines them to be. Unforeseen troubles will surely arise, and they should be expected, but it is the already present evidence of potential weaknesses which needs to be carefully examined and assessed. Getting excited and ready to jump into a project of planting a church just on the basis of someone else's excitement and readiness to jump is rather like a swimmer diving into a lake without first checking to see what treacherous rocks are lurking beneath the surface of the water. Let us eagerly commit ourselves to church planting, yes, but not without careful research and realistic planning beforehand (cf. Prov. 21:5).

Point #3: Let those who are planning and seeking to initiate a church-plant first obtain the counsel, not simply of a committee of people appointed for that purpose, but of experienced church planters. It would not hurt to include planters of even failed experiments. They cannot predict any better than anyone else the details of how any church-plant might develop, that is true, but they can often point out the pitfalls to avoid along the way. If there are any 'red flags', as we call them, or glaring warning signs, they are the ones who are most likely to see them.

Point #4: Let the church planter and those who are working with him commit all their plans to the Lord in fervent and persistent prayer. Let them pray for the Lord's blessing on the work, that they might be a blessing to all with whom they come in contact, and that they might be constrained to lift up the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in all that they do. Let them pray for all that the Lord Himself may be pleased to achieve through them. It is so easy to be bossy, to insist on having our own way, but what is really needed is humility, seeking the Lord's will rather than our own, and committing everything to Him who judges righteously.

Point #5: Let the church planter commit himself to biblical meditation as well, to growing in grace and in the knowledge of Christ particularly. Let him remember that he is ordained to office to be of benefit to others, and that, to be a faithful

servant and an effective witness of Christ to the people around him, he must first take heed to his own spiritual wellbeing and sanctification. He cannot be of any real help to others, or keep himself from publicly bringing shame to the name of Christ, if he is careless in regard to the spiritual wellbeing of his own life.

Point #6: Let the church planter be bold to proclaim in his preaching and conversations with others the unsearchable riches of Christ, and let him not shun to declare the whole counsel of God. He should remember, on the one hand, that he has not been ordained to holy office to promote himself, but to promote the Lord Jesus Christ, to preach Christ and Him crucified. And let him remember, too, on the other hand, that, while he is to present himself as favourably as possible to others in order to win them to Christ, he should not be offended, or even surprised, if he himself is disliked and despised. He should be aware rather that, if men persecuted Christ as a result of their enmity toward Him, they will also persecute His servants. What other people think of him, therefore, should not be important to him; what they think of Christ, however, and whether they are learning to love Him with all their heart, should mean everything to him.

Point #7: Finally, let the church planter proclaim the gospel in its entirety, not only calling sinners to flee the wrath to come, but, even more, encouraging believers and pleading with unbelievers regarding the countless advantages and incomparable delights in seeking refuge in Christ, such blessings which are to be found in no one else, yet are bountifully discovered in pursuing the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

These 7 points are not, whether individually or collectively, a guarantee for successful church planting, no, nor will they eliminate all controversies and disappointments along the way. Having to fight the good fight of faith and to stand against the wiles of the devil will continue to be our lot until the Lord our God calls us home to glory. Nevertheless, the church planter who does these things will not have failed in his service to the Lord – faithfulness is its own success (Josh. 1:8) – nor will he need to be ashamed of his labours, even if the doors of the church he has sought to plant are finally closed.

(If anyone would like to add anything to the above, I would be happy to receive such comments. Just tap 'contact' on the Home Page. HTA)