

## Objections to Church Planting Answered

In the last several years' church planting has risen as a significant emphasis across much of the North American denominational and evangelical world. Numerous church planting networks such as Acts29, Sojourn, V3, Stadia, and our own North American Mission Board (NAMB) among many others, have been active in equipping, training, and resourcing church planters. This renewed focus on church planting has not come without its problems. Failing plants, poorly assessed planters, insufficient training, inadequate resourcing, lack of willing and qualified planters are just some of the issues facing church planting. However, whatever problems and obstacles facing church planting shouldn't preclude the absolute necessity of starting new churches. We wouldn't say that about church revitalization for example – that just because it's difficult and has many obstacles that it shouldn't be attempted.

So church planting needs to be high on our radar, especially in Northwest Indiana with its many underserved areas of gospel work. However, in my experience in NWI among both pastors and church members, there is the feeling that church planting shouldn't be a priority. There are several objections that are raised to planting new churches. I want to take the rest of this article to answer some of these most common concerns.

First, some say that...

### 1. It Hurts Existing Churches

This is often the objection of the churches that are afraid of the competition. But there are several reasons why this argument is not sound. First, church planters usually focus on reaching the unchurched, de-churched, and lost. Good church planters don't want to focus on transfer growth for their plant (although with some plant models, a group will come from the sending church to form the initial core). Second, God is able to grow His church in multiple places. If our theology is that man grows the church, then we will be worried about a new church taking away from us. However it is a fallacy to believe that one church's rise is another church's decline. God will grow all His "healthy" churches and we need not fear that new church plants will stop the purpose of God for our congregation. Third, new church plants can be a rising tide that lifts all boats. That is, as Mark Clifton has written, "*...the more new churches that are planted in a region, the greater the spiritual impact on that region and the better spiritual environment for all churches in that region.*" The reality is where you witness a region saturated with church planting; you have greater health and growth among existing churches.

### 2. There Are Already Enough Churches

This is akin to saying that there are too many pleasant drivers in Chicago! Chicago is not over-served with pleasant drivers and the United States, and particularly Northwest Indiana, is not over-served with churches! The fact is population growth

is far outpacing church planting in North America. We're closing more churches than we are planting. There are fewer churches in America today per capita than there were at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In NWI the data is even bleaker. We have fewer than 2500 SBC church members for a population approaching one million. In addition, we are the second most populated area of Indiana, but we are the least evangelized. And when we consider that NWI has changed dramatically over the last 20 years with much more diversity, then we realize that we need new churches to reach these diverse populations that our existing churches have a difficult time attracting.

### **3. We Need To Focus On Revitalizing Our Existing Churches**

We should certainly focus attention on revitalizing existing churches, but that does not preclude focusing on church planting...it's not an either/or, but a both/and option. But the reality is, here in NWI among Southern Baptists, if not planting new churches would enable revitalization of existing churches, then we'd have no struggling churches! Church planting has basically been absent from SBC life in NWI for many years. However at the same time the majority of our churches have declined significantly. The lack of church planting has aided in our decline and if we have hope in reversing our downward trends, church planting has to again play a prominent role. Church planting has the real possibility of infusing life into our existing churches, especially those that get involved at some level in planting.

It must be noted that new churches can sometimes be more effective in reaching the lost than our existing churches in that they are more flexible, make quicker adjustments, can engage lostness in more innovative ways, and are not held back by the baggage of traditionalism. Revitalization is important, but it must be remembered that most churches in need of revitalizing will refuse to count the cost and will eventually die. Therefore, good stewardship requires that we portion our focus on the few that desire revitalization and also plant new churches.

### **4. Churches Getting Bigger Reach More Lost People**

This argument against church planting is that we just need to focus on helping our existing churches grow...that church growth is the answer in reaching lostness. Obviously, we want our existing churches to grow. But the evidence tells us that most of the growth that comes to existing churches is transfer growth. As Tim Keller states:

*“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 worshipping body, while churches over 10-15 years of age gain 80-90% of new members by transfer from other congregations.”*

Certainly, an existing church can make a strategic decision that it's going to focus its growth on reaching the unchurched (and they should), but that is not typically

happening. And even if the established church does focus on the unchurched rather than the church, that does not diminish the need for new churches. There are some people that are easier for new churches to reach than established churches.

## **5. It's Too Expensive**

Yes, starting new churches isn't cheap. However, maintaining existing churches, especially older churches in decline, is not cheap either. Maintaining aging facilities with their needed updates and repairs can be costly. New plants typically have less facility expense and staff to financially support. In addition, not all support for a plant is financial. Any church, regardless of size and budget, can partner at a level of involvement that suits their situation, e.g., prayer, donation of equipment, mission teams, use of facilities etc.

## **6. Too Small To Be Involved In Planting Churches**

This was touched on in the above objection, however many churches have the feeling that only larger and financially stronger churches can be involved in church planting. This is a particularly common objection among our churches in NWI, which are universally small. However this is a significant fallacy and one that keeps small churches from experiencing the full blessing of involvement in the Great Commission. No church is too small to be involved in planting! Why? First, small churches can partner with other small churches to plant. In fact, this collaborative effort can be more effective because it brings multiple partners to the plant with their various gifts and resources. Second, small churches can partner in ways that fit their current reality. That is, there are other ways to partner in a plant other than financial commitment. Serious and strategic prayer, mission teams, equipment supply etc. are just a few of the myriad of ways that small churches can be involved in a very real way in planting. Lastly, it does not take significant financial investment for a small "Sending Church" to broker other partnerships for the church plant. A small Sending Church will not have sufficient financial resources to underwrite a new plant, but she will have connections with other churches, organizations, and individuals that can be brokered for potential partners.

## **7. We Will Be Involved In Missions In Other Ways**

It is certainly true that not every church has to be involved in church planting. However, it is required that a biblical New Testament church be invested in the Great Commission. The Great Commission includes here, there, and everywhere – Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Historically, the principal means by which the Great Commission has been fulfilled is through the planting of new churches. In fact, all we need to do is open our Bibles and read the New Testament and we see the church at Rome, the church at Corinth, the church of the Thessalonians etc. These were all church plants! Church plants were the way the Great Commission was launched and is essentially how it has been carried out through church history. Many would agree to this when it comes to sending

missionaries internationally – that they are going to plant churches. But the fulfilling of the Great Commission in a North American context today requires the same missionary mindset- that of planting churches for a diverse cultural and ethnic landscape.

Objections to church planting lose their rationale when considered alongside the substantial amount of lostness in our region. We cannot have too many new churches! Even if all our churches were revitalized, healthy and filled to capacity every Sunday we would not be making a dent in reaching the high numbers of lost in NWI. We must go all in to having healthy revitalized churches while at the same time laying it all on the line in starting new churches! Is this impossible? Yes, in our human flesh, it certainly is! But with a desperate dependence on God and wholehearted commitment to do, by His grace, whatever it takes – then it can happen even here to the praise of His glory! May He make the impossible become reality in NWI!

In His Service,

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