

Seven Things I Would do Differently if I Was Planting a Church Today

I have served as a replanting pastor, church planter and church-planting director. It has given me insight from three perspectives. It has been less than three years since I was the lead pastor of a church plant, but I have gained some valuable insight through extensive study, interaction with church planters, network directors, assessors, and by coaching church planters. I reflected the other day on what I would do differently if I were to plant again. I came up with seven ideas that may help other church planters to avoid some mistakes.

1. I would expose the gospel to the fullest extent as possible in every context, relationship, conflict and teaching.

Very few people truly understand the gospel, especially those who are religious. I think that few pastors truly understand the gospel. Galatians 2:14 suggests that there is a way of living that is contrary to the gospel. The centrality of the gospel drives all ministries and mission of the church. Tim Keller's resource on Gospel and Christianity is a good curriculum to use to teach this to your elders, your wife and perhaps yourself. Steve Timmis, author of *Total Church*, mentioned that he "gospels" his people when they are out of step or in sin. I love this way of communicating. Even as we confront others, it must be done in a grace-filled way to image the gospel. Every action step of the church is filtered through the gospel – it must bear image to the gospel or it is eliminated.

2. I would connect with God as I connect with culture.

In our quest to be *missionally* engaged, hip and cool, I think we have lost the "edge" for a radical, passionate engagement with God. Connecting with culture is overrated; connecting with God is underrated. My son asked me if I thought John Piper would be effective as a pastor in Seattle. I told him that I thought he would because his passionate connection with God overshadowed his lack of cultural connectivity. He does not have a TV in his home and he still wears tweed jackets bought at the penny saver store. James 4:6-10 calls us to draw near to God. We have to make this the primary point of our church plant and then we connect to culture in a way that is understood by them. We don't want to be too hip and too cool that we overshadow the person and work of Jesus.

3. I would focus on developing *missional* communities as expressions of the gospel in as many communities as possible.

A *missional* community is a committed core of believers who live out the mission together in a specific area or to a particular people group by demonstrating the gospel in tangible forms and declaring the gospel to others – both those who believe it and those who are being exposed to it. This community is led by a team to shepherd, equip and organize a community on mission. This group is the church throughout the week. They identify, equip and send out new men to lead *missional* communities. *Missional* communities operate unlike a Bible study and more like a family, a missionary team, a band of servants and eager learners. I was attending a small group several years ago and

one of the participants mentioned that she was struggling with honoring her father the way the commandments stated because her father had raped her as a child. This was a real issue, a hurdle for her to clear. She still felt dirty after years of abuse and she refused to honor her Dad who abused her as a child. The group leader said, "Okay, we better get through this lesson." He completely missed the point of the community. He thought it was an academic process and not a family issue. No man would just ignore that statement made by his daughter or wife so he could continue his conversation. These *missional* communities may come together to form a church. For instance, one group meets, replicates, and then those two groups replicate into four groups. A leader is identified among the communities and this person builds into the formation of the leaders. These groups may come together to grow into a church in the future. As a normal method, these groups come together, they enjoy food together, they pray together, and they learn together. They discuss their mission and the ways they are serving the community.

4. I would focus on developing young men for the mission of Jesus.

Emasculated men are the norm. Most young men have brokenness with their fathers. Macho men are typically posers. They are hiding behind their toughness so others will not see their frailty. They hide behind their academia, their success, their busyness, their sexual prowess, etc. Emasculated men are not necessarily effeminate, but they are hiding from their own weaknesses. The problem is that only men can build men and too many pastors are broken as well and have their own father issues. That's usually why some go into ministry – to get validated. The typical church is made up of 39% men and 61% women. Most boys raised in church will abandon it as a young man. If a mother comes to faith, the rest of her family follows 17% of the time. 93% of the time it is true with the father coming to faith. (Barna Research).

We prefer the men in our church to be mules. A mule does not act like a jackass and they are able to carry larger loads and endure longer than a horse. They are tamer than a jackass but do not seem to want to run like a stallion. I think many pastors prefer a mule to a stallion. Stallions are designed to run and not be penned up in a stable. We are generally afraid of stallions because we are afraid of our own masculinity, our leadership, and our "importance" to the Christian community. We are afraid that the stallion will steal our oats and our affirmation by "our" people. Since our own fathers did not affirm us, this is seen as a threat. We value Steady Eddie instead of Daring Dan. Christianity is a radical following of Jesus. The problem with being a mule is that it is almost always sterile.

The Heavenly Father delights in us as His sons and expressing this fact advances the gospel. We are accepted in spite of our sin through the person of Jesus and thus, we are reconciled to our Father. Jesus came to men and called them to follow; to leave their nets and to follow Him. Men are looking for others to lead them into a radical adventure of the gospel. They are attracted to the crazy ideas, not the boring. Most churches invite men to pass out bulletins and mow the grass as the great adventure. That's why they prefer staying home on Sundays watching masculine sports on TV or doing masculine things at home.

5. I would train leaders relentlessly.

Once you have identified a man who can be a leader, what do we do? My friend PJ Smyth, a church planter in South Africa, showed me the progression of Titus as Paul mentored him into leadership.

- 1) In 2 Cor. 7:6-7, Titus was a friend who encouraged Paul in his work as a missionary.
- 2) The ministry of the Macedonians encouraged Titus (2 Cor. 7:13-15). He grew in his affection for those laboring faithfully.
- 3) Titus was a faithful worker carrying out the wishes of Paul (2 Cor. 8:6). He was a faithful mule doing what Paul asked of him.
- 4) Titus developed a heart for the ministry and initiated ministry on his own (2 Cor. 8:16-17). He developed the same passion for the church as Paul. We need to applaud the aggressive nature of the men around us and not try to keep them as mules. They may snort and stomp and buck a little. Our job is to apply the gospel in the areas of their life that will make them useful stallions.
- 5) Paul says that Titus was a proven minister (2 Cor. 8:23 and 12:18).
- 6) In Titus 1:4-5, Titus was the senior overseer to appoint elders throughout the island of Crete. His proven faithfulness and calling allowed him to pioneer works in a hostile environment.

I would not do much of anything else except to train leaders. I would let others do administration. Identifying, equipping and sending leaders are the jobs of the pastor who is committed to train leaders relentlessly. I would train leaders to lead and not to hold an office. We should not appoint leaders too quickly before they have earned the right to lead.

At every sermon, we must call men to mission, to lead, to repent of their idols. We have to equip men to be good fathers, good husbands, and good men. Those men who are addicted to alcohol or pornography or have anger issues are involved in a redemption group (a recovery group, of sorts) focused on getting back to the image of God.

Of the people who are involved in community groups, 70% should be in a normal rhythm of community life where they receive their shepherding, encouragement, learning, serving and missional living. 10% are involved in one-on-one counseling as a tow truck to move them down the road, but with the design to get them back on the highway of community group. Another 20% are pulled off the highway for maintenance. These are redemption groups whose goal is to return them to the main highway.

6. I would get a coach.

According to a study by Leadership Network, only 68% of all church plants are still alive after four years. The odds of survivability increase 250% (2.5 times) when the planter receives some leadership development training. They reported that survival rate has doubled since implementing important systems such as assessment, training, and

coaching. Coaching is essential to empower others in the journey as they discover what God wants them to do and then doing it (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12). It gives them a prayer partner, accountability, feedback, perspective, encouragement, resources (ideas, content) and help with strategic planning.

7. I would enjoy the journey of church planting.

We image the gospel as we display the grace of God in our lives and as we display grace toward others – even (especially) when they mess up. The gospel includes receiving the grace of God. We must apply this with our family, our “followers,” those in our churches who are our workers and especially the drama-queen worship team (kidding). I often overlooked the evidences of grace in my life as a planter. I expected the best effort. That bled into my family. One evening when I was stressed and overly-complained about something, my oldest son asked me, “Dad, do you have a trip coming up soon?” My wife erupted with a contagious laugh and we appreciated the candidness of a son whose father was not displaying the evidences of grace.

As we exercise grace to others, we need to exercise toward ourselves as well. Our righteousness is not established through numbers. We need to see the lives transformed, and not the nickels and noses as necessary for our righteousness.

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