

PREPARING TO MULTIPLY: FOUR STEPS FOR ESTABLISHED CHURCHES

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Abstract

How should a leader of an established church lead the church to multiply? With the increased attention to church planting, there are more resources available, but little attention is given to the established church. This article seeks to help the leader of an established church prepare to engage in multiplication. While strategy, best practices, and finances are vital components to church multiplication, the crucial starting point for an established church leader is to prepare. There are four places to look while in the preparation stage: inward, upward, outward, and around.

Learning to cook taught me crucial lessons about the importance of preparation. The first time I tried to cook a full meal was for my girlfriend (who is now my wife), and it was a disaster. I took on more than I could handle and found myself sweating, with a messy kitchen, and half-cooked dishes that were inedible. I was minutes away from making a phone call for take-out. What began as a romantic gesture became a frustrating experience, and the only reason the meal was salvaged was because I asked my mother to help finish cooking the meal.

Later, I discovered *Jacques Pepin's Complete Techniques*, and I realized that I had jumped into cooking without understanding the basics. Before even touching food, Pepin spends time teaching the importance of holding the knife correctly and sharpening it. For seventy chapters, Pepin focuses

entirely on preparation. The lesson is clear—preparation is essential to execution. This is crucial in athletics and medicine, and it is essential to church multiplication.

FEW WRITE ABOUT ESTABLISHED CHURCHES

Many have written about the preparation of the church planter or the church planting team, but less is written about preparing established churches to multiply. This is probably due to the unfortunate reality that most established churches have plateaued or are declining.¹ Many leaders of established churches experience churches that “are steeped in complacency and the status quo and thus tend strongly to resist needed change.”² Since it is more difficult to mobilize change in an established church, there is a preference to starting new churches apart from the established church. Still, established churches need to be involved in church planting. As J.D. Payne challenges, “It is time for more churches to become mothers, instead of remaining on birth control.”³

Some authors write about established churches being involved in multiplication, but most write for churches already at the strategy stage. However, two dedicated resources for established churches are *Spin-Off Churches*, by Rodney Harrison, Tom Cheyney, and Don Overstreet and *Ripple Church*, by Phil Stevenson. While both of these resources are helpful and commendable works, Stevenson gives the most attention to preparation.

This article hopes to build upon these great works and provide guidance for leaders of established churches to multiply. Proverbs 16:9 reminds us that “The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.” There are four directions a leader needs to look in order to prepare: inward, upward, outward, and around. These preparation steps are primarily for the leader, but it is recommended that the steps begin to be taken by others as well.

LOOK INWARD

The first direction the leader needs to look is *inward*, which means to step back to evaluate motives. Since you have probably read books, attended conferences, or observed church plants start in your city, you are probably excited about multiplication. Nevertheless, before answering the “how”

¹ Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers*, 1 ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 60.

² Aubrey Malphurs, *The Nuts and Bolts of Church Planting: A Guide for Starting Any Kind of Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 9.

³ J. D. Payne, *Discovering Church Planting: An Introduction to the Whats, Whys, and Hows of Global Church Planting* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 234.

question, it is best that you stop to answer the “why” question. If you do not have an answer to the “why” question, or if the answer is not rooted in a calling from God, then it is probably best to wait.

There are destructive motives that need to be identified and put away. Peter writes, “We have been born again to be God’s holy people, so we are to put away envy” (1Pe 2:1). Envy looks at the successes of others and withholds joyful celebration and praise of God. Envy makes joy in kingdom growth impossible because the only growth that envious people desire is the growth of their own kingdom.

I have been in San Francisco for nine years, and in that time, I have seen several new church plants become the largest and fastest growing evangelical churches in the city. Externally, I celebrated the growth of churches in San Francisco, but internally, I experienced discontentment and envy. In those moments of envy, there was a desire to start something new, but it was selfishly motivated.

God was gracious and stopped me because I was not focused on Christ or his kingdom; I was focused on me. Joe Rigney writes that “Envy is a gaping maw, a roaring lion seeking to devour, the relentless ache of the shriveled heart.”⁴ Those words described my envy and explain why anyone with envy should not multiply. Planting a church out of envy will dishonor God and harm the church.

Envy is easily masked behind ambition and personality, so how can we tell if we are motivated by envy? Rigney provides some helpful diagnostic questions.

The next time someone else is given an opportunity or a blessing that you wish was yours, how do you react? Do you murmur about it, or do you celebrate with them? Are you filled with gratitude, or carping rivalry? When it comes to the ministries of others, are you their biggest fan or their biggest critic? Are you consumed with envy, or is your joy made complete as you see the Bridegroom increase in the success of someone other than you?⁵

Sometimes, an envious person is so blinded that he cannot answer these questions honestly. If you are serious about looking inward, I would encourage you to ask your spouse or trusted friend to answer these questions for you. If there are any discrepancies in your answers, that may indicate a lack of self-awareness that needs to be explored.

In addition to envy, look inward for *selfish ambition*. Dave Harvey has written a book, *Rescuing Ambition*, and anyone with ambition to multiply churches should read it before starting. Harvey notes that godly ambition

⁴ Joe Rigney, “Why Envy Is a Danger for the YRR,” *Desiring God*, last modified April 3, 2013, accessed October 6, 2016, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-envy-is-a-danger-for-the-yrr>.

⁵ Ibid.

becomes corrupted when “the love of distinction never has a project, purpose, or person in mind beyond self. The most important thing is not the success of a business or a great endeavor. The most important thing is that I be remembered for being the best, for being first. It’s the trap on the path of ambition.”⁶ Since pastoral ministry is people work, there is a danger to work for the applause of people.

The danger of selfish ambition is real and common among those who want to multiply churches. Audit yourself by asking these questions and inviting others to evaluate your character. How often do you allow others to share the spotlight in ministry? Do you find that your mood swings with church attendance and offering? Are you often critical of other churches and pastors simply because they have externally successful ministries?

Conversely, it is important that a leader has godly ambition. Without ambition, leaders lose focus or give up. Paul says, “and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation” (Ro 15:20). Two motives are essential to the leader of multiplication—a love for God and a love for the lost.

Starting new churches is not ultimately about the church; it must be about God and his glory. Jesus said to the church in Ephesus, “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first” (Rev 2:4). Sometimes a leader becomes myopic in his focus on the church and forgets that the church exists for the glory of God.

In their book, *Ten Most Common Mistakes Made by New Church Starts*, Griffith and Easum suggest that the first common mistake is “neglecting the Great Commandment in pursuit of the Great Commission.”⁷ They rightly conclude that “the Great Commission minus the Great Commandment reduces evangelism to a vocation, a challenge, or a duty. However, the deep motivator for people who take evangelism seriously is an overwhelming love of God.”⁸ A leader looking to multiply must have a deep relationship with Jesus. If there is not a foundational love for God and the pursuit of his glory alone, then efforts for multiplication will either rely on human strength or become self-interested.

LOOK UPWARD

The second direction to look is *upward*, which is to look to Christ. Church planting books rightly focus their attention on the leader. John Maxwell is right when he says that “everything rises and falls on leadership.” How-

⁶ Dave Harvey, *Rescuing Ambition* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 42.

⁷ James Griffith and William Easum, *Ten Most Common Mistakes Made by Church Starts* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2008), 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

ever, church multiplication must be grounded in something more than the leader's skill and personality. Multiplication must be anchored in Christ and Scripture. This is something that is often assumed in multiplication strategies and must be made explicit.

The biblical mandate for starting new churches is found in Christ's promise, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt 16:18). Jesus desires to build his church; it is not ultimately a work of man. Looking upward means being compelled by Jesus' promise to the church.

Even though the Great Commission does not say to plant churches, multiplication of churches is implied. Tim Keller points out that baptism "means an incorporation into a worshipping community with accountability and boundaries" (cs. Ac 2:41–47).⁹ Ott and Wilson further note that the command to make disciples and obey all that Jesus commanded "cannot be kept by one individual alone, the kingdom of Christ cannot be demonstrated in isolation."¹⁰ Jesus' commission requires the starting of new churches so disciples can follow Christ together and make more disciples. Obedience to the Great Commission requires the planting of new churches.

In addition to the promises and commands of Jesus, the pattern of the early church was to start new churches. This is seen in the book of Acts and in the ministry of Paul. At almost every city, preaching of the Gospel occurred, conversions happened, and churches started. We know that the Thessalonian church continued Paul's work when he says, "For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so we that we need not say anything" (1Th 1:8).

Notable scholars Andreas Köstenberger and Peter O'Brien point out that Paul "was engaged in primary evangelism and proclaimed the message of the grace of God so that men and women were converted, but he also founded churches and sought to bring believers into full maturity in Christ as a necessary element in his missionary task."¹¹ Paul's mission to preach the gospel included the establishing of new churches.

Looking upward also means being theological. This is because the practice of starting churches is a theological task. Ott and Wilson recognize that church planting is theological when they say it "is where missiology and ecclesiology intersect."¹² Church planting is a thoroughly practical task

⁹ Tim Keller, "Why Plant Churches," February 2002, accessed October 5, 2016, http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/Why_Plant_Churches-Keller.pdf, 1.

¹⁰ Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 23.

¹¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos/Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 268.

¹² Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 26.

but not detached from theology. An upward-looking leader recognizes the importance of theology, will prepare himself in the study of theology, and equip the church through the teaching of theology.

Phil Stevenson wrote an article entitled, *A Theology of Church Planting*, and he recognizes that “church planting is an implementation of theological teaching.”¹³ Stevenson identifies four key theological concepts that are foundational to church planting: *mission Dei*, incarnation, kingdom of God, and ecclesiology. These truths must shape both the leader and the church’s minds and hearts. His helpful summary of these theological topics is a great primer for developing a theology of church planting.

LOOK OUTWARD

Looking *outward* is learning to develop a love for the lost and understanding your context. In order to lead the church to multiply, the leader must have a love for those who need Christ.

In an established church, the leaders time may be primarily focused on the ministries for believers. It is important to help Christians grow in Christ-likeness and to create systems that sustain discipleship. However, a leader looking to multiply churches must be able to live among non-Christians and share the gospel in everyday experiences. Their prayer life has to be filled with prayers to the “Lord of the harvest” (Mt 9:38) because the plentiful harvest with few workers burden them.

Writing about how to act at the right time, Stevenson says that a church “that has the desire to see people brought into the kingdom has the potential to become a parent.”¹⁴ In order for a leader to prepare an established church to multiply, the leader first must cultivate a love for those who need Jesus. This was the pattern of Jesus during his earthly ministry; he ate with the drunks, tax collectors, and sinners.

One of the best ways to develop this love for the lost is to schedule it into your calendar. A leader’s time is easily filled with ministry needs of the church, which is why there is often little time for non-Christians. Prioritize a standing calendar appointment, weekly or monthly, to spend time with non-Christians. A leader’s love for those who need Christ cannot grow unless time is spent with them.

In addition to your calendar, make sure it is a part of your prayer life. Pray by name for leaders of your city. Make sure you regularly pray for non-Christian friends, and ask them how you can pray for them. Most non-Christians are not against prayer, especially if it is for them.

¹³ Phil Stevenson, “A Theology of Church Planting,” *Great Commission Research Journal* 2, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 252.

¹⁴ Phil Stevenson, *Becoming a Ripple Church: Why and How to Plant New Congregations* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2013), Location 1184, Kindle.

This love for the lost also needs to be fostered in the church. If a church loves non-Christians, it will be more likely to multiply. Malphurs gives a helpful audit survey¹⁵ that could be used among key leaders to identify if evangelism is a core value. If it is not a core value, discuss with leaders what barriers exist or what conflicting priorities are hindering a love for the lost. Nurturing the congregation to develop a love for the lost will take praying, teaching, and modeling.

LOOK AROUND

Finally, preparing a church to multiply requires the leader to look around. Look around in your church and in your city for likeminded people. Multiplication cannot be accomplished alone, and neither should the preparation for it. This means looking around for people who share this passion and befriending local church planters.

If God has given you a vision for multiplication, then he will also provide people to follow this vision. Identifying these people is important because they will become a support group that will pray for you and help in the multiplication effort. As you cast the vision for starting new churches, make sure you sit down with key leaders to see if they are supportive. Make sure to involve and empower likeminded people to leadership positions so they can help influence the culture.

If you look around at your top leadership (board, elders, trustees), and there are no likeminded individuals, then the priority should be to cast a vision for multiplication. Stevenson is right when he warns that “until pastors, board members, and other influence-makers in the local church own a vision for parenting, they will lack enthusiasm for expansion.”¹⁶ If you find yourself in this place, do not impudently criticize the leaders. Spend time praying for the Holy Spirit to change minds, and spend time teaching your leaders the importance of multiplication as obedience to the Great Commission.

Looking around means investing in relationships with local church planters. There is much to be learned from those who are actively involved in the work. This can be done personally and corporately. Personally, take the time to sit down with church planters, and get to know them and their passions. Since new church planters are primarily focused outward on the community, their ability to exegete the culture is probably higher than most established church pastors. Take them out for coffee or lunch, and ask how you can pray for them and their church. Learn how you can support them. Since multiplication is kingdom work, this means learning to encourage others and not harbor a spirit of competition.

¹⁵ Malphurs, *The Nuts and Bolts of Church Planting*, 237.

¹⁶ Stevenson, *Becoming a Ripple Church*, Location 829.

On the corporate level, you could invite the church planter to come and share or guest speak at your worship services. This gives the established church exposure to the church plant, and it can help cultivate an acceptance of multiplication. Make sure to take the time to pray for the church planter and his family publically.

Depending on the willingness of your church, offer tangible support, like the use of your building or work force. Involving the established church in the help of a church plant helps create momentum for future multiplication work.

CONCLUSION

The urgency of church planting is significant. I praise God for the recent interest in church planting, and my hope is that more established churches will start to multiply. If you have read this far, you probably have a desire to start new churches, and I am thankful for that. However, before you start, take some time to prepare yourself and your church. I hope you do not end up with a messy kitchen, half-cooked dishes, and the need to call in your mom to help—unless she is a part of your church planting team.

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