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Church Planting Movements and the Great Commission

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Is the planting of new churches the defining model of Great Commission faithfulness in this generation? That question is asked by Tim Stafford in an article published by *Christianity Today*. In “Go and Plant Churches of All Peoples,” Stafford suggests that the church planting movement has supplanted more traditional forms of evangelism.

“We’re excited and committed to church planting. It’s the cutting edge.” This is how Stafford summarized what he heard from leaders in a range of evangelical denominations.

This is what I constantly hear on our seminary campus as well. This generation of young pastors is increasingly focused on the planting of new churches. Stafford suggests that this is due, in part, to frustration with older approaches. North America is becoming more secularized and evangelistic efforts are falling behind. As Eric Ramsey of the Southern Baptist

Convention’s North American Mission Board lamented: “North America is the only continent in the world where the church is not growing.”

There is also a recognition that the majority of established churches have lost their evangelistic edge. Research within the Southern Baptist Convention, for example, indicates that upwards of 70% of all congregations are either declining or “plateaued” — barely holding their own.

Stafford cites George Hunter of Asbury Theological Seminary, who explained: “Churches after 15 years typically plateau. After 35 years, they typically can’t even replace those [members] they lose. New congregations reach a lot more pre-Christian people.”

Stafford explains:

Church-planting insights learned on the mission field have penetrated American church leaders, partly because they know how churches in the developing world have grown. Success-oriented Americans love to hear stories from Africa and China. Developing-world churches, once treated with patriarchal condescension, have a new status. Missionary thinking has a new status, too.

Church planting is a missionary approach, typical of the apostle Paul and of most missionaries since. Where there is no church, you have to plant a church. You have to find ways to penetrate the culture with the gospel, and then you have to provide a secure place for disciples to grow and to explore their new identity. A short while ago, we didn’t think this way in North America. Now we do.

This new emphasis and passion about planting new churches is indeed good news. Interestingly, Stafford’s article surveys a rather wide variety of church planting approaches, including emerging churches, seeker-sensitive churches, and more traditional models. His point is that the emphasis on church planting has spread throughout much of American church life. Each model of church planting demands and deserves its own careful evaluation, and one inescapable question to be asked in this analysis is one not directly considered in Stafford’s article — What is a church?

Nevertheless, the main point of Stafford’s article is clearly on-target when it comes to this generation of young

Christians. I see this as good news, but also as a matter of concern.

There can be no doubt that the planting of new congregations is a New Testament model. This approach comes with apostolic encouragement, as any reading of the Book of Acts and Paul's letters will reveal. Many of these new congregations will be fueled with great passion for the Gospel and for reaching unreached communities, people groups, and sectors of our society. This is indeed good news.

At the same time, we also need this generation of young pastors to go into established churches and revitalize a Gospel ministry through expository preaching and energetic leadership. Giving up on the established church is not an option. Some young pastors see church planting as a way of avoiding the challenge of dealing with the people and pathologies of older congregations. This is an abdication of responsibility.

Furthermore, many established churches are showing signs of new life, often under new leadership. As one pastor explained, this sometimes means planting a new church within an older church. On the other hand, only a fraction of newly planted churches exist as operational congregations five years after their founding.

Similarly, the passion to reach unreached populations is entirely laudable and urgent. The sad reality is that many of our established evangelical churches seem determined to reach only people who look like themselves — if they are committed to reach anyone at all. The danger on the other side is that many of these newly-planted churches begin to look like their founders and first members. A church of tattooed twenty-somethings in New York can be just as lacking in diversity as the aging middle class congregation at First Church.

Stafford suggests that the church planting movement has become an alternative to traditional evangelical methods such as crusades and personal witnessing. This may be increasingly true when it comes to the traditional crusade. It is hard to draw mass crowds to the stadium in an age of home theaters and 24/7 activity.

But when it comes to personal evangelism we are back to the Book of Acts and the apostolic model. In the end, churches will grow only as Christians share the Gospel with people who desperately need to hear it — and that will hold true no matter how old or young the congregation may be.

The energy and commitment evident in the church planting movement should encourage all who long to see a new wave of evangelism throughout North America. But this movement must be driven by a robust New Testament ecclesiology and must be undergirded by an eager embrace of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. This movement must complement — not castigate — existing churches. Each needs the other, and both can learn from each other.

